

Thursday, May 10, 1945

Next morning Irena's window overlooking the river was open and a bouquet of red flowers stood behind the green window guard. I stopped on the bridge and looked up at the window. I could see the glass chandelier hanging from the painted ceiling in her room and imagined her sleeping under it in her crumpled pyjamas. It was all over now but she was still there. I went on. When I'd gone through the brewery gate, I stopped listening. Terrible screams were coming from somewhere, like Mrs Vasakova's screams yesterday. A chill ran down my spine. I stopped thinking about Irena. People on the path turned to listen, too. Sounds came from the warehouse, then more screams. All at once I knew what was going on, and had an odd urge to look, to see it. I hurried over. The SS men weren't sitting in the yard any more. The place where they'd been sitting was empty except for their rucksacks and other stuff which they'd left behind. I was almost up to the door when I heard more screams. I opened the door and went in. The lights were on inside the warehouse and a bunch of men were standing around something lying in the middle of the floor. You could hear thuds and groans and sobs. I stepped forward and then saw what was happening. Several naked bodies lay on the ground. Mr Mozol, the time-study man at the Messerschmidt plant, was swearing and beating one of the Germans with a cane decorated with hiking badges. The German lay on his stomach, his back covered with blood. He no longer moved. 'You German swine,' Mr Mozol kept yelling. 'There's another for you,' and so on, hitting him hard with his cane. I knew he had good reason. I shuddered. Some of the others in the crowd were yelling and swearing too; a few, though, just stood there. There was a funny smell in the air; the place was stuffy. Then I noticed a few more SS men still standing off in a corner. They were still wearing their uniforms and were tied up. I turned. I

wanted to get out of there. And then I saw Rosta's pale face a little way off.

'Hi,' I said in a low voice.

'Hi,' said Rosta. He was leaning against a crate. 'Boy,' he said.

'Let's go,' I said.

The moaning started again.

'Lie down, you son of a bitch!' said somebody in a deep voice. I went over next to Rosta. 'Take him out and finish him off,' the voice went on.

'Next customer!' another voice yelled. Two guys ran over to one of the remaining SS men and dragged him over under the light. His eyes were bulging and he struggled automatically and then they started ripping his clothes off. They went at him like madmen, tearing away from every side and in no time at all he was completely naked. He had a sweaty white muscular body.

'Come on, Rosta, let's go,' I said and we went out. Out in the yard a dim sun was shining. People had stopped to stare at two battered SS men who were being dragged off somewhere behind the icehouse. We followed them. I looked around. Major Weiss, in full uniform again, was striding solemnly around the corner of the icehouse with Mr Kaldoun. We went around the icehouse, too. There stood another bunch of people and under the cooling pipes lay a pile of corpses. The walls of the icehouse gleamed white in the sunshine and the bits of mica glittered in the stucco. The men leading the SS men stopped. Sergeant Krpata and some other guys stood by the wall. Krpata had his revolver out.

'Stand 'em up over there,' Krpata commanded. The men lined the SS men up against the wall.

'Also!' yelled Krpata. 'You can thank your *Führer* for this!'

Then he pressed the muzzle of the pistol up against the forehead of the first SS man and pulled the trigger. Then he shot the second one. The men let go and both bodies crumpled to the ground.

'Take them away and bring in the next,' said Krpata.

'Come on,' I said.

We turned and left. Neither of us said anything. The sun was

burning through the morning haze; it started getting warm. People were streaming back and forth along the path to the main building.

'Where were you yesterday?' said Rosta.

'At the customs house. You?' I said.

'Nowhere.'

'You hid out?'

'I didn't have a weapon. They gave me a rifle and ammunition but the bullets didn't fit.'

'You didn't miss much,' I said.

Rosta was silent for a little while. Then he said, 'What do you think about all that anyway?'

'You mean back there?'

'Yeah.'

'I don't know,' I said. 'What can you say? It's just - just Goya.'

'Goya? He's shit compared to that.'

'You're right.' I didn't feel like talking about it. We went over to the gate. I remembered those two brothers that guy had showed me last night at the brewery. With their eyes gouged out. The bastards, I said to myself. Except the ones that did it had probably cleared out and these others were paying for it. What the hell, maybe they have the same sort of thing on their consciences, too, but how could you know for sure? And how could you tell whether they had on their consciences what Mr Mozol and the others here were loading up on their own right now? I knew a few people who had plenty on theirs. Regierungskommissar Kühl. How he bellowed at the Jews when they were standing in line in front of the station, waiting to be taken off. He'd never been sent off to the front. *Ein alter Mitkämpfer*, he'd been a member of the Nazi Party since 1928. Then there was that bastard Staukelmann who'd turned in Lexa's father, who was later shot because that was the easiest way to get hold of Lexa's father's apartment. And then later, when we already had our band and we donated the proceeds of two concerts to Lexa's mother, Staukelmann informed about that, too, because informing had become a habit with him by then, and the only reason nothing came of that was because Dr

Sabata had bribed some big wheel from the Gestapo with a case or two of slivovitz. Or Zieglosser, head of the personnel department at Metal, who used to pad around the factory picking out girls and then he'd have them called in to his office and if they didn't come across, they'd be shipped off to the Reich. Like that seamstress Bozka I'd worked with. God knows whether she'd ever get back alive. The bastard. And all of them had cleared out in time. That kind always did. And then when you'd forgotten all about them, they'd turn up again and in the meantime somebody else had to pay for what they'd done. Maybe these SS guys they were killing now hadn't been half as bad as Kühl and Staukelmann and Zieglosser had been.

We stopped beside the pile of the SS men's things. Somebody was screaming again inside the warehouse. A German rucksack made out of calfskin lay at my feet; a pamphlet had fallen out of it. I bent over and picked it up. It showed tanks marked with Prussian crosses moving across a field; the Gothic-script title was *Woran Wir Glauben* - What We Believe In. I flipped through it, stopped at one passage, and read:

For us, there are only two possibilities: either what we believe in is a mistaken belief and history has not called us to this task and we have only deluded ourselves as to our mission, in which case we will not complete it and, sooner or later, will vanish from the stage of this life and none of us will shed a tear for this great movement but say, instead, 'We were weighed in the scales and found wanting.' Or...

I shut the pamphlet and saw a hay wagon loaded with corpses creaking by. It moved slowly and I could see a hand dangling out of the pile and it seemed to be groping around as if it was looking for something.

'Where you taking them?' somebody asked the wagon driver.

'Into the woods,' he said.

We went along the path to the main building.

'They've shown what sadists they are underneath,' burst out Rosta. 'The bastards.'

'You seen Dagmar?' I said. 'Is she all right?'

'Sure,' said Rosta. 'She stayed inside and kept out of trouble.'

'She did?'

'How about Irena?'

'She volunteered as a nurse.'

'Have you talked to her?'

'Not yet.' The thought of seeing Irena suddenly hit me with an almost physical force. To be with her! If only I could go to her right now! I felt as if somebody had grabbed my hand and started pulling me.

'I'm going home,' I told Rosta. 'So long.'

'Wait,' said Rosta. 'Maybe the other guys are around some place.'

'Well, maybe they are, but I've got to take off. See you later.'

'Well, okay,' said Rosta, as if he couldn't quite figure out what was going on. I turned and hurried off. I felt driven to move. There was nothing I could do against it - except go. I decided I'd set out to find her and suddenly it seemed the easiest and most natural thing in the world. Sure. If only I'd done it first thing in the morning, instead of going to the brewery. The wagon with the SS men had just creaked through the gate and women were standing around outside gazing in horror. I went out through the gate and there she was - Irena. My heart skipped a beat she was so beautiful and I loved her so much. She stood there in her dress with the thin green stripes and her hair was drawn back and tied with a white ribbon. Her red lips were slightly open and her eyes looked worried. Irena! It was as if God had sent her to me.

'Hello, Irena,' I said to her before she'd even seen me.

She turned her great big eyes on me and hurried over.

'Danny!' she said with relief in her voice, as if I was going to protect her from something. 'Where's Zdenek?'

'Zdenek?' I said. The question came like a slap in the face. 'I don't know.'

'Haven't you seen him?' she persisted. 'Don't you know where he was? Or where he went?'

'I don't know, Irena. The last time I saw him was yesterday at the brewery.'

'Don't you know where he was when the shooting started?'

'No.'

'Oh God. He hasn't come back yet, Danny.'

'He hasn't? Well, all I know is, he wanted to go with the mountain climbers.' I felt a sharp pain. Not because Zdenek hadn't come back, but because Irena was in love with him.

'I know,' said Irena with an impatient frown. 'But he didn't come back with them!'

'You talk with any of them?'

'Yes. They were out at the customs house. But they haven't seen him since then.'

'And...' I said hesitantly as my hopes began to rise. Except that was nonsense. I'd never be that lucky. 'And did you ask - did you look at the casualty list?'

'Yes, but he's not listed. Danny, will you please run in and ask at the Brewery?' She looked at me imploringly. I certainly didn't feel like going anywhere - I just wanted to be with her.

'They won't know anything. I can tell you that right now.'

'I know, but ask anyway, will you please? I've got to find out somehow,' Irena said, and grasped my hand. My God, but I was crazy about that girl. How could she ever have seemed dumb to me? But she was and I loved her anyway. Obviously that didn't have anything to do with it.

'All right, Irena,' I said, as if it wasn't an easy thing for me to do. 'They won't know anything, but if you want me to, I'll go.'

'Please, Danny. Thanks ever so much.'

I squeezed her hand and she squeezed mine a little and smiled at me. I walked over to the main building and went in. The place was like a beehive except here it was swarming with people. I went into one room and elbowed my way up to the desk. Behind the desk sat Captain Kuratko talking to someone on the telephone and jotting things down from time to time.

'Captain, have you got the casualty list?' I called out over some old man's head.

The captain glanced up at me and, when he saw who I was, answered, 'It's not complete.'

'Could I take a look anyway?'

'Here,' he said, and handed me a sheet of paper. There were around forty names typed on the paper. I read down. Hrob was

listed but none of our guys were. There was Mrs Vasakova and Lidka Jarosova, but no Zdenek. I read through it again with fading hopes, but there was no Zdenek this time either. I just didn't have that kind of luck. He'd turn up. I knew it and I felt like laughing so now I'd go out and comfort Irena and in a while Zdenek would surface somewhere and come back and walk off with Irena. In the end it was always me that had to clear out.

'Thank you,' I said, and put the list back down on the table.

'You're welcome,' said Captain Kuratko with his ear to the telephone. I walked out. Hell, no, they wouldn't kill Zdenek. Mrs Vasakova sure, but not him. I could just see those buck-teeth of his and his fat lips and big face, and it made me mad. I saw Irena standing on the other side of the fence, holding on to the bars with her little white fingers, watching me nervously. If only I could tell her he'd been killed. That he was dead and killed and all shot up and done for, but I couldn't. And I never would no matter how much I might long to. I walked towards Irena and on out through the gate and, as she turned to me with fear in her eyes, I shook my head.

'Nothing,' I said.

'Nothing?'

'He isn't on it.'

'What'd they say?'

'Nothing. But his name isn't on the casualty list. It's not complete yet, though.'

'And they don't know where he could be?'

'No. But we can ask again when they get more names.'

'When will that be?'

I shrugged. 'We could come back sometime this afternoon.'

Irena sighed and leaned against the fence. She looked crushed and she was beautiful in her green striped dress with the nice legs under it and her white sandals. Jesus, why was she so wild about that guy anyway? He wasn't worth it. And what did she need to bother about anyone else for anyway when she was so pretty and when everybody would do anything in the world for her?

