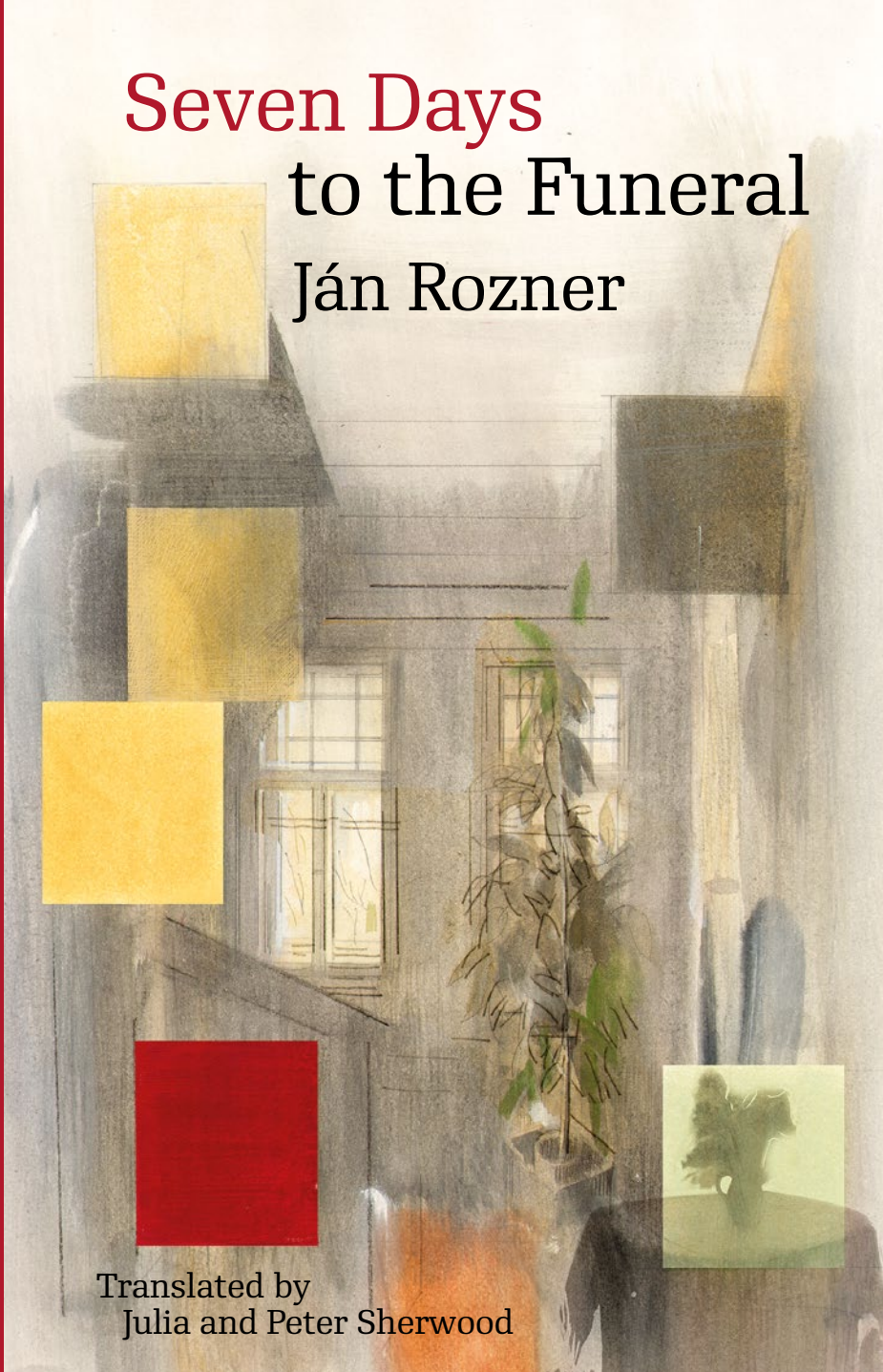
Seven Days to the Funeral

Ján Rozner



Translated by
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Translated from the Slovak by Julia and Peter Sherwood
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ján Rozner (1922–2006) was a leading Slovak literary, theatre and film critic, journalist and translator from German and English. Following the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 Rozner and his wife Zora Jesenská (1909–1972), an eminent translator of Russian literature, both active proponents of the Prague Spring, were blacklisted and lost their jobs. When Jesenská died of cancer, her funeral turned into a political event and everyone attending it faced recriminations. *Seven Days to the Funeral*, Rozner's lightly fictionalised account of the days leading up to his wife's funeral, is both a significant chronicle of Slovak history under communism and a writer's deeply personal coming to terms with himself. His two other books, *Noc po fronte* (The Night after the Front, 2010) and *Výlet na Devín* (An Outing to Devín Castle, 2011) explore a similar intertwining of the personal and historical while closely scrutinising the nature of memory. In 1976 Ján Rozner emigrated to Germany with his second wife Sláva, a doctor. They lived first in Stuttgart and then in Munich, where he died in 2006 and is buried at Munich's Nordfriedhof cemetery. All of his books were published posthumously, sensitively edited by his widow, who died in 2014 and is buried beside him.

C O N T E N T S

BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

Zora Jesenská died in Bratislava on 21 December 1972 and was buried a week later, on 28 December 1972. This book recounts what her husband went through in the course of those seven days.

It was around seven o'clock by the time he got home, somewhat later than on the previous few days, his head empty from hours of the intense strain of keeping alert, but he was also feeling hungry and, as a result, angry and irritable. He decided that this time he wouldn't just cut a few slices of bread, put some butter and cheese on them, and proceed to chew them in the same way he'd been stuffing himself at breakfast and dinner for over a week now. On his last trip to the shops he'd bought some canned meat; it said on the can that all you had to do was put it into boiling water, unopened, for five minutes or so.