'Oh, goodness,' she sighed. 'Oh, goodness, I just pray he wasn't shot.'

'Don't worry,' I said.

Irena didn't say anything. She just stared at the ground.

'Don't worry, Irena,' I repeated. There wasn't much else I could do now, except to try to comfort her. 'Don't worry. You already been over to his place?'

She nodded.

'And the landlady doesn't know anything?'

'No.'

'And you've checked at the hospital?'

Irena jumped. 'Oh, Lord, I'm stupid,' she said, but it was all the same to me. I was crazy about her anyway.

'Well, let's go on over.'

'Will you come with me, Danny?' she asked.

'Sure,' I said.

'That's awfully nice of you, Danny,' she said, and we started off. Idiot, I said to myself. Still, the way she'd said how 'awfully nice' it was of me had been like a caress. We started off towards the hospital. Irena walked fast. Neither of us said anything. I noticed how tightly her dress fitted across her hips and stomach and how nice it looked where it came together over her breasts. Beautiful, except they stood out as if they were on display and I couldn't help thinking that big jackass Zdenek had already sampled them and that that was probably all he was after, and now there she was, beside herself with anxiety - as if, in case he'd kicked off, nobody else would be interested. It was crazy. There I was who would have given anything to be able to sleep with her and practically dying of longing and there she was calmly walking along beside me in that tight provocative dress scared stiff about her dear little Zdenek and absolutely blind to me. Was I any worse or dumber or uglier than he was? God, how I hoped he was dead! If only they'd shot and killed and hacked him up into little pieces, just so you, Irena, would come to understand. But exactly what was she supposed to understand? And I didn't really wish the guy all that bad. Let him live, and even love Irena - fine. As long as Irena left him for me. But, no, her little soul wouldn't

let her. That silly, girlish soul of hers said no. I looked at her, at her sweet creamy cheeks and the white ribbon in her hair and she was beautiful. We turned into the hospital yard and went up to the main building.

'You want me to ask?' I said.

'I'll go myself, Danny.'

'Yes?'

'I know Dr Capek, remember?' said Irena. I should have remembered. But then I was a fool.

'Well, I'll wait for you here,' I said. Irena's striped dress disappeared through the door and I sat down on a bench in front of the surgery pavilion. It faced northwest and the sun was already high enough to reach the pavilion. I looked up at the western hills, at the edge of the woods and Prague was there beyond it, somewhere in the distance, and that gave me new strength. What the hell, I said to myself, I can manage without Irena and I'll go off to Prague and play Dixieland and somewhere there'll be an entirely different sort of girl and I'll go up to her room with her and she'll take off her clothes for me and let me touch her and we'll have an affair and I'll be able to do whatever I want with her. Yet I sensed it wouldn't be the same as if I could have Irena now, that nobody would ever really replace her, not even the most beautiful girl in the world, and that I didn't care about seeing just any naked girl, only Irena, and the only person I wanted to touch and make love to was Irena. I felt awfully depressed. I shut my eyes and my temples ached. I sat there in dull despair for an awfully long time. Then, at first as if from a long way off and then close by, I heard Irena's voice saying 'thank you very much' to somebody and somebody saying he'd telephone her father immediately if anything came up and I opened my eyes and saw her standing with Dr Capek on the steps by the entrance, saying good-bye. I got up off the bench and joined her. She looked at me gravely.

'Well?' I asked.

'Nothing,' she said in a tragic voice and looked at her watch. 'Danny, will you come with me?' The way she looked at me, I would have gone with her for ever and anywhere.

'Sure, Irena.'

'I'd like to stop by at his place again and see if maybe he's come back in the meantime.'

'All right,' I said and was all ready to go, but Irena just stood there.

'Danny, you . . . you're not angry at me, are you?'

'Why should I be angry?'

'For dragging you around with me like this.'

'Oh, you're not dragging me anywhere.'

'Yes, I am, Danny. I...'

'Oh, go on, Irena, don't be silly.'

'You're sure you don't mind?'

'Irena...'

'Are you?'

'Irena . . . maybe I shouldn't say this right now, but . . . well, you know I love you.'

'I know. That's why.'

'Well, so I don't mind and I'm not angry at all, Irena.'

'Really?'

'You know I can't get angry at you.'

'Well, then, all right. But then don't be angry with me and let's go, shall we?'

'Sure,' I said.

'Come on,' said Irena softly and soothingly and she stroked my hand and I was happy she was letting me come along with her and I knew I was being an idiot but maybe it was better to be an idiot like this than to be smart. I was glad I was so dumb.

'Irena,' I said softly.

'What?'

'You love him an awful lot, Irena?'

'Yes.'

We walked along without saying anything for a while and then I said, 'Maybe he's already back.'

'Oh, God, I hope so.'

Then nothing again, until Irena said, 'Did anything happen to your friends in the band?'

'No,' I said. 'Irena...'

'What?'

I came out with it. I couldn't keep it back any longer. 'Irena ... if Zdenek's been killed ...'

'Danny, don't say any more!'

'But you don't know what ...'

'No, no. I know what you're going to say.'

'You don't either.'

'Yes, I do.'

'But you don't, Irena.'

'Danny, I know what you're going to say.'

'And I can't say it?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Because I don't want you to.'

'But why?'

'Because Zdenek isn't dead and, even if he were, it wouldn't be fair to him for me to listen to you.'

'But, Irena ...'

'No, I told you already.'

'My God,' I said in despair and I knew I'd say it anyway. So I asked her straight out, 'Irena, what would you do if Zdenek was dead?'

She shook her head.

'Irena!'

'No, don't ask, Danny, there's no sense in it. I can't tell you. And anyway, he's not dead. He's alive and healthy.'

'I know.'

'Well then.'

We crossed the bridge in silence and walked past the slaughterhouse towards the old power station. Lots of people were out on the street, and here and there you could see guys with rifles. The flags on the houses looked gay and the crowd was in a holiday mood. Sunk in our own problems – and Irena's were nothing compared to mine – we made our way through the crowd and past the power station, past the spinning mill, up by the high school and then towards the underpass and I remembered that only three or four days before the Germans had brought me the same way and how scared Irena had been

for me then and it seemed a long time ago. We went through the underpass. At Sokol Hall, the custodian and another old codger were hanging up a huge portrait of Benes and all sorts of garlands. I looked down at the sidewalk and saw that, in spite of yesterday's rain, you could still make out a small red stain. Or maybe it was only my imagination. Why in hell couldn't it have been Zdenek's blood instead of Mrs Vasakova's? We kept on going and turned left on the street leading up the hill to the army cemetery. The street was shady because it was narrow and there were little houses on both sides. Not an awful lot of celebrating going on in this part of town. I looked at Irena and could tell she wasn't with me at all any more, but all wrapped up in her thoughts about Zdenek.

'You want me to go in with you?' I asked.

'Of course,' she said and I could see she didn't really want me to but that she didn't want to say no to me now after coming this far with her. That'd be a swell revenge, I thought, if I'd stick with her now and pretend I was crazy with relief and joy to find Zdenek still alive and then hang around in his room with them all afternoon. Only it wouldn't really be any revenge; it'd be idiotic and I'd feel more embarrassed than they would. We stopped in front of a small, yellow, one-storey house and Irena rang the bell. We stood waiting and then heard footsteps shuffling along the hall and the click of a bolt and a wrinkled old woman opened the door.

'Good morning,' Irena said sweetly.

'Good morning,' the old woman said.

'Could you tell me, please, has Zdenek come back yet?'

'No,' said the old woman.

'He hasn't?'

'No.'

Irena hesitated for a second. Then she said, 'Could we wait for him?'

'If you want to, miss,' said the old woman, and stepped out of the doorway.

'Come on, Danny,' said Irena. I went in and said 'how do you do' to the old woman, and then Irena opened a door on the left side of the hall and we went into Zdenek's room. I shut the

door behind me and there we were, alone. It was dark in the room because the brown windowshade was drawn; a dim yellow light poured over the old-fashioned furniture; in the silence you could hear flies buzzing. Along the wall opposite the window stood a bed – brown-painted pipes with brass balls on top, a faded bedspread. A heavy, beat-up, carved, and painted cupboard stood next to the door. Along the wall across from the door was a little wooden marbletop table with a flowered porcelain wash basin on it. Beside the table was a faded plush couch and a wall rack with lots of little vases and figurines of shepherds and shepherdesses. There was a desk by the window with a big photograph of Irena on it and, in the corner, a rubber plant on a stand and, under the stand, grapples and a coil of climbing ropes. In the middle of the room three chairs stood around a table covered with a heavy green cloth. Irena walked across the room and sat down on the couch. I went over and sat down next to her. Neither of us said anything. I looked around the room.

'Have you been here before?' she asked.

'No,' I said. 'It's a nice place.'

'Well, it's not too comfortable, but I think it's pretty,' she said.

After another long pause, I asked, 'You come here often?'

Irena laughed and you could tell that that little head of hers was practically bursting with memories.

'Often enough,' she said, and blushed a little.

'Doesn't the landlady mind?'

'No,' said Irena.

'You're lucky,' I said.

Irena got up and started pacing around the room. I watched her, thinking how beautiful she looked in her green striped dress and in that dim light that made her face look even sweeter because all you could really make out were her lips and dark eyes. She stopped by the table, picked up a little Buddha, and turned it in her hand.

'I gave this to him,' she said softly.

'Hmm,' I said, unable to think of anything else to say or do. Irena set the Buddha back down on the table. She opened the

cupboard and stood there in front of it. I saw a few of Zdenek's jackets and a coiled climbing rope on a hook and a neat pile of shirts and underwear. Irena stared at the clothes, lost in thought. I couldn't stand it any more.

'Irena,' I said.

'Hmm?' she said without even turning around.

'Irena, how'd you meet Zdenek anyway?'

Then she turned, looked at me and said, 'Why do you ask, Danny?'

'No reason in particular,' I said and looked down at the floor. 'I just wondered.'

'Really?'

'Really.'

'Well, I don't know ... Danny ...'

'What don't you know?'

'You sure it won't just make you angry or sad again?'

'No.'

'Truly?'

'No,' I said. 'I'd really like to know. Everything about you interests me. You know that.'

'I know. But this ...'

'Tell me, Irena. Please.'

'Well, all right,' she said, and closed the cupboard and came over and sat down on the couch not too close to me and leaned back. She crossed her legs and her skirt rode up over her pretty knees which I noticed were a little bruised. But she pulled down her skirt right away.

'It was at Wet Rock,' she said. 'Just a year ago. I'd gone over with some friends and we'd climbed Chapel Cliff. You know the one?'

'Yes,' I said. But in my eyes Irena didn't fit at all with Zdenek and his crew with their nature cult and all that sitting around on rocks to watch the sun go down. She belonged indoors, in a kimono and little slippers with pompons made out of bird-of-paradise feathers, lounging around in the bedroom. That's where she belonged and not all wound up in ropes, dangling over the side of a cliff. I listened to her husky voice which gave away a lot more than just what she was saying.

'And Zdenek...' she said, 'was there with a group from Stare Mesto and they were going up over the Pehr approach to Chapel Cliff. You traverse to the overhang and, from there on up, you have to use pitons.'

'I know,' I said, but what I was thinking of wasn't what Irena had in mind.

'And I was right under the overhang and Mirek was already up and secured me and, all of a sudden, there was Zdenek up on the traverse and he saw me and he looked at me and then just stared.'

Irena paused for a moment. Then she went on and her eyes had a remote stare now. 'It was evening but the cliff was still in the sun and the tops of the trees down below were shining and the sky was already completely pink and Zdenek was wearing that leather jacket of his and I looked across at him and I liked him. He had nice wavy hair and it shone in the sun and he was looking at me, too, so I thought - though why, I don't know - maybe we'll get to know each other, and then he climbed up and helped the person behind him up too and then looked around and came over to me and said, "Mind if I join you?" Or something like that, I don't remember any more, it was something like that anyway, and I said, "Well, it was about time you asked, isn't it?" and I really didn't mean to put it like that but it just came out like that, that's all, and then he told me he'd been assigned to work for Messerschmidt in Stare Mesto and I told him I worked at the post office and then we roped together and went for a walk in the woods together and it was nearly two hours before we came back to the...'

Listening to her, I could picture the whole scene - the woods and the tops of the cliffs dripping with sunshine as if it was honey and the deep evening forest and Zdenek leading Irena deeper and deeper into the woods, and then kissing her. The most incredible thing about the whole business was that I also existed then and that all this was going on completely independently of me. I was being bored stiff at a welding course at Messerschmidt's in the meantime.

'We made a date for the following Sunday,' Irena was saying, 'because he was in the factory then where they worked

from something like six in the morning until late at night. I was off duty the next afternoon and I went over to Honza's to get some climbing irons and I was just crossing the tracks by the station when all of a sudden I saw him getting off the train, and when he saw me he came right over. I asked him what he was doing there and he said he'd taken sick leave and had a whole week off so I told him to come over to Honza's with me but he wanted to go for a walk in the woods so that's where we finally went.'

Irena fell silent. 'Well, so now you know how it happened,' she said after a while.

'Yes,' I said. 'And then?'

'Then? What do you mean?'

'Well, afterwards. How did he manage to come to live in Kostelec?'

Irena laughed. 'He was in Stare Mesto for a while and then he arranged to be transferred.'

'To be near you, right?'

'Naturally,' said Irena, and suddenly she looked very serious and said, 'Oh, God, you really don't think anything's happened to him, do you, Danny?'

'Of course not,' I said.

'I couldn't bear it,' she said. A clock was ticking somewhere in the room and the shade was a rectangle of brown light over the window.

'Irena,' I said. I uttered her name like a magic charm. Like balm for my own hurt soul.

'Yes,' she said.

'Irena, have you ever...'

'What?' she answered softly and automatically.

'Is there - has there been - anything between you?'

She didn't answer. Her face was motionless and I couldn't for the life of me tell what she was thinking just then. I felt I'd gone too far and quickly and guiltily said, 'Irena...'

'Hmm?' she said very faintly.

'Are you angry at me?'

'No, Danny.'

'I'm glad. Because... well, you know how much I love you.'

'I know,' she said, and laid her hand on mine. But she still hadn't admitted that there'd been anything between them. I knew there had been but I wanted to hear it from her. Since I'd never got anywhere with her, I at least wanted to hear how far he'd got with her.

'Irena,' I repeated, 'did you have an affair with him?'

She bent her head and said, 'Well, after all, Danny, we've been going together for a year now.'

'I know,' I said, and felt miserable. I'd have given anything if she'd only let me have an affair with her, too. But I knew I didn't have much to offer. I quickly thought about what really great thing I had that I could sacrifice for her. The saxophone! I could play the saxophone better than anybody - nobody in the district could even begin to touch me when I was playing my tenor sax. So I could give that up. Rather never pick up my sax again than never once have an affair with Irena, I said to myself. Then, even head over heels in love as I was with her right then, the more I thought about it the less sure I was that I'd really do it and I said to myself, Sure you would! Damn right you would! By God, and you will, too! And I even swore to God I'd never play my sax again if only He'd let me have Irena and then I modified it a bit and swore I'd stop playing when I was thirty - or forty - and at the same time, in some dark corner of my soul, I was pretty sure that something would come up which would get me off the hook somehow so that, actually, I didn't swear to anything and I hadn't given anything up but, in spite of that, I was still in love with Irena, awfully and unbearably and deeply. I longed for her. Then I noticed she was squeezing my hand and I heard her say, 'Danny?'

'What?'

'Don't think about it.'

I switched on a melancholy smile. 'I just can't help it, Irena,' I said.

'You mustn't.'

'There's nothing I can do about it. I have to.'

'But you're with me, too, and you mean an awful lot to me, you know?'

'Honestly, Irena?'

'Honestly.'

'Irena,' I said yearningly, putting my arm around her shoulder.

'No, Danny,' she said, taking my hand and setting it back on my knee. 'There,' she said.

I looked dejected.

'And don't be sad,' she said.

'But I love you so much.'

'I know, Danny, but there's nothing we can do about it.'

That made me mad. Nothing we can do about it! She's always said that. And there was something we could do, if she really wanted to. Plenty, if only she had a little room left for me in her heart. But she preferred to play virtuous, getting me all excited, and meanwhile the only reason she was so virtuous was because I didn't appeal to her or excite her as much as Zdenek did. I didn't believe in fidelity and all that other rot. All it was was just an excuse girls waved around so they could make life miserable for not just one guy but for as many as possible. I was mad, but there wasn't anything I could do about it. It was up to her to make the next move. Irena looked at her watch.

'It's already two,' she said. I wasn't hungry; the time had flown by. 'Shouldn't we ask again?' said Irena.

'Wait a minute,' I said. 'I'll run over to Sokol Hall and phone.' I wanted to keep Irena in that room with me as long as I could.

'That'd be awfully nice of you, Danny.'

'Aren't I always?'

'You are. You're wonderful.'

Wonderful. Well, sure. A wonderful idiot who put up with everything. I got up. 'Good-bye,' I said. 'I'll be right back.'

'Thanks,' said Irena, and she gave me a smile for the road. I hurried out of the room and the house and ran down to Sokol Hall as fast as I could so I could get right back to Irena again. I went inside and over to the telephone and dialled the brewery and waited.

Then a voice came. 'Army Headquarters.'

'Hello,' I said. 'Do you have the full casualty list already, please?'

'Yes,' the voice said.

'Would you kindly tell me if a Zdenek Pivonka is listed.'

'Just a minute,' said the voice. I waited tensely. I knew my wish wouldn't come true, but I waited anyway. It took a long time. I prayed he'd be on the list this time.

'Hello?' the voice came back.

'Yes?'

'No, he's not listed.'

'No?'

'No.'

'And that's the final list?'

'Yes. All the dead have been identified.'

'But he hasn't come back yet.'

'I'm sorry, but he's not on the list.'

'I wonder where he could be then?'

'Possibly out on patrol somewhere.'

'On patrol?'

'Yes. Some of the patrols went out to clear the woods of SS men.'

'I see. Well, thank you very much.'

'You're welcome.'

'Good-bye,' I said, and hung up. Sure. Zdenek was probably out hunting Germans someplace. Nobody could kill that guy. Well, that's okay too – let him hunt, I thought to myself. Meanwhile, I'd make as much use of my time with Irena as possible. I hurried out. Or maybe they'd got him off after all – somewhere way off back in the woods – and just hadn't found his body yet. As I headed back up the hill, the idea that he really was dead and no longer stood in my way swept over me – I could see Irena grieving, Irena wearing a black dress to his funeral and then observing a period of mourning for a while and then getting tired of it and then going around with me. And as I walked along, I thought over my strategy in the time I had ahead of me and drew up a general plan of action. I rang the doorbell and suddenly there was Irena. The old lady hadn't even shown up to open the door for me. She was probably one

of those landladies who don't worry too much about their tenants' visitors. Then I thought about all that had probably gone on here before between Irena and Zdenek.

'He's not on the list,' I said.

'And do they know where he is?' said Irena.

'No. But he's not listed among the dead.'

'So they don't know anything?'

'No. But Kuratko said they could still find some more corpses up in the woods. They're out searching the woods right now in fact.'

I looked at her with a really demonic stare. It seemed to me she'd turned pale. She went back into the room and I followed her. I sat down on the couch and Irena started pacing the floor.

'Don't be scared,' I said.

'It's this waiting that's so awful, Danny.'

'I know.'

She stopped by the washtable and leaned against it. She had a beautiful figure in that dress.

'Danny, you're very sweet,' she said.

'Oh, go on.'

'You really are – waiting like this with me.'

'With you, Irena, I'd be glad to wait for ever.'

She smiled.

'Irena,' I said. 'I'd like to say something comforting, but I don't know what to say.'

'You don't have to say anything, Danny.'

'But I'd like to.'

'You don't have to, Danny. I know how thoughtful you are,' said Irena, sitting down on the couch and stretching her legs out on to the chair in front of the table. Neither of us said anything for a while. The clock ticked loudly into the silence.

'Irena,' I said, 'remember when we saw each other for the first time? That time in winter, I don't remember exactly when. All I remember is that you were walking across the square in your ski outfit and carrying your skis over your shoulder, I think, and you looked at me and it was love at first sight – for me, anyway.'

Irena laughed. 'I remember,' she said.

'And you remember that time in spring,' I said, 'when you were standing on the corner with some other girl but I only saw you and didn't even notice the other girl and the sun was shining on your hair and you were saying something and wearing a flowered dress and when I saw you, my heart stopped and I didn't know where I was hardly and just wanted to go over to you only I didn't have the nerve so I just said hello?'

Irena nodded.

'And that time in the summer, at the pool, when I came in with Salat and you were stretched out on the side reading a book and you were wearing shorts and the top had an anchor on it - remember?'

'Mmmm.'

'Yeah, and we sat down with you and played cards.'

'Yes, and you told my fortune and said I was going to have five children.'

'You remember that?'

'Sure, Danny. How long ago was that anyway?'

I thought back. It seemed an awfully long time ago. We'd been freshmen then. So sophomore year made one year; junior, two; senior, three; and then two years compulsory labour. Five years.

'Five years, Irena,' I said.

'Five years. Good God, how the years go by.'

'Yes. I've been in love with you for five years, Irena.'

'You really love me, Danny?' she said, and there was a wavering, indecisive look in her eyes now.

'Very much, Irena. For five years you're all I've lived for.'

'Oh God,' she said and took my hand. 'Danny, if there were only something I could ...'

'And there isn't, Irena?'

'No, Danny, no. I couldn't.'

'Irena, if you really wanted to ... just a ...'

'No, Danny,' she said and then after a while went on, 'Don't think I don't care for you. But you know I can't.'

'Why not?'

'I can't, Danny.'

'Irena, if you only knew how painful ...'

'I know.'

'And I'm jealous, Irena.'

'You shouldn't be, Danny. I'm sorry you ...'

'I don't want you to be sorry for me, Irena.'

'Still, I'm not so sorry for you that I pity you.'

'Well, what's that supposed to mean?'

'Oh, you know.'

'No, I don't.'

'Well, I just mean that I can't do what you want me to do.'

'And you wouldn't like to?'

'Well ...' She thought for a minute. 'Well, yes, of course I would, Danny ... but it just isn't that simple.'

'Irena, would you really like to ... well, you know ... be together with me?'

'Yes, Danny.'

'Then why don't you?'

'Because I can't.'

'But why not?'

'Danny, don't ask such silly questions.'

'It's not a silly question.'

'Yes, it is.'

I didn't say anything for a while, and then I said, 'Irena, if I didn't love you like I do and if you didn't care about me ... Except you say you do ... or don't you?'

'I do, Danny,' she said.

'So then why don't you want to? There's nothing wrong with it, Irena, if you ... if you care about me.'