He filled a pot with water and put it on the gas stove. He laid out a plate and cutlery, and removed the empty bottles of mineral water and fruit juice, as well as the two thick books from the bag he had brought home. Tomorrow he would return the books to the library and choose two different ones. He left the bottles in the corner of the kitchen, carried the books into the living room and by the time he returned to the kitchen the water was already bubbling away in the pot, so he placed the can in the water and it was only then that he remembered he hadn't checked how long it had to be left for. But he didn't take it out. He sat down on the bench at the kitchen table, and when he thought he'd waited long enough he turned off the gas, quickly took the can out of the hot water, opened it, tipped half the contents onto a plate and cut himself a slice of bread, even though he saw small pieces of potato floating among the pieces of meat in the unappetizing looking sauce.

The canned meat was lukewarm. It tasted disgusting and sticky like industrial rubber but that made sense, being of a piece with everything else that had conspired against him.

Lately he'd taken to talking to himself, though only brief sentences, mainly expletives directed at himself, and questions

(so what else was I supposed to have done?), meant to conclude a particular chain of reminiscences. This time, too, he felt the urge to give voluble, succinct and strong expression to his annoyance with the foul-tasting canned meat, which was why he followed each gulp with a loud and accusatory howl at the wall opposite:

"Damned canned meat!" – "Fucking life!"

The yelling helped him to calm down a little and made him realise how ridiculous it was for him to swear, especially using words he normally never used. But at least it was a way of unburdening himself to an imaginary interlocutor. He was fully aware that it wasn't the fault of the disgusting canned meat and that there was nothing to stop him from tipping the contents of the plate down the toilet and making himself a sandwich with some cheese from the fridge, but it was doing him good to berate everything that could not be tipped down the toilet and so, after swallowing each chewy piece of the disgusting canned meat, he continued insisting to himself, only now more calmly – as if he had discovered the immutable nature of things – and much more quietly, over and over:

"Damned canned meat!" – "Fucking life!"

The repetition turned his swearing into a kind of idiotic children's game and as he went on mindlessly, he suddenly heard the telephone ring.

He remained seated for a while, not interested in hearing what someone might want to say to him over the phone. But what if it's about something else, he thought as the names of three or four friends flashed through his mind, but then, as he began to walk towards the phone in the living room, he thought again: this was it, irredeemably, definitively.

He crossed the living room, picked up the receiver and spoke. The voice at the other end asked who was speaking, so he introduced himself. The voice gave its name as "Doctor Marton". It occurred to him that there was a time when he used to hear this name more often: it seemed to belong to

a urologist he knew and for a moment he wasn't so sure he was going to hear the news he was expecting, but once the voice on the telephone started explaining "I'm calling from the oncology ward. I just happen to be on night duty here tonight," he was quite certain again that he would hear what he'd been expecting.

Actually, he wasn't expecting it at all; it's just that sometimes it had vaguely occurred to him that he would get a call like this one day, perhaps the day after tomorrow, in a week, or in a couple of weeks. But he wasn't expecting it just yet…

However, the voice on the other end of the phone didn't continue with the news he was fearing but instead proceeded to give him a detailed account of how he hadn't been able to find his name in the telephone directory, which was why he had to ring at least three people who he thought might know him, but none of them had his number, and only then had he remembered a fourth person who had finally given him his number. That was why he hadn't called sooner.

The voice on the other end of the phone paused, so, just in order to say something, he offered: "Yes, my number is ex-directory." Then the doctor moved on to the crux of the matter: "The thing is, your wife's condition has deteriorated. Her situation is now critical."

Again, he just said "yes", as if to encourage the doctor to say more but the doctor digressed once again: "I'm sure you remember that before we admitted her we told you that something like this couldn't be ruled out… that you had to be prepared for it."

What does he mean by "we", he thought, annoyed; he had talked to the consultant and nobody else was present at the time. But out loud he just said "yes" again and then finally, as he'd been expecting, the doctor moved on to the reason for this phone call: "And that's why it would be a good idea for you to come in right away."

Again, he repeated mechanically, “Yes, I’ll come in right away,” to which the doctor added: “It would be a good idea for you to bring someone along.”

He didn’t understand why he should bring someone along just because his wife’s condition had deteriorated, but again he just repeated his “yes” but this time the voice at the other end of the telephone quickly went on, as if it had inadvertently forgotten to mention something important: “Obviously you must be prepared for the fact that your wife may already be dead.”

Now the voice at the other end of the line had run out of things to say, so he repeated his “yes, I’ll come in right away”, and put the receiver down.

For a moment, he stood motionless by the telephone, as if the last sentence had to be chewed first and then swallowed, like another chewy piece of the disgusting canned meat. But he hadn’t yet swallowed it. He focused on something that had nothing to do with the content of the phone conversation. Like an editor or a dramaturg editing other people’s texts, he reviewed the doctor’s last sentences, as if proofreading a manuscript on his desk. Where’s the logic in this – first he tells him about the situation getting critical and then he ends by saying the critical situation is over. And then this “obviously you must be prepared…” Obviously! He didn’t mind that it was an ugly word; what bothered him was that it made no sense in this sentence. Surely the doctor didn’t mean to say “obviously” – what was so obvious about that? Surely he meant to say “of course”, in the sense of “but”: “but you must be prepared for…”; that would have had some logic to it.

Having finished this proofreading exercise he went back to the kitchen, slowly and deliberately, as if in possession of a secret. Once in the kitchen he sat down on the bench again to ponder something and it took him a while to realise he wasn’t thinking of anything, and that all he had to do was go to the hospital and take someone along. So he got up, picked up

the plate so that the smell of the canned meat wouldn't linger in the kitchen, tipped the rest in the toilet, flushed it down, put everything away and sat down on the kitchen bench again, as if he now needed a little rest before leaving.