'That's something different, Danny.'

I moved closer and took her hand.

'Irena, I know how good and kind you are and ... and pure' - the word stuck in my throat - 'and I know you're in love with Zdenek, but there wouldn't be anything wrong about our being together. Really, there wouldn't.'

'Yes, there would, Danny.'

'No, Irena. Why I wouldn't even want you to break up with

him since you're so much in love with him. It's just that I'd like to have a little proof that you really care for me, see?' and a little tenderness ... and when I think about you and him, I feel dumb and inferior compared with him, you know?'

She stroked my cheek. Things were looking up.

'Oh, go on,' she said.

I wondered how to keep things rolling along now that I almost had her where I wanted her. I put my arm around her shoulder and looked into her eyes.

'You understand, Irena?' I said.

'I understand,' she said.

Then I let my voice grow softer as I went on. 'Believe me, Irena, I don't want you to do anything wrong but I'm so madly in love with you and I want you so badly and you don't know how happy I'd be if we could just be together for a while, anyway.'

I saw her eyes brimming with something that looked like sadness and sympathy but I knew what it really was. It was pleasure. She was flattered and at that moment she was already being elegantly unfaithful to Zdenek. Which made me love her even more.

'Irena!' I implored.

She smiled hesitantly. 'Yes?' she whispered.

My moment had come. I drew her gently closer. She didn't resist. She just kept looking into my eyes. Then I leaned over and kissed her. I saw her close her eyes. She was gone. I embraced her and sipped away at her love-hungry lips for a long time, but after a while she started to push me away. She smiled guiltily. 'So,' she said. 'Enough.'

I looked at her, my eyes full of loving devotion. Only this time I really was in love and devoted. 'Irena,' I sighed.

'Enough,' she said.

'But, Irena ...'

'Enough,' she said. 'Come on - over here next to me.'

I moved over as close as I could and stretched out beside her on the sofa.

'Give me your hand,' she said. I gave her my hand and she took it and held it.

'Are you a bit happier now?' she asked.

'Yes.'

'I want you to be,' she said.

I loved her. I was absolutely wild about her.

'Irena,' I said, 'I ...'

'Well, what?'

'I'd like to say something nice, but I can't think what to say.'

'Then just be quiet, Danny, and lie here next to me. You don't have to say anything.'

I didn't say a word. We lay there next to each other and the room was flooded with the brownish-yellow light and flies hummed and buzzed around the ceiling light. I could hear Irena breathing and see her bosom rising and falling and I loved her and wanted to touch her breast but couldn't. The flies buzzed and the clock ticked and gradually my thoughts started to settle down. I lay there next to Irena, thinking about her, her lips and warm shoulder, and about how good it felt to be there with her, and the flies went on buzzing and then suddenly I noticed that Irena was breathing very regularly and I looked at her and saw that her eyes were closed and her lips parted and something glinted inside her mouth, and I realized she'd fallen asleep, that she was probably all worn out from last night, and I lay there without stirring so I wouldn't wake her up and I looked at her face, sweetly sleeping, and at her breasts under the green-striped material and at her stomach and lap and suntanned legs and as I looked at her, I started thinking again, thinking about her, about Irena, and about how things would be in the future. And I thought that maybe Zdenek had got himself killed after all. Then, I thought, I'd have sweet Irena all to myself and she'd come up to my room, but I didn't have a room all by myself and so I thought how it would be when I was living in Prague and I hoped I'd find a good-hearted landlady, too, and that Irena would come to see me at my place which would be in some dark old apartment building, a room like this one, and Irena, wearing a transparent hooded raincoat over her corduroy suit, would jump off the streetcar in the rain and the streetlights would be reflected on

the cobblestones and Irena would come along barelegged, past the lit-up shop-windows and between the evening pedestrians in their raincoats, looking like a bright cloud, beaming and beautiful, and her coat would glisten with raindrops and then she'd turn into one of those dark and shabby apartment houses with two plaster Herculeses over the doorway and walk through the dim hall with its plaster stucco trim and pictures of castles and up the stairs to the third floor where there'd be a view out through the big window with its etched-in landscape, a view of the backs of other houses and then she'd stop in front of a door and ring the bell and I'd come to the door in my bathrobe and let her in and Irena would take off her raincoat and then we'd sit down on the couch and Irena would tell me what she'd done all day and then I'd kiss her and then she'd stop talking and I'd kiss her again and Irena would put her arms around me and we'd lie down next to each other and Irena would press up close to me and I'd undo the buttons at her neck and keep right on kissing her and then Irena would take off her skirt and everything so would I and we'd kiss each other over and over and then we'd be together and I'd say 'darling' to her, 'darling, you're so sweet' – and afterwards we'd lie side by side and then Irena would get dressed and comb her hair in front of the mirror and I'd watch her and then I'd get dressed, too, or maybe just see her to the door and then there I am, all by myself, thinking about her again. It was wonderful, to think about, so I started – thinking it through all over again: she comes up to my place, takes off her raincoat, she's sweet and affectionate, and then we're doing this thing together, and it's still with us, even in cafés and at the movies and the theatre lobby and during the lectures we sit through and out on the street, and we'd always be doing it and we'd talk about it, too. I thought about it some more and then about how I'd graduate and Irena and I would get married and what the wedding would be like and how all my friends would stare when they saw Irena and be secretly furious at me for having walked off with such a sweet lovely girl because in the meantime they'd married real cows or hadn't got married at all and we'd be married in church and my uncle, the one who's a

priest in Budejovice, would perform the ceremony and somebody would be playing the organ and I could see Irena standing there in front of the altar in a beige suit and me putting the ring on her finger and then off we'd go to live together and we'd have children and I imagined Irena in a hospital with a baby boy or maybe a girl all wrapped up in a blanket and we'd call it Daniel or Irena and then I left off thinking about the future and only thought of all those kids we'd have – three or four or five, for instance, or three sets of twins or maybe we'd have as many as twelve – and suddenly I wished I had them already and I could just see myself, old and jolly, with about seven sons and five daughters and the Smiricky line growing and spreading out from me, from me, the last of the line, and how these sons would have their own children and so on and then I realized this was getting pretty absurd so I went back to thinking about Irena coming over to visit me, and her hair and her breasts, and my eyes closed and my head grew heavy and, next to me, Irena was breathing regularly and I thought about her and then my thoughts got all mixed up and I was so tired I started drowsing off and then I fell asleep.

When I woke up, the room was almost dark. The evening sun was just going down outside the brown shades and the room was quiet. Even the flies had stopped buzzing. Irena lay beside me, her left hand under her head and her face turned towards me, her eyes closed and her eyelids dark, her eyelashes making two softer darker arches. I could see two little white teeth gleaming between her parted lips and I was overcome with an awful, yearning love. She'd unbuttoned the collar of her dress and I could see the tender white flesh of her body. I put my arms around her and kissed her on the forehead. She nestled closer to me and put her right arm around me. But her eyes were still closed. I kissed her cheek again and whispered, 'Irena.' She opened her eyes a bit and then suddenly moved very close to me. I held her tight and wanted to kiss her on her mouth. But she turned her head so I couldn't and just hugged me.

'Irena,' I said.

She hugged me again and started to say in a low, rapid voice,

'Danny, I'm so scared something's happened to him. I just know something's happened to him.'

'Don't be scared, Irena,' I murmured into her ear. 'Don't be scared,' and at the same time I had an awful yearning for her and I was mad at her and it would have been fine with me if he'd been drawn and quartered.

'I'm so scared, Danny, I'm so scared,' she kept saying, and she trembled as if she was cold.

'Don't,' I said, and I felt awful. She didn't say anything. I could feel she was still trembling, though. So I started caressing her hair and mumbling, 'Irena, darling, easy, easy,' and she stopped trembling but then all of a sudden she was sobbing softly. I kept on mumbling, 'Don't cry, Irena, darling, don't,' but she sobbed all the harder with her face dug into the arm of the sofa and I drew her very close and suddenly she turned her face to me and it was wet with tears and all red but incredibly sweet, and I kissed her on her wet cheek and then on her nose and one eye and then her cheek again and then on the other eye and I kept on kissing her and knew that this was what life was all about and I wanted it to last as long as it could. It was getting dark and Irena sighed every once in a while as we lay there side by side in the twilight and I thought frantically about her body and I could feel how fantastically hot and alive it was and I loved it, but suddenly it wasn't only because of the pleasure it gave, because she'd denied that to me, but for the life in it, for the fact that it was Irena and because of that little soul of hers which was dumb, maybe, but was still the living and tortured soul of a woman.

Then finally she sat up suddenly and put her hand to her hair. I watched her comb the tangles out of her hair and then she got up and smoothed her dress. I stood up, too, and smoothed back my hair. We both stood there. Then Irena said, 'Let's go, Danny.'

'All right,' I said. I felt like an idiot.

'Zdenek won't be coming any more now,' she said.

'Oh, he'll come back all right,' I said, just to make her feel good. She turned to me and put her hand over my lips.

'Shh! Don't say that,' she said. I didn't understand. 'If we say

it too often it won't come true,' said Irena. So that was it. I stumbled out into the street behind her. It was already night outside and chilly and full of stars. The old lady hadn't even appeared. I took Irena's arm and we started off towards town. We went down the hill and along the main street towards the square. The front of the church shone in the starlight and the windows of City Hall were all lit up. The blackout was over now. There was a meeting going on at City Hall. People were standing around talking in the square. Irena and I walked past in silence. There was a big poster next to the church. We stopped and read that tomorrow at ten o'clock there would be an official welcome for the Red Army on the square and that General Jablonkovski would be there in person.

'Are you going to go, Irena?'

'Hm,' she said. We walked on. I wondered how to ask her whether she'd go with me if Zdenek didn't come back, how things were going to be if he did, but I couldn't. All I could do was keep quiet. We walked along together towards the station and crossed the tracks and walked past houses under the stars and on towards the bridge. Then we turned off and stopped in front of Irena's house. The dark river and the leaves in the forest rustled behind me. I took Irena by the hand and looked into her face. Her face was white as milk and her eyes and lips were dark. That was practically all I could see of her and yet she was all there.

'Darling,' I said.

'Good night, Danny,' she said softly.

'Irena...'

She stood there for a little while, then kissed me quickly on my mouth, whispered good night, turned, and hurried into the house. She disappeared like a phantom right in front of my eyes. I turned around and felt a sharp pain in my heart. Yes. It hurt. I hurried home. I was almost bawling. I climbed up to the third floor, unlocked the door, and tiptoed into the kitchen.

'Is that you, Danny?' Mother's voice came from the bedroom.

'Yes. Good night,' said Mother.

I tore off my clothes and curled up under the blanket and

'Well, it's just an opinion,' I said, 'but I think you'd be better off.'

Mr Dluhon smiled nervously again. 'But your father was always a National Democrat. Just ask him.'

'I know, but the Bolsheviks are here now.'

Mr Dluhon leaned over to me and said confidentially, 'Oh, just you wait until all this blows over,' he muttered. 'After things quiet down, Dr Kramar'll be respected again.'

'I'm not so sure,' I said.

'Wait and see, Mr Smiricky. You're still young. You don't remember. But just ask your father.'

I didn't know quite what I was supposed to ask and why he was sticking Kramar in his window right now when the storm hadn't even begun to blow yet that was supposed to blow over, but I acted as though I knew. So I said, 'Yes, well, but maybe you might put in Benes until things do quiet down.'

'No, Mr Smiricky, I think not,' said Mr Dluhon. 'I've always been a Kramar man and I'll remain one till my dying day.'

Well, then maybe you won't be around very long, I thought to myself, but all I said was, 'Well, it's up to you. But I'd stick Benes in there, if I were you.'

His eyes twitched a bit as if he was thinking I was showing too little respect for a statesman, even if it was Benes. Then, with that same servile smile, he said, 'Thank you, Mr Smiricky, for... well... for... but I'll just leave Dr Kramar in there.'

There was no helping the poor guy. I decided to forget about it and take a look around the square instead. Maybe the guys would be there by now. And the girls. And I'd wait around for Irena.

'Well, maybe you can get away with it,' I said, with a smile. 'I've got to be going. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye, Mr Smiricky, and thank you,' he said, and bowed again. I walked on. People dressed up in their Sunday best were already heading towards the square. A smaller bunch was crowding around Moutelik's display window. All those pictures he was taking. I thought to myself, and headed over. And there they were. I shoved my way up close to the window and saw that Berty, that fool, had put me at the top of his display and

underneath my picture was the caption: 'Defender of Our Fatherland.' Jesus Christ! I hadn't wanted anything like *that*! I'd wanted the picture to show off with but not have myself put on display in his show window like the village idiot. I could already hear the other guys razzing me about it. Hell. I looked at my picture. Well, it wasn't a bad snapshot. But that awful caption underneath - 'Defender of Our Fatherland.' I could have socked Berty; it would be a pleasure. And then I almost burst out laughing. What had I been defending anyway? If only these people, with all their noses pressed up to the window, knew what I'd been fighting for. And how much I cared about 'the Fatherland'. And what I really cared about. If they only knew what I'd done on the eve of these great events and what I'd been thinking about and how worried I was about that other great defender of his Fatherland - Zdenek Pivonka. And how well it suited me that he'd disappeared while defending his country. And how his war widow fitted into my plans. Oh, God! I remembered Irena and glanced at my watch. There was still plenty of time so I started looking at the other pictures. There were captions under all of them, just like I knew there would be. One group was composed of Mr Frinta, Mr Jungwirth, and Mr Wolf, all sporting armbands and standing in the brewery yard, grinning into Berty's Leica. Underneath was the caption, 'Everybody Volunteered', and under a portrait of Dr Bohadlo, striding across the bridge in his knickers and with his hunting rifles, Berty had written, 'Into the Fray!' Most of the other captions were like that. A fuzzy picture of German tanks creeping away from the customs house bore the inscription, 'Enemy on the Horizon', and for a shot of poor Hrob kneeling beside the shattered dugout holding a bazooka, Berty's incomprehensible fantasy had come up with, 'Neither Gain nor Glory - the NATION is All!' Berty was obviously a chip off the old block. But still, Hrob's picture was poignant. Thinking about what had happened the day before yesterday, tears came to my eyes. I could still see the highway glistening in the rain and Hrob's red head and now here on Berty's snapshot, which had turned out exceptionally well, he knelt for ever, full of enthusiasm, hunched beside the grey stone dugout

wall with the strip of glistening highway and the black tank below, its long snout aimed at him. And in the background, the pretty rolling countryside and scraps of clouds in the sky. It was a masterpiece. But that wasn't Berty's doing. If anybody deserved the credit it was his dad for being able to buy him the Leica. Again I thought about Hrob and how he'd stood in line to enlist in the army, obedient and eager, and then lying so still there in the grass. If anybody had done anything real worthwhile, it was Hrob. But it went against my grain to call him a patriot, even in the privacy of my own thoughts. He didn't deserve it. Mr Jungwirth and Machacek and Kaldoun and those guys – those were the patriots, and if they liked the word they could have it. But not Hrob. Hrob was something better. I remembered him at school, munching bread behind me and the smell when he opened his mouth; I remembered him always having patches on his pants and how he'd stare hungrily while Berty finished off a couple of sausages at the ten o'clock recess. I was sorry he'd had to die the way he did and so young and I thought about his mother, probably shrieking and tear-streaked and hoarse right now, and suddenly Mr Kaldoun and Moutelik and the others – and me, too, stuck up in a window like an idiot – struck me as dumb and ridiculous. It was awful. Still, the best thing to do was not worry too much about it. I made up my mind I wouldn't say anything to Berty about it. Let him leave the picture where it was and to hell with it. I turned away from the window and walked slowly towards the square. Flags and banners fluttered in the brisk wind and the sun was shining brightly. I stopped at the corner by the loan association office. Long banners hung from the church and from the theatre and City Hall was decked out with a whole array of flags. A regular Sunday promenade streamed along the streets and around the square. The speaker's platform in front of City Hall was draped with red cloth and flanked by propped-up birches. The sloping square, which yesterday had still been cluttered with refugees' bundles, gleamed clean and empty now. The refugees had vanished. It was a spring day and it was peacetime, and it struck me that I'd soon be setting out for Prague. It had been a whole year since I'd last been there. We'd gone there to play at

the last big wartime affair, an amateur jazz festival in Lucerna Hall. There'd been an air raid that night and the concert had broken off in the middle. We'd played 'St Louis Blues', I remember, and 'Solitude', only we'd changed the names to '*Die schöne Stadt im Süden*' and '*Liebling, mein Liebling*' concealing all that beauty under those awful words, and the Lucerna sparkled and shone with light and the balconies were packed and people hollered and clapped and stamped their feet and Emil Ludvik* was on the jury and he talked to us after the concert and the kids in the audience raised a terrific rumpus after every number and it lasted until late at night. Then we went home on the morning express, sleepy and depressed, and we had to pay a fine at the factory for missing half a day's work and they wanted to report me to the personnel office because I'd missed a lot of half-days. But it'd been terrific. The most wonderful time of my life. And now it was peacetime and there'd be jazz and night clubs and everything again. I looked around me and wondered.

I was still standing there thinking when suddenly I heard an odd far-off noise. It sounded like the clatter of hundreds of wheels; it was coming closer. There was a sharp whip crack and then through the gap in the anti-tank barrier two Steppe ponies appeared pulling a wagon with a Russian up front. The Russian was cracking his whip over his head and singing as the ponies galloped along, the wagon wheels rattling over the cobblestones. When I was watching the first one, a second wagon appeared, then another and another and another, as one after the other they squeaked through the anti-tank barrier and hurtled along the street and through the square, heading west. The air was filled with creaks and rattles and the crack of the long whips. Like a wild stampede, they rumbled past in rapid procession – the red-cheeked Russians towering over the rumps of their flea-bitten ponies, bellowing out their Russian songs. The people on the sidewalks gawked. The wagons hurtled by at breakneck speed, the wiry little horses tossing their manes. There was an endless line of them. Their smell filled the air – the smell of the tundra or taiga – and, breathing it in and looking at those weatherbeaten men's faces, it seemed incred-

ible that such people really existed, people who knew nothing about jazz or girls either, probably, and who just shot by – unshaven, revolvers strapped around their greasy pants, bottles of vodka stuck in their hip pockets, excited, drunk, and triumphant, not thinking about the things I thought about, completely different from me, and awfully strange, yet with something awfully attractive about them, too. I admired them. So this was the Red Army, dashing by at full speed, dusty, sweaty, barbaric as the Scythians, and I thought about Blok again whose poems somebody had lent me during the war and wasn't sure whether something new wasn't about to start, something as big as a revolution and I wondered what effect it would have on me and my world. I didn't know. Everything was tearing by so fast I felt lost in it all. I knew they'd be given a big welcome and that there'd be speechmaking and that everybody would be enthusiastic about communism and that I'd be loyal. I didn't have anything against communism. I didn't know anything about it for one thing, and I wasn't one of those people who are against something just because their parents and relatives and friends are. I didn't have anything against anything, just as long as I could play jazz on my saxophone, because that was something I loved to do and I couldn't be for anything that was against that. And as long as I could watch the girls, because that meant being alive. For me, then, two things meant life. I knew there was a hunger in those people riding past on those wagons and in those who'd be setting up the party and discussion groups and Marxist study groups and all that now – a hunger for knowledge. I'd already got to know them at the factory, from discussions we'd had in the john, and when I'd talked about the solar system and about galaxies and Apollinaire and American history they'd listened, wide eyed. There was hunger in them for things I was glutted with. It was different with me. With my past and my ancestors and education taken for granted for generations and just comfort and luxury in general. It was interesting to read about people like them. About the Negroes in America, the mujiks in Russia, the way people had shot the workers and so on. To read about this thirst for knowledge, this struggle for a better life. It was

interesting and even moving at times, so that sometimes actually tears came to your eyes, but only because you were sentimental, because you were touched by the idea of poverty and suffering like my mother at Christmas when she wore a silk dress and wept when she heard the carols. Otherwise, it didn't really touch us. It was remote. It wasn't something really close to my heart, it was outside and far off, remote. I'd had an education and so had everybody else I knew and we had all the comforts of life and civilization. Actually, education didn't even seem important; it was something you just took for granted, like railroads and aspirin, for instance. What really mattered was girls and music. And thinking about them. But finally, ultimately, nothing mattered. Everything was nothing, for nothing, and led to nothing. There was only the animal fear of death, because that's the only thing nobody knows anything about, and that fear alone was enough to keep a person going in his nothingness. I wondered whether some day this fear, too, would lose its importance for me.

The wagons kept rattling past and suddenly I felt terribly depressed. I turned around and saw Haryk and Benno with Lucie and Helena coming from the church against the tide of the wagons. Lucie was wearing a dress that looked like a Carpathian-Ukrainian folk costume, with a fringe along the hem of the skirt like Sokol teenagers wear on their pants, and it was funny but on Lucie it looked good. She kept stopping to yell at the Russians as they drove by and to toss them a rose from a huge bouquet she held in her arms. Benno, Helena, and Haryk walked along in silence; they weren't yelling at anybody. I waited for them and knew what Benno would say when he saw me, and he did: 'Greetings, defender of our fatherland.'

'Did you volunteer?' added Haryk.

'Shut up,' I said. 'You better just keep an eye on Lucie so she won't start necking with one of our liberators.'

'You hear?' Haryk called to Lucie. But she wasn't listening.

'Zdrastvujte!' she screamed like she'd gone out of her head.

Haryk watched her in disgust. 'She's gone nuts,' he said.

'Listen, before I forget it,' said Benno, 'there's a rehearsal this afternoon at two o'clock at the Port. We're playing at six to-night in the square.'

'Really?' I said.

'Yeah. We're going to celebrate peace.'

'And there's going to be dancing?'

'Sure,' said Benno.

The last of the wagons had rattled by. People were starting to crowd up in front of City Hall. Mr Petrbok's brass band was lining up right in front of the platform. The clock in the tower showed quarter to ten.

'Let's go up and get a place,' said Haryk.

'Come on,' said Benno.

'I've got to wait here,' I said.

'Who for?' said Benno.

'Irena,' I said coolly.

Benno looked at me like I'd gone mad too and shook his head. 'You were, are, and always will be a fool,' he said.

'That's right,' I said.

'Well, so long,' said Benno.