He sat there with his shoulders drooping, his hands in his lap. He would no longer have to… yes, there were quite a few things he would no longer have to … think about what state he might find her in and what he would say to her… or to think, as he had done so often over the past two weeks, whether she would ever come back to this flat… and if she did, for how long. He no longer had to be petrified, nothing would change, everything had calmed down. She simply existed no longer. He was unhappy with himself for not feeling a sudden sense of alarm that was supposed to shake him up. But then again, could it have ended any other way? That's what she may have been thinking, too. And maybe she'd even wanted it. What nonsense. But still, sometimes in the course of the last few days this thought had crossed his mind. It had lodged itself in his brain and now he felt ashamed for thinking that she had come to terms with it … with leaving him here. Alone. Surely she must have known that he wouldn't be able to cope by himself. He'd be left sitting in this huge flat from morning till night. Shrouded only in perpetual silence.

And a vast emptiness. Suddenly he seemed to have got a grip, noticing that his mind had gone blank again and that he had to go to the hospital. The doctor had ordered him to come. Although just now it no longer mattered if he went there right away or if he continued to sit here. He wasn't going to the hospital to see her anyway; he was only going there *because of her*.

He got up, went to the hallway, put on his coat, took the lift down, unlocked the garage, opening both wings of the garage door, reversed into the street, not towards the bend and downhill towards the centre of town, but up the hill where some three hundred metres further along lived his

wife's cousin. Because he was told not to come on his own although he had no idea why. He had only just been to see this cousin of hers an hour earlier. He had dropped by on his way from the hospital, as his wife had requested.

A few days ago, two patients who shared the hospital room with his wife were going to be allowed to go home for Christmas at their own request. So his wife had asked if she could do likewise and the doctor had given his permission. That's when she suggested that since restaurants were still open on Christmas Eve, he should stop by one and buy some fried carp. They would heat it up, light a few candles and celebrate Christmas Eve at home.

As she had been on a drip for several hours a day, he was surprised that the doctor was willing to discharge her. He had no explanation for this and that was why he went to see her cousin, herself a doctor, to see what she thought. What she'd said was: "Something might happen at the hospital, and something might happen at home. Subjectively, it will make her feel better to be allowed to be at home."

This afternoon she was feeling worse again so she asked the doctor if she could stay in the hospital after all, and the doctor agreed. And that was why she came up with a new plan to do with the Christmas Eve carp: her doctor cousin had a relative who was a manager in some big hotel where they were bound to cook for their guests even on Christmas Eve. Her cousin should order two dinners that he would take to the hospital. They could also light the candles there. But he should go and see her cousin now so she could make the necessary arrangements or find out if it was possible at all.

That was why he'd dropped by his wife's cousin's on his way from hospital half an hour earlier… or perhaps it was an hour.

Was it astonishment that he detected in her face as she opened the door? Or was it startled anxiety … because

she had guessed what happened? He no longer remembered. Instead of a greeting, he said: "I just had a call from the hospital," and she ushered him in without a word. He sat down in the same armchair he had sat in half an hour or an hour earlier, and she sat down too. The room was illuminated only by a standing lamp next to the sofa.

He gave her as detailed an account as he could, concluding with the sentence: "However, you must be prepared for…."

God knows why he had thought that her cousin would also notice the lack of logic in the doctor's call but she just sat there in silence, as if he weren't there at all. She is only thinking about what had just happened, he thought. She's not thinking about her in the same distracted and unfocused way that he is. All that was forcing its way to the surface of his consciousness were some irrelevant trivialities, overlaying the matters her cousin was thinking about. Such as the doctor and his phone call.

She had actually been the first and the only person to tell him the truth, the prognosis for his wife's disease. His wife had been in hospital for a few days when he asked her cousin why she was getting increasingly weak and why the infusions weren't helping. "They do help sometimes, for a while," she said, "but she has…" and she used two Latin words before adding: "And that's about the worst-case scenario in this disease." She went on with some explanation from which he gathered only that it was all probably hopeless. That was why, a few days later, he went to ask her how the doctor could possibly discharge her.

After quite a long time the cousin seemed to awaken. She stood up, and left the room saying "I'll get dressed and fetch a bag and a suitcase".

He was slightly baffled as to why they would need a suitcase and a bag to go to hospital now that his wife had died. He felt embarrassed by her silence, her vacant solemnity. Reluctantly he admitted that his main feeling was that of being

wronged because his regular life had been derailed, thrown off track. After all, this woman who'd just died had been a part of his life for nearly two decades. Of course, to some extent, she'd also been a part of her cousin's life. They had known each other since they were little girls and been close long before he met his wife. Yes, that was it, he thought, as if a justification had dawned on him – she had lost someone close or very close, but her life would not change at all. Whereas his life seemed to have been turned completely upside down. She'd shut the door behind her, leaving him in their flat on his own. His life still had a purpose as long as he existed alongside her, since she too needed someone by her side to give her life a purpose. But all that was gone now. Whereas all that happened to her cousin was that something had faded out of her life but she could and would go on living as before.

Silence continued to be all that he could hear in the flat. How come her husband was not at home? He was usually at home in the evenings. Reading his mathematical books. He must have gone for a walk or a run. That was his way of relaxing.

The cousin appeared in the door again, saying "Let's go," and he noticed she was holding a suitcase in one hand and a bag in another.

On the way to the hospital he kept quiet, only once voicing something that had occurred to him earlier: "Today it's Thursday and two weeks to the day that I drove her to hospital."

Two days earlier he sat in the office of the consultant of the department where his wife had been examined.

The consultant didn't beat about the bush. "Your wife has leukemia," he informed him and then paused as if wanting to give him time to come to terms with this before going on.

But the name of this disease meant nothing to him; he had no clear idea what kind of illness it was, to him it was just a medical term. He was familiar with other health problems,

such as Paget's disease of the bone, a condition that involves a cellular deformation of the bones of the skull, putting pressure on the trigeminal nerve and causing unbearable pain, for which brain surgery was often the only possible form of treatment. He knew everything about this rare disease, as his mother had suffered from it and eventually died of it. But otherwise he was a complete ignoramus when it came to medical terms, which was why he didn't react to the information with any shock or emotion, as the consultant probably had expected. He asked: "Is that serious?"