'So long,' I said. They left. I stood there alone on the corner again. The local dignitaries were assembling in front of the platform. There was the former mayor, Mr Prudivy, who'd apparently taken over again now that Kùhl was gone – the Regierungskommissar under whom he'd been compelled to serve throughout the war as Czech deputy. Then there was Mr Kaldoun and Mr Krocan and Mr Machacek – the whole bunch, including General Director Heiser, Dr Sabata, Dr Hubalek, the head of the hospital. They were all standing in front of the red platform in their black suits, consulting among themselves. The crowd was growing and the police were keeping everything under control. I saw Police Chief Rimbalnik, in his white coat and corset, majestically giving orders. I looked away. No sign of Irena. It didn't surprise me and as the minutes passed I got more and more irritated and then really mad at her. Only whenever I got mad at her because she didn't show up, I realized how much I loved her and yearned for her more than before. I thought over what had happened the afternoon before

and the memory of it went to my head. When I came back to earth again, the square was already full and the clock said half past ten. I stood on tiptoe and looked for Irena. Still no sign of her. I couldn't have seen her anyway because the sidewalks all around the square were packed. She'd stood me up. Her promises were always like that. She'd stood me up and God only knew where she was. Maybe Zdenek had come back in the meantime. That was probably it. I felt depressed. Then I pulled myself together and elbowed my way through the crowd up towards the platform. When people glared at me, I told them I was on the welcoming committee. I was rude and didn't give a damn if I was. I elbowed my way right up to the front so I had a perfect view of the platform. Irena – what a bitch she was. A little girl holding a bouquet and wearing a folk costume stood in front of the platform; she was shaking with stage-fright. It was Manicka Kaldounova; I knew her and I felt kind of sorry for her, but not very. The gentlemen from the welcoming committee kept glancing at their watches and shifting their feet nervously. The brass band had been all polished up; they stood there with their tubas and horns all ready to go, waiting. People around me were grumbling. It was hot and already half past ten. Every now and then some kind of rustle would start on the street and people would stop talking but then nothing happened. I was sweating like mad and then finally shouting and applause drifted in from somewhere and I knew General Jablonkovski had entered town. Everybody turned to look off towards the corner by the loan association office. The applause swelled and you could hear the shouting and applause sweeping in towards us and then all at once one open car came around the corner, then another, and they drove slowly through the two lines of people towards the platform. The welcoming committee lined up. Somebody shoved the little flower girl forward. The door of the first car opened and out stepped a fat ruddy-faced man wearing red riding breeches with double stripes down the sides and a chestful of medals. The little girl recited her little speech while the general listened courteously. Then he bent over, hoisted her up in the air and held her there for a second because there were lots of photo-

graphers bustling around. I caught sight of the ever-present Bert taking the general's picture from an impossible angle just as the brass band let out a big blare. The general quickly set the little girl down on the ground and saluted, the gentlemen from the welcoming committee stood at attention, people started taking their hats off. The band was playing the Russian national anthem. I saw everybody standing there, stiff as posts, and noticed the deacon among the welcoming dignitaries. He was cowering at the back with a purple bib under his Roman collar and he looked worried. The band thundered to the end of the Russian anthem and launched into 'Where Is My Home?' Then it clanked into 'The Lightning Flashes over Tatra' and people started putting their hats on again. But Mr Petrbok was just getting warmed up. The square resounded with the deep tones of the bass trombone and I realized they were starting off on 'God Save the King'. At first, the crowd glanced around hesitantly, then took their hats off again. The concert continued with 'The Star-Spangled Banner', and wound up with the 'Marseillaise'. The band didn't play the Chinese anthem. They probably didn't have the music. The whole thing lasted for a quarter of an hour. General Jablonkovski's hand had fallen asleep from saluting so long and the gentlemen in the black suits were sweating. So was Mr Petrbok. Finally he concluded with a majestic flourish and beamed triumphantly at the general. The general removed his hand from his cap and turned a crushing gaze on Dr Sabata who was approaching him with a piece of paper. Dr Sabata put on his pince-nez and started stammering something. Once more the general stood at courteous attention, the sun shining right into his ruddy face, and a big shiny drop of sweat trickled along his nose. Behind him stood his bemedalled staff, looking bored.

'... And on your brave shoulders you bring us freedom,' I heard, as a breeze wafted Sabata's voice my way. Nobody could understand what he was saying. But then, even if the doctor had been stammering into a microphone nobody would have understood him. I remembered I really ought to be grateful to him since he'd saved my life just a few days ago. Or maybe not, since Prema and his gang would have turned up sooner or

later. Sabata droned his way through his exalted rhetoric and the courteous general shifted from one foot to the other. Then finally Sabata said a few words without looking at the paper and held out his hand. The general pressed it with enthusiasm and Sabata's knees almost gave way. People started clapping and then the gentlemen, all gesturing wildly and stepping aside for each other, propelled the general up the steps and on to the podium. The applause and cheering grew louder. The general lumbered heavily up the steps and clutched the railing. He looked really magnificent. His uniform was a bit dusty and his medals glinted in the sunshine. His sweltering face broke into a large white smile and his thick-fingered hands waved in greeting. The crowd's excitement built to a climax and then slowly ebbed. Everybody quieted down to listen. The general glanced over the assembly and paused dramatically. Then his rough, rasping, heroic voice thundered out over the hushed square: 'Tovarishchi!' And a submachine gun started blasting away from a window somewhere. Everything happened with incredible speed. Somebody pushed me from behind and I fell flat on my face. I saw the general bounding off the platform in a single leap, then a whole lot of little white holes suddenly popping up across the front wall of City Hall just behind the platform. I lay there. I watched the gentlemen from the welcoming committee pushing and shoving each other to make their way back to the entrance. The brass band ducked around the corner leaving behind only a couple of white caps and the bass drum. There was bedlam behind me; the square was emptying out fast. The gun barked again. I saw people dropping to the ground; those who were a little farther off were crawling towards the houses. It was quiet. The sun shone down. I looked around to see where the shots were coming from. The Russian officers peeked out from behind their cars; the general was standing bare-headed behind a pillar in the doorway now. He had red hair. He was holding a revolver. The submachine gun started blasting away again and you could hear the cracking impact of the bullets as they tore into sheet metal. Whoever it was was obviously trying to hit the Russian officers. I looked around and saw a flash in the attic window of the house next to the

City Hall. Then there was a fainter shot. I turned around again and saw the general, cool as a cucumber, firing his automatic up at the attic window. Another submachine gun started firing from the Russian car; glass tinkled, slate shingles around the window split. Then a couple of Russians ran around from behind the car and dashed towards the house, their pistols drawn. The Russian submachine gun covered them with a short burst. They ran to the door and disappeared inside. It was silent. I glanced around the square. People in their Sunday best were lying on the cobblestones. The whole square was strewn with sprawling bodies; heads peered out from behind the church, behind the well, and behind the statue of St Jan Nepomuk. Two fainter shots suddenly rang out into the silence. The general stepped from behind the pillar, strode slowly over to the plaza in front of City Hall, putting his automatic back into his holster. His red hair gleamed in the sunshine. One of the Russians poked his head out of the attic window and shouted something down to the general. I quickly got up and dusted my knees off. The general looked around. People started getting up and drifting back towards the podium. The general smiled and waved them to come closer. Then he picked his cap up off the ground and mounted the platform again.

'*Eto germanski barbar*,' he shouted at the people with a laugh and a wave of his hand. The crowd burst out laughing and began clapping. Another head appeared in the attic window and then the upper part of his body with one hand dangling limply. I recognized the man's face. It was Kurt Schnobel. His father had a shop in that building. He'd been fifteen at the time of the invasion and he'd become a first-class Nazi. So he was the one who'd done it. His body dangled half out of the window and then the Russians gave Kurt another shove and he tumbled out and down on to the sidewalk. He fell like a rag doll with outstretched legs and arms and hit the ground with a splat. I watched the people run over and start to kick him but he was dead anyway. Then the general started off on his speech again. '*Tovarishchi!*'

I didn't understand a single word. After a while I got pretty bored; I looked around at the people. Judging from their faces,

most of the others didn't understand him either. And then I noticed that the welcoming committee was slowly creeping back to its place up by the platform. They looked around cautiously as if expecting more bullets any minute, but when they saw everything was under control they started applauding like mad. The general kept raising his voice portentously and every time his voice went up a note the crowd applauded.

'He sure can talk,' somebody said behind me. It was Haryk.

'I'll say,' I said, and went on listening. About a quarter of an hour later, the general finally concluded his speech. After the applause, Mayor Prudivy stepped up on the platform, took out a sheet of paper, and thanked General Jablonkowski for his address.

'After six years of unutterable hardship,' he said, 'the fraternal Red Army has finally brought us freedom again. Once again we can breathe freely, and now our mothers no longer need to tremble in fear for their children. The hated German intruder has been routed by the heroic armed forces of our Slavic brothers and their Allies.' He went on like that for half an hour. I gradually stopped hearing what he was saying and, instead, suddenly saw him wearing that same morning coat or cutaway or whatever it was and standing there, in exactly the same spot he was standing now, on that very same platform which they probably stored away somewhere in City Hall, except that then there had been a big *V für Victoria* painted on it and Mr Prudivy was translating *Regierungskommissar Kühl's* speech and calling on all citizens to contribute to *Winterhilfswerk* and saying something – not very enthusiastically, granted – about somebody else's 'brave shoulders' which 'bore the brunt of the fighting' or something like that, I couldn't remember too clearly. Then one time he'd been at our place on a visit and had made a big fuss about how Kühl had forced him to translate that speech and both my father and Dr Sabata had hastened to assure him how important it was to have trustworthy patriots in important positions, et cetera. Well, I realized he hadn't meant it seriously about those brave German shoulders. He wasn't a collaborator. It was just that he was

always a trustworthy man in an important position. And that's exactly what he was. And always would be. They could count on him. People like Dr Sabata and Mr Krocan who owned the factory and, well, almost anybody. He was demonstrating that right now, with real flair. He stuck out his chest, stood on his tiptoes, and bellowed, 'Long live the free Czechoslovak Republic!'

There was wild applause. Prudivy waited and then he shouted, 'Long live President Benes and Marshal Stalin!'

This time the applause lasted even longer. When it died away, Prudivy gave it everything he had and screamed, 'Long live our great Slavic ally, the USSR!'

'Watch out you don't bust a gut, you Slav slob!' Haryk muttered behind me. Haryk in particular had a bone to pick with him because Prudivy had made him have his head shaved once. It was when Moravec* issued that proclamation about zootsuits. Potzl, a collaborator, was opening an exposition of paintings by an anti-Semitic artist named Relink or something and Haryk made a special point of turning up in a water-waved pompadour with a sharp porkpie hat on his head and he didn't take it off the whole time Potzl was speaking. He even offered his own opinion of the artist in question and Potzl heard him and started screaming that it was a provocation and Mr Prudivy, who was standing nearby as a National Confederation delegate, got scared and he and Potzl led Haryk off to the barber shop. Later he apologized to Haryk's parents, saying he had no choice, that otherwise Potzl would have denounced him and so on. And the only reason he himself had gone to the exposition in the first place was because he had to, being chairman of the National Confederation. I kind of felt sorry for the guy. He always had to do things he really didn't want to do. And so now there he was again, welcoming the Red Army. He had to do that, too, so nobody would bring up all those other things he'd had to do before. All right. He'd always been dependable, as my father used to say. And he'd go on being that way. You could count on him. When I looked up at him standing there on the podium I figured this revolution probably wouldn't change things too much after all.

The crowd roared with enthusiasm and Mr Prudivy concluded his speech. The general turned and started shaking hands. The brass band struck up a march. The celebration was over. The dignitaries surrounded the general and towed him into City Hall. I turned to Haryk.

'So I'll see you at two at the Port?'

'Right,' said Haryk.

'You going home?' I said.

'I'm going to see that Lucie gets back.'