"I'm afraid it is," the consultant affirmed.

He didn't find that fully satisfying, so he asked again, with greater urgency: "How serious?"

The consultant addressed him almost personally and very specifically: "Your wife's condition is very advanced. You have to be prepared for anything. It's my duty to tell you."

"But…" he began and suddenly no longer knew what he was going to ask. Probably whether it was treatable at all.

The consultant reassured him: "She will be admitted as soon as a bed becomes available, maybe even tomorrow or the day after." He thought that the consultant gave his wife preferential treatment because they had been referred by a common friend, a doctor, and he had no idea that in this department people died quickly and frequently. "We'll give her cytostatic infusions," the consultant enlightened him but as he must have realised that this term wouldn't mean much to a lay person, he explained that this was a brand-new type of medication, which could have a completely unexpected, indeed miraculous, effect. However, he immediately added: "Initially, the infusions put a lot of strain on the body, and the patients may actually feel worse for the first ten or fourteen days. But that doesn't mean that the underlying condition has worsened. Can you please explain this to your wife? It's quite possible that she can be discharged in three or four weeks. The problem is that there will be a relapse in about three

months and your wife will have to be hospitalised again and the treatment repeated."

It was only now that the meaning of the consultant's "very serious" was laid bare to him. He had to be prepared for anything. In the best case his wife would be dying in instalments.

The consultant reminded him: "We will tell her that she has extreme anaemia. That's what you should say to her as well: extreme anaemia."

So he told his wife that she was suffering from extreme anaemia, that there was this new kind of medication, cytostatics, that the infusions initially made the patients feel worse, but she might be discharged as early as about three weeks. He didn't tell her that after some three months she would have to be given the infusions again.

They were just eating lunch. His wife remained silent for a while and then asked: "And is that something people die of?"

He replied grumpily, almost angrily, as if she was suspecting him of not telling her the whole truth: "That's exactly why you're going to the hospital, to get cured, not to die." And that was the truth, after all. He also told her that it was only now that the diagnosis had been made that the treatment could begin.

His wife didn't respond and just looked through him and at the wall as if thinking, oh, go on pontificating, I've learned enough already. Who knows how she interpreted "extreme anaemia". She must have guessed that these two words were meant to soothe her fears. He was sure she didn't believe him. That's why a completely different argument occurred to him: "I was told the other day that I'd had an untreated heart attack. It was diagnosed as angina pectoris. Which is what it said on my father's death certificate. That's also something people die of." This occurred to him because deep down he was still a bit upset that shortly before this his wife had received his diagnosis with such indifference. When he had felt unusually exhausted, had to cut his walks short, and felt

a pain in his left arm, all she had said was: “Well, go and see a doctor, then.” In the end he felt so unwell he didn’t dare drive himself to hospital. And the doctor he saw was quite shocked when she examined him. She told him to lie down on a couch, rang another department where he was examined straight away and given some nitroglycerine and a medical report. When he came home, his wife didn’t even glance at it. Only a few days later did she say: “Let me see the piece of paper they’ve given you, so I know what’s wrong with my husband.” She read it, folded it up and gave it back to him without a word.

When they discussed her illness later, he got worried that it may have been too harsh of him to blurt this out to her, so he added in a more conciliatory tone: “But it’s something one can live with. The doctor said I could live to be eighty.”

From then on he had to keep up a constant pretence, both while she was still at home and also later in hospital. Once she was in hospital it would have been absurd for her to believe the diagnosis of “extreme anaemia” he had told her about.

She shared a room with two other patients, both of whom had leukemia with remissions and had to be hospitalised roughly every three months. It was unlikely that they hadn’t discussed their illness. And even had she had a room to herself, she knew she was on the oncology ward. Just as well she never asked why he was lying to her. She must have known from experience that this was what people do when someone is gravely ill. In the end, she didn’t believe him even when, exceptionally, he told her the truth.

Just a few hours before, the last time he’d seen her today, a nurse had brought in some containers and all sorts of other things, so he left the room as courtesy to the other two patients. While in the corridor he ran into the duty physician, who said “congratulations”: he had just seen his wife’s latest blood test, which showed a perceptible improvement, quite

rare in such a short time. As soon as the nurse left the room, he hurried back to give her the good news. But she just looked at him in disbelief and said: “Really?”

A moment later she said she felt very tired and he’d better go home. He just shouldn’t forget to drop in on her cousin about the carp for Christmas Eve.

It was evening now so he was able to park right by the hospital entrance. Over the two weeks when he went to see her in the afternoons – and on a few rare occasions, maybe twice before lunch – he had to look for a parking space, sometimes quite far away, in a side street.

Her cousin picked up the empty suitcase and bag from the back seat. Now it dawned on him why the doctor asked him to bring someone along. It was as if his wife was to be discharged, and the main reason he was told to come was to collect all her stuff, to get rid of all her effects. So that no trace of her remained there.

He expected to find the hospital room just the way it was when he was last there, except that she would be lying motionless and he would no longer be able speak to her or ask her how she was, whether she was feeling any better, how she had slept. But the first thing he saw when he opened the door was a screen that had been placed in front of her bed by the window. He quietly said hello to the other two patients and paused before the screen at the end of her bed. He saw her head and was taken aback to see that even though her face had not changed, her mouth was wide open. As if she was about to scream? No, there was nothing in her expression suggesting that – her mouth was just open. Forming a large “O”. As if saying, oh no. He kept staring at her open mouth in astonishment.

A moment later a nurse walked in. Without taking much notice of them, she sat down on her bed behind the screen, took the false teeth from the bedside table, inserted them

into the deceased's mouth, took a thin white band out of her pocket, put it under her chin, pulled it under her hair and tied it behind her head with a quick, practised movement. The mouth closed shut. Then the nurse said something to him but in his confusion he took in only a few words. All he understood was that she needed something from him and that she would be back.