'Well, so long.' I turned and pushed through the crowd. I started home. I walked along thinking about Irena, wondering why she hadn't come. A funny buzzing started up in my head and people's backs seesawed pointlessly in the sunshine ahead of me. Everything started to seem unreal. The celebration, the general, the German terrorist, and Irena who'd been so close to me just the day before that she'd been the whole purpose of my life. I knew she was dumb but I needed her and her silly chatter. Right now I needed her somehow. It was as if something was wrong with me and with the people around me and I needed Irena so I could think about her and wouldn't have to think about those other things which suddenly, out of nowhere, were getting all mixed up in my brain – the general and Mayor Prudivy, the sweet stink of those Russian wagons, that leaflet we found last winter, Prema and the machine gun which had been put away again in the warehouse – and it all made a chill run down my spine and I was depressed or dissatisfied or something, God only knew. I just wished Irena were there. She didn't know beans about life or, when you come right down to it, that everything is just a lot of nonsense and suffering, and so she had her own silly, vague idea of some sort of gorgeous, happy, cosy life, and all I felt was that funny chill. And, still, I needed her. I loved her. Or else it was just because I was alone and suffering from depressive melancholy, as they called it, and from that strange confusion of the world which, up until recently, had seemed somehow simpler, in spite of the fact that there'd been the war. Or maybe because of it. In any case, life made some sort of sense. Now I was nothing but a living corpse. We all were. Me, Mr Kaldoun, Mr Moutelik. Everybody.

They'd made a living corpse out of me and I didn't know for the life of me whether there was somewhere some magic potion that would bring me back to life. I went past our house in the direction of the brewery. I went up the stairs to Irena's apartment and rang the doorbell. Her mother came to answer it.

'Good morning, ma'am. Is Irena home?' I asked.

'No, she isn't, Mr Smiricky. She went out this morning and hasn't come back yet.'

'Aha. Well, I'll drop by this afternoon,' I said.

'May I give her a message?'

'No. I'll drop by again. Thank you, and good-bye.'

'Good-bye, Mr Smiricky.'

She shut the door and I went down the stairs. Everything disgusted me. And I knew where Irena had gone. I remembered the sofa and the brown shades and I was sick with jealousy. I shook my head and hissed between my teeth. That helped a bit. I went home.

Mother opened the door. 'It's a good thing you're here, Danny,' she said. 'The Englishmen are leaving.'

'Oh?' I said. 'How come?'

'They've made up a special train for them.'

'I see,' I said, and I went into the room. Father was sitting at the table with the younger Englishman, Siddell. In front of them stood an open bottle of wine left over from New Year's Eve and Siddell's eyes were sparkling. He looked rested and he was freshly shaved.

'Hello,' I said.

'Hello, Danny,' said Siddell.

'Where's the sergeant?' I asked.

'He's already gone to the station,' said Siddell.

I sat down. 'Well, so you're going home, right?' I said.

'Yes,' said Siddell.

'You're glad, aren't you?'

'It's been five years,' he said.

I started to eat. Father was making conversation with the Englishman in his broken German. There was a white tablecloth on the table and our best plates. I thought about Irena.

After lunch Father poured everybody a glass of wine. We stood up.

'So,' said Father. '*Auf glückliche Reise nach Hause!*'

'Your health,' said Siddell.

We drank. It was half past one.

'I've got to be going,' said Siddell.

We all got up from the table and started saying good-bye. The Englishman said thank you, Father shook his hand and grinned at him. I took my saxophone out from under my bed and went to the door.

'I'll go with you,' I said.

The street was shady. Most of the people were indoors eating lunch. You could hear people singing from over by the station and the singing came closer and just then a column of Russians marched past the Hotel Granada in their rumpled uniforms with an officer in front and they were singing. Their chests were full of medals and they had submachine guns on their backs and the song they were singing was strange. It gave me the same feeling as that procession this morning. Their voices sounded full and wild and alive and just then I felt a deep and awful longing for something and I didn't know for what – for life, maybe, God only knew, or for Irena, for a different kind of life than this one – and I stopped, under the spell of those bellowing soldiers, and looked at those men marching by and at their mouths that opened and shut rhythmically and out of which all those sounds were coming, and Siddell stopped, too, and then all of a sudden, out of the clear blue sky, he yelled 'Long live the Red Army!'

A couple of dirty faces turned towards us and grinned and hands, calloused from their machine guns, waved at us. The officer saluted. But they didn't stop singing. The street resounded with that weird, wild song of theirs and it was beautiful and then it faded, faded until it was completely gone.

'They look wild,' said Siddell and he looked at me. There was a question in the way he looked.

'They do,' I said. 'Tell me...' I hesitated for a moment. 'Are you a communist, Siddell?'

Siddell glanced at me. 'No,' he said. 'Not really, I guess. But I am a working-man. A worker – you know what I mean?'

'I see,' I said.

'And those chaps,' he said, looking off to where the dusty column had already disappeared beyond the anti-tank barrier, 'they look like working-men too.'

'They probably are,' I said. The idea had never occurred to me. For me, for us, for us here at home, they were Russians and Bolsheviks. For this guy next to me, they were workers. My head started to ache.

'Tell me, Danny,' said Siddell and there was a touch of – I'm not sure what – mockery, maybe, in his eyes. 'Are you glad the Russians are here? Or would you rather have the British?'

I looked at him. There was no doubt about it. He was making fun of me all right. He'd seen our place and all the other homes I'd arranged for them to stay in – like an idiot. I got mad.

'You're all workers, too, aren't you? You and the sergeant and all the rest of you?'

'Yes,' said Siddell. 'But . . . there's a difference.'

'I know,' I said. I thought a while and then asked, 'Why do you ask these questions? You've seen my family. You know we'd rather have the English.'

'No need to get sore, Danny,' said Siddell, and he smiled at me. 'You're a good chap. And your mother is a very kind lady.'

'Thanks,' I said. 'Maybe I'd rather have the English. But the Russians are here now. There's no changing that.'

'You're right. That can't be changed,' said Siddell, and again it seemed to me he said it pretty complacently.

We went into the station and out onto the platform. There were lots of Englishmen and Frenchmen standing around waiting for the train. We went over to the bunch of Englishmen. The sergeant was prowling around, keeping an eye on things. As soon as he saw me, he grinned and saluted.

'Well,' I said. 'So you're going home. After five years.'

'Yes, sir,' said the sergeant.

'That's nice,' I said. 'I hope you liked it here.'

'Yes. And thank you very much for everything you've done for my boys.'

'Oh, never mind,' I said. I didn't feel like talking about it. I knew my world was leaving along with them but I wasn't sure whether it had ever really been my world at all, whether it hadn't been just a world I'd known from the movies and that the only thing I really had in common with them was the English language. The train slowly pulled into the station. Conductors were standing on the steps with whistles in their mouths and red flags in their hands. The soldiers started running towards the train. The sergeant yelled a command. His men lined up, then started off on the double. The Frenchmen swarmed around. There were many more of them than there were Englishmen. But even before the train had come to a stop, the Englishmen overtook them like a rugby team on the offensive. In a few seconds, they were grinning at me out of the windows. I stood next to their coach and looked up at them.

'When you come to England,' called Siddell, 'don't forget to come to Liverpool.'

'And to the West End,' yelled the sergeant.

'I won't,' I said. It was all a big act. The train slowly swallowed up the tide of uniforms and the dispatcher in a red cap blew his whistle. The train started to move.

'Farewell!' I yelled up to the window and shook a couple of hands that reached down to me.

'Good-bye, Danny,' I heard voices call, but I couldn't see very well because my eyes were full of tears. I was bawling like an old whore. And I wasn't any better than one. I was a fool, an idiot, a Robinson Crusoe ruined, beaten, lost. I was overcome by grief. Not just because they were leaving. But because of everything. Everything in the world. The train was leaving and I could hear the Englishmen's voices singing 'Tipperary' in my honour. They're going, I thought to myself, they're going home and they'll kiss their wives and tell about their adventures and they'll drink beer with their neighbours who stayed at home. Life is beginning again for them. It had begun for me, too. A new chapter in a life that was always the same. What the hell. I picked up my saxophone case and went out of the station. The saxophone weighed me down. I walked past the sun-warmed western side of Irena's house, across the bridge with

the broken railing and under the weeping willows, up towards the Port Arthur. I could hear them playing. I was late. I opened the door and there they were. They were sitting in a line, without their coats and with their ties loosened and the sun fell on them through the window, Benno with his droolly trumpet up to his lips, Lexa's pale fingers on the keys of the clarinet, Venca's swollen cheeks and sliding valve, Haryk with his legs crossed and his Gibson guitar in his lap, Jindra with his hat on his head, embracing his bass, and Brynych's freckled, mousey face behind the drums. They were just giving out with 'King Porter Stomp', Venca's tailgate trombone snapping rhythmically while Benno played his teasing melody over it, sweet and sad and simple. At the table by the window the sun fell on Lucie's golden hair and on the lipsticked lips of Benno's Helena. I took off my jacket and opened the case. The music poured over me like a healing shower. Quickly I took out my sax, fitted it together, hung the cord around my neck, and hooked my sax on. Then, just as I was, I came right in on tenor, slowly walking over to my chair, playing as I walked. My fingers moved all by themselves. I played without thinking. It all came out right and free. This was life. This, right here, was life. I sat down and in one breath finished that wonderful, sweeping fox-trot along with the rest of them.

When it was over, Benno said, 'Where've you been?'

'Seeing off the Englishmen,' I said. I looked around. 'Where's Fonda?'

'In mourning,' said Haryk. 'So no piano.'

'You guys ready?' said Benno. 'Let's play.'

'What'll it be?' said Haryk.

'"Rent Party"?' Venca suggested.

'Okay,' said Benno, and we started in.

'What time do we start tonight?' I asked afterwards.

'Six,' said Benno. 'Where were you all day yesterday anyway?'

'Why?' I said.

'Well, you didn't show up for patrol.'

'You mean you went out again yesterday?'

'Naturally, stupid,' said Benno.

'We cleaned up the woods,' said Haryk.

'Yeah?'

'Yeah. And we nearly knocked off old man Petrbook.'

'Why didn't you?' I said.

'Because they are stupid, that's why,' said Benno.

'Shit,' said Venca. 'That was a real shit party all right.'

'What happened?' I asked.

'Well,' said Venca, 'there we were cruising through the woods with our machine guns, see, all strung out about five yards apart, and all of a sudden we see something move in the bushes, so Haryk yells out "*Halt! Wer da?*" and it was Petrbook and he screamed like somebody was murdering him, "Don't shoot! Don't shoot! I'm a Czech!" So Haryk ...'

'So I yelled "*Aaaa - ein Tscheche! Raus!*"' said Haryk, 'and Petrbook was scared shitless and started screaming "*Nein, nein, ich bin Freund, ich bin Deutschfreundlich!*" So we just dragged him out of the bushes and sent him home.'

'What was he doing there anyway?' I said.

'He was on his way back from Black Mountain. He'd lit out for his father-in-law's place the night before last, when all the shooting started.'

'Come on, let's get with it,' said Benno impatiently. We started in with 'St Louis Blues'. I played like a madman, trying to drown out my thoughts. Then it was half past five and Benno said we'd have to go. We put our instruments into our cases and went out. In the meantime the sun had dropped in the west and was lighting up the first windows. The lovely, pointless city lay spread out beneath us in all its springtime colour - lilacs on Castle Hill, cherry blossoms in the gardens, the fresh flags in the windows.

'We'll eat there,' said Benno. 'Prudivy said there'd be grub for all hands.'