He went on standing by the end of the bed, the cousin beside him, both gazing at the woman's sleeping face. There was nothing clearly defined or out of the ordinary about her expression, neither fear nor a hint of a scream now that the mouth had been shut; they were looking at a face that was sleeping peacefully, as if at rest. There was even a faint pink glow to her cheeks. As if the illness had retreated. And a huge burden had been lifted. That was perhaps all that could be read from her face.

The cousin walked up to the bedside table, bent down towards her face and touched her forehead with her lips. She stayed leaning over her for a while. He came up to her as well and gently brushed her cheeks with his hand, but only for a moment. He didn't do this to check whether her face was no longer warmed by the normal coursing of blood, it was just that he wanted to touch her, he told himself later when recalling this moment…

The cousin began to gather up the bottles on the windowsill. Every day he brought her at least two bottles of mineral water, two small bottles of Coca-Cola which she had never used to drink before, and every other day a jar of stewed fruit. All the bottles and jars he had brought were still full and the cousin stowed them away in the carrier bag she had brought. He watched as they disappeared from the windowsill as if this had nothing to do with him, and for the first time he registered the roofs of the buildings outside and realised, in astonishment, that it was below one of those roofs that he had lived, with his mother and brother, for nearly five years,

almost right through the war. In the course of the past two weeks it had never struck him that the hospital was in the neigbourhood where he had spent the days of his youth.

Now he joined the cousin in putting his wife's belongings into the suitcase and the bag, including unread books he had brought from the library: she had kept asking for biographies, and most recently he'd taken out a new biography of Hans Christian Andersen by a Danish writer. He took some personal items from the drawer of the bedside table; from its lower section he took a spare pair of pyjamas and from the wardrobe everything she had worn when she was admitted, including her black woollen winter coat. He folded it over the bedframe. Then he bent under the bed to retrieve a smaller bag, which she had brought to hospital for her slippers and a pair of socks.

The nurse returned, a piece of paper in one hand, a watch in the other. She handed him the latter, explaining why the watch glass was broken – the patient must have lain on it when she was no longer conscious – and she thrust the piece of paper in front of him: "This is for you to sign." He hadn't brought his glasses and didn't know what it was that he was meant to sign. It's to confirm that we have collected all her personal effects, her cousin whispered to him. So he signed to say that he had no legal claims against the hospital.

The nurse left, the cousin closed the suitcase and after lingering for a while she said she would go and see the duty doctor; he should come too and say thank you. "What for?" he asked, bewildered. "Why, for going to all that trouble to find you. It was beyond the call of duty," she said and left.

He stood there for a while gazing at the peaceful face. Earlier today he had sat right here by this bed for longer than usual. First another visitor had come, then she dozed off for a while, then he had to go out and stroll up and down the corridor because of the nurse; later she was tired, their conversation was fragmentary, with long pauses, and he had

the constant feeling that there was something else he should tell her. Then she dozed off again. Once, on waking from her slumber, she said. “It’s so nice to have someone hold your hand.” Until, finally, she herself told him to go home.

He picked up the suitcase and his wife’s empty handbag, flung her coat over his arm and then he spotted a corner of her jumper sticking out from under the blanket. A purple woollen jumper that she had worn every winter for the past few years; in his mind’s eye he would always see her at her typewriter wearing this jumper, he thought. He put the coat back on the bed and stuffed the jumper into the bag.

Now all he had to do was say goodbye to the other two patients. He made to shake the hand of the one whose bed was on the other side of the screen. She was the younger of the two, in her thirties, and he had exchanged a few words with her occasionally. As soon as he took the first step in her direction, to his surprise she started talking: “Dear oh dear, who would have thought, it’s been just a few hours since you were here…” She had overheard the cousin telling him to go and see the duty doctor: “The doctor won’t be able to tell you anything, he was too late, all he knows is what we told him. After you left, your wife fell asleep, at least I think she did, but then I noticed that she suddenly started to toss and turn and all of a sudden she sat up in bed, clutched her head, so I asked if I should call for a doctor but she said no, there’s no need, I have a headache pill, but she didn’t take it, she just sat there holding her head in her hands and then she said again, there’s no need to bother the doctor just for this, and she kept holding her head and swaying from side to side, and then she suddenly fell back onto the bed and I could hear she had trouble breathing, as if she were suffocating, that’s when we both started ringing the bell to call the nurse, she got here very quickly and when she heard her heavy breathing, she ran out to get the doctor and came back with him a few minutes later but by then we couldn’t hear her

breathing anymore, and the doctor didn't try to do anything either."

All this came pouring out in a single sentence without any punctuation and the longer she spoke the greater relief he felt: it was immensely important for him to know all this. He didn't have to imagine, to conjecture anything. Her life was now closed as far as he was concerned, at least in the sense of what had been happening to her. And those few words she spoke – no need, I have my pills…. no need to bother the doctor – it was as if he heard her voice, that was how she spoke when it was to do with her – what for, why bother others, there's no need – one shouldn't make a fuss, one mustn't let others dance attendance on oneself. She had suffered from migraines, she had them more and more often and quite badly, and sometimes she would also hold her head like that with both hands as if it were about to burst. And when he heard about her heavy breathing, he thought, involuntarily, that must have been the death rattle. When his father had died many years ago, there had also been this death rattle right at the end. He could recall it to this day.

That was really very helpful, he said to the patient, he would never have found out otherwise. As he said goodbye to them, he was almost moved. He picked up the suitcase, the bag and the winter coat again, mumbled something about Christmas and went out to the corridor.

In front of the duty room, he set down the suitcase and the bag, knocked and went in with the winter coat over one arm. The doctor who had phoned him was at his desk, the cousin was sitting to the side and as he entered it seemed to him that they had been waiting just for him. The doctor stood up, introduced himself and offered him a seat, explaining again that he hadn't been able to get hold of his phone number; he'd even thought he would not get through to him and was about to send a telegram. As for his wife, they had discussed it already – he said, glancing at the cousin – he

didn't really have any more information on how it happened, it might have been a stroke or a cerebral haemorrhage; by the time he was called, all he could do was pronounce her final demise. Demise, he thought, what a handy word, how useful. Death is something grim, emotionally loaded… He said he had already heard an account from a patient in her room and then, as instructed by the cousin, he thanked the doctor for going to the trouble of phoning him. Out in the corridor he picked up the suitcase and the bag. The only sounds that could be heard were their footsteps. He had sorted out what he had been told to come for and now the exasperation he felt when he returned home earlier started to creep back.

Only a few hours ago he had told her that he would drop by in the morning and bring her a fresh pair of pyjamas, and she had asked with a feeble smile: "Am I really so far gone?", probably because he said he would come first thing in the morning. She seemed sort of exhausted and frail, as if her strength was failing her, that was why he wanted to see how she would be the next morning. She had managed to work it out somehow.

The hospital had killed her. He kept thinking about this in the car, and eventually said it to the cousin as well: "What was the point of her going to hospital? She could have stayed at home, had some peace and quiet, and everything would have ended the same way." The cousin upbraided him: "Stop talking nonsense! There could have been complications, some haemorrhaging that couldn't be dealt with at home, and you would have reproached yourself for the rest of your life that she wasn't in hospital."

As he drove into the open garage and got out of the car, he announced, out of truculent anger: "This stuff can stay here, I'll bring it up tomorrow." The cousin was surprised: "But why leave it here until tomorrow? We might as well take it up now." And she started unloading the things from the car.

Upstairs in the flat, after putting his wife's handbag under the kitchen table, hanging her black woollen winter coat on the hanger and asking the cousin to put the suitcase and the bag under the table as well – he'd deal with them later – he went into the living room and sat down in an armchair. He heard the cousin taking stuff out of the bag and the suitcase; maybe she was emptying them so she could take them back home. He wished he could be left alone in the armchair with his fury and exasperation.

Gazing ahead in anger his eyes fell on the *recamier* – that was the technical term for what they called a chaise longue, an upholsterer had once told them. It disrupted the symmetry of the room's layout: they had moved it there when his wife became unwell because she was most comfortable in a semi-recumbent position and wanted to be in the room where she always sat at her typewriter and where he, too, had used to sit and read, and as he looked at the recamier he realised that he was now directing his fury and exasperation at everything that came to mind – the hospital with all its bunglers, the attending physician, the doctor who made the silly phone call, the recamier that had turned their living room into a furniture warehouse, the cousin who wouldn't give him credit for anything – yes, she was now on the phone to her husband telling him what had happened and where she was – … and, he finally admitted to himself, he was also angry with her for having died and leaving him here all alone, in fact, she wanted to die and it did not matter to her all that much what would happen to him. Well, to be fair, it must have mattered to her as well, but didn't she tell him herself that she had lost the will to live, although that had been two years ago, but he couldn't get it out of his mind now and kept repeating it to himself: she did want to die.

It was two years ago that they celebrated their first New Year's Eve in this new flat, just the two of them. They never

used to have people around for New Year's Eve, and only once had they dropped in on the Trachtas who always held a big get-together in the evening, an open house, but on this occasion they had not only been alone but also felt alone, they didn't ring anyone and no one rang them, they sat there unhurriedly sipping white wine, with really not much to talk about, and didn't turn on the TV or the radio because she didn't want to hear or see people who were cheerful and carefree… And then, all of a sudden, she started musing about life, wondered if there was any point to it, and said that she kept coming to the conclusion that it was actually pointless. He knew she didn't say this because she couldn't work, because she'd been deprived of every opportunity to work, she whose entire life up to that point had been filled with work – I've done my bit already, she once told him – he knew that she was contemplating the meaning of life for a completely different reason, yet he latched on to the subject gratefully. In recent years, having nothing to do himself, he had started reading books on philosophy, although they too lost their appeal at some point and he was hardly reading anything anymore, nevertheless, everything that had been written on the subject, everything he had read about it, now came back to him and he started to pontificate: this is an ancient question, the quintessence of all philosophy, as he tried to find a way of rebutting what she had just said, so many people had chewed over this question, from antiquity to Sartre… but she couldn't give a damn about what he was telling her about Sartre, she wasn't interested in his pontifications and brushed off every argument he came up with a single sentence: "I don't really feel like living anymore."

He knew her state of mind, yet now, as she hurled this at him without mincing her words – that's how it felt to him – something in him resisted, as if she had insulted him, rejected him, and he asked almost indignantly: "But me being here, does that mean nothing to you?"

She didn't reply. What was she supposed to say anyway? That it did mean something to her? But that she had nonetheless lost the will to live? She would have to explain at great length something she was loath to explain, and what for anyway: he was perfectly aware of it himself.

Two months before that New Year's Eve her niece Jelka and a friend of hers had been killed in a mountain-climbing accident in the Tatras. They had taken the wrong trail for their descent and started to climb down a sheer rock face no one had ever descended without full mountain-climbing gear. That was how it had happened.

It had taken him years to understand that there had been something irrational about the way his wife felt about her mother, whom she had regarded as not quite of this world, and about whom everything was good and beautiful. And later on – after Jelka had moved in with them in their city-centre flat – again it had taken him a long time to understand that the way she felt about her niece was the same. On the one hand, she was able to see, and indeed did see, all the girl's flaws, some minor, some major, human flaws typical of all young people, yet Jelka had also been a reincarnation of her mother, an extension of her relationship with her mother: she felt duty-bound to look after her, watch over her. The girl's mother had entrusted her to her care, and she had failed – the niece who had been entrusted to her, perished. And although she was completely blameless, something inside her was broken, shattered, and would not heal. That was the reason she said she didn't feel like living on that New Year's Eve, two months after the accident.