We pulled our cartful of instruments. Everything was over now and we were setting out to play the farewell serenade. We'd set out with our cart like this thousands of times. I remembered that winter afternoon in 1943 when we gave concerts in the neighbouring towns and held jam sessions for our fans on Black Mountain and in Provodova and Hermanovice

and all over in those little out-of-the-way mountain villages, mushing through the ice and snow with the bass fiddle and drums and a procession of faithful zootsuiters tagging along behind us, and I thought about the snow-drifted little taverns with their rickety chairs and the bartenders who looked at us as if we were crazy and the old-timers who listened in disgust to our carryings-on and then filed out one by one. I could still see the low ceiling and kerosene lamps in Provodova and the local zootsuiters dancing in their thick rubber-soled shoes with their girls who'd come in high felt boots with their dancing shoes in their pockets. I could see their shadows writhing and twisting against the whitewashed walls, dancing their own bastard breed of swing, and Benno in his green sweater swilling rose hip tea, and Lexa in ski pants, and I could taste the reed in my mouth and smell the ersatz tea and I thought about the moonlight rides on the sled at night with the black saxophone case on my lap and the dark rotund figure of Benno ahead of me, whizzing down into the valley where the sleeping town lay without a light in sight and there was only the hum of the factories and for me the whole scene still echoed with those blues we'd played all over the district and I remembered the midnight blues on New Year's Eve in 1944 on the ski jump at Black Mountain, four months ago, in the bitter cold dark with a dark half circle of faithful fans standing down below and how the icy air poured into your lungs at each breath and how Lexa goofed on his clarinet because his fingers froze and I remembered my hands in the knitted gloves with the tips of the fingers cut off playing 'Basin Street Blues' which floated out over the valley and trickled down the snow-covered mountainside with the wind and the snowflakes and it sounded strange and new and wonderfully absurd on Black Mountain during the German occupation on the thirty-first day of December, nineteen hundred and forty-four. And I remembered the battles we'd had with the polka partisans and the apple cores they'd thrown at us and the faithful zootsuiters who tangled with the gang from Malina while we skipped out the back way with our instruments, and the illegal jazz magazine O.K., which guitarist Ludvik 'Louis' Svab* brought us from Prague, from P. L.

Doruzka,* and the dead Fritz Weiss* who, according to Benno, actually started a jazz band at Terezin before being taken off to the gas ovens.

I was thinking about all this as we crossed the bridge and rattled triumphantly along with our cart on our way towards the square. Boys we knew greeted us from the sidewalks. 'Hi, men,' they said. They were all dressed up in sharp jackets and wide-brimmed Tatra hats and pretty young girls looked at me and that made me feel good. Things weren't so bad after all. I felt best here in this crowd with our instruments. I almost felt good. There weren't any Petrbooks or Prudivys around. I walked along with one hand in my pocket, shoving the cart nonchalantly with the other. Flags were flying in front of the houses like a salutation, red flags with hammers and sickles on them, and Benno's rump was bouncing along in front of me again and his fat back in a plaid jacket. Except for Haryk and Lucie, who were having a fight, none of us said anything and I marched along behind our cart, silently, all wrapped up in my thoughts. Helena Reimannova came out of the Mouteliks's and joined us and I thought about Irena and about how happy I'd been yesterday but that happiness had vanished and would never return, and then I put my hand on my saxophone case and thought to myself, I love it - that live, silver, comforting thing lying there in that case. But as we approached the square and as the vivid colours of the girls' dresses flashed by and I saw all those made-up red lips and all those beautiful hairdos and legs, I yearned for Irena again. In vain. We came to the square and headed over towards City Hall. Near the speaker's platform they'd set up a bandstand wreathed with green garlands. A few chairs stood on the stand. A bunch of guys our age and their girls had already gathered around us. There weren't any older people. I knew they'd all be over at the Sokol garden where Mr Petrbook and his brass band were going to play polkas. We had this all to ourselves. Benno went inside and came back with Mr Pazler. They brought out some more chairs and we unloaded our instruments from the cart and took them over to the stand. Then we each got a bowl of soup and potatoes. We sat down next to our instruments and, while we

ate, looked around. People were strolling back and forth around the church and a crowd was gathering near the bandstand. There were still plenty of refugees and soldiers in uniform mingled in among the local people and, right up front, some Russians stopped to gawk at us. The windows of the loan association office shone with a golden light; happy crowds streamed across the square. Everybody was laughing and talking. The customs house, the tanks, the shooting – it was all over now and had happened a long time ago. I thought about Hrob and the dead driver in the cab of the truck and the SS men over at the brewery and the two corpses in the warehouse. All over now. I took my saxophone out and adjusted the mouthpiece. The young guys and their girls stared as I slid my fingers up and down over the keys a couple of times, blew a few glissandos and smears, and then I took my saxophone out of my mouth and smiled at a pretty young girl down under the bandstand. I didn't recognize her but she looked sort of familiar. She had on a slippery-looking tight-fitting red dress and had a beautiful girlish figure. She smiled back and kept looking straight at me. We stared at each other. Who was she, anyway? Then she dropped her eyes and started saying something very quickly to another girl whose arm she was holding. Then I remembered. It was one of old Dvorak's twins, the guy who owned the auto-repair shop. I'd known her for ages but this was the first time I'd noticed she was so pretty. I couldn't remember her name but I made up my mind to give her a try before leaving for Prague. Before meeting that other girl there. I felt old in comparison to the twin, like somebody from another generation, and she warmed my heart. She was going to carry on from where we were leaving off. With this zootsuit stuff and jazz, this way of life of ours. Squares like Petrbock and Machacek and the others, they didn't understand it. According to them, we were no-good loafers and jazz was just something crazy and eccentric. Not for us it wasn't. For us, it was life, and for me the only life. The only one possible and the best one.

We finished eating and started tuning up. The crowd around the bandstand became alert. Benno was in charge today, in-

stead of the orphaned Fonda, and Venca had his usual troubles with his trombone. Suddenly the people in the square were still. We stood and, like a priest lifting the chalice during mass, we put our horns to our mouths. Into the warm sun rays and into the shadows of the festive square we blew a theme we stole from the Cata Loma Band. We played it staccato and arrogantly, we blared the melody so that the burghers walking near the church turned towards us. I saw them shaking their heads, thinking 'How can anyone listen to this?' But those around the bandstand listened. No, not listened – they swallowed it, they absorbed it. Our band caught fire, we were roaring and swinging until we finished the number. When we sat down, we immediately burst into 'Organ Grinder Swing'. The crowd around the bandstand started to move and in the next moment the plaza was full of jiving couples. I sat there on my chair looking out at the girls' skirts twirling up and the silhouettes of the zootsuiters with their built-up shoulders swinging in the sunshine. Benno's horn was aimed out over the dancers' heads, the sun glinting on it, and Venca's trombone slid in and out over people's heads like the wand of the god of jazz and I just poked along modestly under the fast sharp ripples of Benno's horn and I felt great. The sun was touching the roofs of the houses in the west and we sat there glittering in its rays, flashing our glorious music right back in its face. The sun was with us. Up on the hills the castle loomed, slanting across the blue sky. And the lovely Queen of Württemberg had driven off somewhere in her carriage, sleepy and bundled up in blankets, off and away to somewhere in Germany. I saw Mitzi down in the crowd, dancing with Prdlas, king of the zootsuiters, and Eva Manesova with Vorel, who wrote poetry, and over on the sidewalk I saw Rosta's blond head and the rosy cheeks of Dagmar Dreslerova and Rosta had his arms around her. And I was all alone, sitting up there on the bandstand with my saxophone in my mouth. And then suddenly I saw Irena down below in a light blue dress and she smiled at me. Her smile pierced right through me and made my heart stop beating. She was dancing beautifully on her lovely legs and keeping Zdenek, who was grinning like an idiot and clumping around like an

elephant, a good arm's length away. But he was still holding on. And I'd hoped they'd shot him. No such luck. He could go off and leave her a thousand times but he'd always turn up again. He'd always pop back up again like a demon or the devil, with his buckteeth and chapped lips and Irena would always drop everything and run right back to him. No. I was the one who, finally, had only dreamed and imagined how it would be, and he didn't dream or even need to dream since he had it all right there. Finally, he was the only one who got anywhere with Irena, and she undressed for him and slept with him and loved him, and she was fond of me. Fond of me. That was all and there was nothing to be done about it. All I could do was to be grateful she was at least fond of me. I got up, gravely raised my sax to my lips and sobbed out a melody, an improvisation in honour of victory and the end of the war, in honour of this town and all its pretty girls, and in honour of a great, abysmal, eternal, foolish, lovely love. And I sobbed about everything, about my own life, about the SS men they'd executed and about poor Hrob, about Irena who didn't understand and who was slowly but surely approaching her own destruction in some sort of marriage, about youth which had ended and about the break-up that had already begun, about our band which wouldn't even get together like this again, about evenings when we'd played under kerosene lamps and about the world that lay ahead of us, about all the beautiful girls I'd been in love with – and I'd loved a lot of them, probably all of them – and about the sun. And out of the orange and saffron sunset clouds in the west a new and equally pointless life bent towards me, but it was good and I raised my glittering saxophone to face it and sang and spoke to that life out of its gilded throat, telling it that I'd accept it, that I'd accept everything that came my way because that was all I could do, and out of that flood of gold and sunlight, the girl bent towards me again, the girl I had yet to meet, and she caressed my cheek. The zootsuiters were dancing in front of the bandstand, kids I liked and whom I'd be leaving within the next few days since I'd be going away, going somewhere or other again, so I played for them and I thought about the same

things I'd always thought about, about girls and about jazz and about that girl I was going to meet in Prague.

Prague, October 1948 – Karlovy Vary,
September 1949

Notes

CZECH LEGION: Units of volunteers who fought against the Axis Powers on the Eastern and Western Fronts during the First World War.

P. L. DORUZKA: One of the most important writers and historians of jazz in Czechoslovakia; a principal organizer of the annual International Prague Jazz Festival.

ALOIS JIRASEK (1851-1930): Author of romantic novels with strong Czech nationalistic tendencies.

DR KRAMAR: One of the leading figures, together with Masaryk, in the Czech and Slovak independence movement during World War I. He subsequently became Czechoslovakia's first prime minister. Kramar represented the interests of the industrial capitalists and later joined the coalition formed by the Agrarian and Social Democratic parties.

EMIL LUDVIK: Founder and leader, in 1939, of the first really swinging band in Czechoslovakia; founder and secretary of the Czechoslovak Society for Human Rights (1968-9), dissolved by the Czech Government during the post-Dubcek 'reforms'.

MORAVEC: Minister of Education and Culture in the puppet government formed under the German Protectorate.

BOZENA NEMCOVA (1820-62): Novelist and short story writer closely associated with the nineteenth century Czech national renaissance movement. Her most widely read work is *Granny*.

OCTOBER 28TH: Czechoslovak independence day, commemorating the establishment of the republic and celebrated as a national holiday prior to February 1948.

SOKOL: A nationalistic physical culture organization.

LUDVIK SVAB: Guitarist of the Prague Dixieland Band founded in 1948 and still performing.

FRITZ WEISS: Jewish trumpet player and arranger for Emil Ludvik's band incarcerated in Terezin where he formed a jazz band called 'The Concentration Camp Swingers'. He died there.

KNIHOVNA KATEDRY
anglistiky a amerikanistiky
Filozofické fakulty
Masarykovy univerzity
BRNO, Arna Nováka 1