But with time even this wound had begun to close and seemed to have healed. They were living for one another again. But once she fell ill and grew weaker, once she became aware of how things stood with her, the wound opened up again. And maybe that was what reawakened her desire to be together again with those that she belonged with. *Unio*

mystica. And although she continued to love him as before, and probably also felt sorry for him, he was someone from this real, everyday world.

The cousin finished her phone call and asked if he would like a cup of coffee. "No, thanks," he said with a determined firmness even though he didn't know why he didn't want any coffee. All he wanted was to sit in this armchair and gaze into the distance, looking for further objects to rage at.

The cousin reminded him: "You should ring your brother." He shook his head in refusal. "No, I'm not ringing him now."

This time he knew exactly why he didn't want to do that. It might be all right if his brother Pavol came by himself. But for this solemn kind of visit he would be sure to turn up with his wife and eight-year-old daughter in tow. Pavol's wife had been hospitalized on many occasions: she'd undergone surgery several times and so, as someone thus afflicted, she talked mostly about her own ailments. Their daughter, meanwhile, giggled at every possible opportunity. She wouldn't giggle now, as they would all sit here in obligatory mourning. And he'd have to talk. But he didn't want anyone around.

The cousin said she would ring Martin and Viera Rázus, a couple who were close relatives of his wife. Goodness gracious, why did she have to bring up Martin in particular. He'd seen him only this afternoon in hospital. The cousin must have told him that his wife didn't want any visitors, and yet he came bringing along some total stranger, and this total stranger wanted his wife to sign a copy of her translation of Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*. The novel had won awards in the West and had been turned into a Hollywod movie but had not appeared in the Soviet Union and her translation into Slovak was published virtually semi-legally during the Prague Spring, which made it a sensation. This stranger, a doctor who used to work in this hospital and had for many years been employed by some international organisation in Switzerland, made full use of the opportunity of having a chat

with a literary figure. When at long last they left, his wife was so exhausted by their visit that she fell asleep straight away.

He no longer felt like staying in the armchair, for fear that the cousin might say, "Hold on, I'll pass you on to him," and he would be forced to give an account of what had happened and how, so he got up to go to the kitchen to make himself a cup of coffee, but instead surprised himself by declaring: "I'll go down to tell my sister-in-law. Seeing as she lives in the same block."

A few seconds before he had no idea that he was going to say anything of the sort, that he would go and see his sister-in-law, of all people.

Only her cousin and her sister-in-law Mária, no other visitors, his wife had said. But her sister-in-law had not been to see her once in those two weeks. And before his wife was admitted to hospital, she hadn't come for at least three weeks, maybe even four. Her sister-in-law was holding a grudge. She had joined them on one of their last walks, and as so many times before, started to complain about the head of the housing cooperative, who she claimed had made vast amounts of money at their expense. His wife had no idea whether the man had made a little on the side, but when she learned that he was looking for tenants to move into the new building which he himself had planned and organised, he had offered her a flat and, at her request, allocated another to Mária's daughter Jelka, who was still at university at the time. But because his wife defended the head of the housing cooperative, her sister-in-law took offence and, being a person of principle, stayed offended. Two weeks ago, he told her that he'd taken his wife to hospital and why, but she never went to see her.

He rang the door one floor below and heard voices from inside the flat. After her daughter died – it was only then that she had moved into this flat – Mária asked her sister and her husband to move in with her. They were pensioners who went to bed early and never made a sound, so she must have

had visitors. The sister-in-law opened the door. He remained standing in the doorway and apologized for disturbing her so late. Now he could clearly hear the voices from inside the flat. Young female voices. He recognised that girlish laughter. He stood there uncertainly for a moment before plucking up the courage to say: "I have some news," and getting stuck again before making the brief announcement.

And that's when it happened. All of a sudden, unexpectedly, like when someone has a dizzy spell and keels over, or a tipsy person begins to throw up, right onto the tablecloth, onto his own trousers, unable to control himself or get up and leave, and just keeps throwing up. Just as he was about to make his brief announcement, he felt a lump in his throat, he choked up, his voice faltered and, incapable of uttering a single word, he began to sob, loudly, uncontrollably. He had to lean against the door-frame, felt the tears coursing down his cheeks and covered his eyes with the back of his hand. It was like trying to overcome a fit of cramp but instead he just kept weeping, in choked sobs – he hoped he couldn't be heard inside the flat until in the end he was just breathing heavily, and he finally managed to utter the brief announcement and say what had happened earlier that evening, say those three words. He could now hear cheerful girlish laughter from the flat again, his sister-in-law was saying something he could not yet take in, but eventually he understood that she would come up in a minute.

He stopped on the stairs to wait for his thumping heart to calm down. He couldn't understand what had come over him, and in front of his sister-in-law of all people, a woman who always displayed admirable self-control and iron inner discipline and who was completely indifferent to him to boot. He wiped his eyes and cheeks on his sleeve, as he didn't want the cousin to see him like that.

But maybe the reason it happened was that he suddenly recognised those girlish voices. That girlish laughter.

He and his wife had referred to them simply as “the girls”, although they must have been in their twenties. During the two years since the sister of one of the two girls had been killed in the Tatras together with his wife’s niece Jelka, the girls would often come to see them, and sometimes he and his wife also went to see the dead girl’s sister and her family. Jelka and the dead girl had formed a kind of circle with those two girls. That was why his wife had felt something of a fateful bond with these two girls, who had previously been strangers.

When they phoned from the hospital to say that a bed had become free for his wife and that she would be admitted the next morning, he tried to imagine what that last evening would be like. Would they both pretend that nothing out of the ordinary was happening and that she’d be home again in a couple of weeks? Could the evening pass like any other? No, they needed someone else to be here, someone who would chat about this, that and the other in a carefree way, someone totally removed from his and his wife’s world. That could only have been the girls. Even if he told the girls why he wanted them to come that evening, they were the only ones who would be able to come around and not sit here anxiously, with serious expressions, even for a moment. They would talk about all kinds of things, as usual, and they would laugh. Good job he remembered them in time. The dead girl’s sister operated some piece of machinery in an optical factory, but her friend worked in an office and even though it was late in the afternoon, he was able to reach her. Yes, they would come, definitely, she promised.

He went into his wife’s room and told her he was popping out to the supermarket to get something for dinner. He had to have a bottle of wine and some brandy at home to make everything feel as natural as always, so that the girls would laugh and talk about this, that and the other. He brought the shopping, and soon after he sat down next to his wife, she

asked shyly, almost timidly, if he would mind asking the girls to come around in the evening.

He had already done that, he said, he'd phoned them and they were coming. He was elated. He had guessed her wish even before it had occurred to her. That may have been his last opportunity to guess any wish of hers.

The girls had come over that evening, talked about all kinds of amusing things that had happened on their recent hiking trips, how they had to sleep in the hay once, in a shed, they shared all kinds of fun stories about their friends from work, one talked about her father's attempts to make his own wine, he'd even bought a wine press but what came out of it was a horribly sour hogwash, and things like that. They had all laughed heartily, none of this had concerned them, it was all part of a completely different world, he and the two girls drank a whole bottle of wine between them and also had quite a lot of brandy and although his wife stayed in a semi-recumbent position on the recamier, she too was more lively and seemed less tired than on other days. And after the girls left – he'd walked them down to the tram stop – she didn't complain about the visit being tiring.

The cousin was waiting for him in the armchair in the living room. She told him she'd rung Martin and Viera, they were bound to arrive any minute. And he told her that the sister-in-law would come soon; she had visitors. He asked the cousin to make him some coffee. Meanwhile he would ring his brother.

He tried to convince his brother that it really wasn't necessary for him to come over this evening but Pavol wouldn't hear of it and was sure to bring his whole family.

The cousin brought him the coffee and he started telling her what he'd heard from the patient in the hospital. He could recall every sentence as if he'd memorised a script. He was coming to the end of his account when the downstairs doorbell rang and he had finished by by the time the visitors came out of the lift.

It was Martin and Viera R. She'd been weeping, her eyes were still red, and the first thing Martin demanded to know the minute he walked into the living room was how it could have happened as he'd only seen his wife that very afternoon. As if he didn't know, being a doctor, that this could happen at any time. In fact, his visit had left his wife so exhausted that she soon fell asleep, and as she opened her eyes she said: "It's so nice to have someone hold your hand." He kept this to himself, as well as another thing he forgot to mention to the cousin: how his wife had told him that, earlier that day, as she went down the corridor, she caught a glance of the cousin coming out of the doctors' room at the far end of the corridor: surely she'd been told something that made her leave without popping in to see her. He tried to talk her out of it, said that the cousin had only dropped in briefly and had to go back to work, but his wife just nodded: "Well, maybe."

There was a kind of obstinacy today to the way she kept insisting that things were looking very bad. This was what he told them about. How reluctant she was to believe that the duty doctor had said to him: "Congratulations". And how, when he mentioned the pyjamas he would bring next morning, what she read into it was only: "Is it really so bad?" Suddenly the doorbell rang again. "That will be my brother," he said, but saw three other people come out of the lift who he would never have dreamt would turn up tonight – Jozef Bžoch, his colleague from his last job, who'd been sacked three years ago on the same day as he was, with his wife Perla, an editor in a publishing house, and her friend Viera Hegerová, a translator who lived near them, so they'd given her a lift. "Goodness, we had no idea, man, none whatsoever," his former colleague said by way of greeting: apparently, they didn't know his wife was in hospital, it was only tonight that a friend had told them – the one who'd given the doctor his number. So he had to start from the beginning, about her first being unwell at home and believing for about three weeks

that she'd caught the flu, how she went to see a doctor while he sat in the consultant's room… meanwhile his sister-in-law came, followed by his brother and his wife and daughter… and about the cytostatic infusions she was on. Then he told them what time it was when he left the hospital and when the phone call came, and finally he briefly summarised what the other patient had told him. While he spoke, the cousin was flitting between the living room and the kitchen, making coffee for every new visitor.

Then everyone started talking over everyone else. Martin R and the cousin discussed the likely cause of death. The others, one after the other, recalled the last time they'd seen his wife, where it was and what she'd said. And everyone said, in one way or another, what a great tragedy this was, a great loss to literature, and all the things she might still have done. Except for his brother and his family, who didn't say a word.

The babel of voices was interrupted by Viera R, who said he should ring the state press agency ČTK, as they ought to report it, surely ČTK has to issue a press release when such a major public figure passes away, but he shook his head. "I'm not going to ring them… not now," the last two words occurred to him as an afterthought, as he didn't feel like explaining that he was not going to ring them, ever; Viera R was a bit baffled, and said, well in that case he should ring the writers' union first thing tomorrow, they would draw up an official notice for ČTK. What planet is she on, he thought, but all he said was: "But she's not a member," but then his sister-in-law chimed in, in a firm, belligerent tone, that he should definitely contact a newspaper tomorrow and get them to publish a large death notice in a black frame. He nodded as if in agreement – here's another person from another planet. Now there was no getting round it, he had to explain so he began: he wasn't going to ring anyone, his wife's death wouldn't be reported by any newspaper anyway, because she was no longer a public figure, she'd been expunged from public life,

her name taken out of circulation and it was forbidden – "do you understand, forbidden"– he stressed with irritation, to mention her name anywhere, and as for a death notice in a newspaper, it was the same, anybody, including someone completely unknown, could place such a notice in a paper, but if the person who died was no longer allowed to exist in public life, and it was forbidden to utter their name in public, not even in a death notice, a paper would either refuse to print it or it would be censored, well, that was the situation… he spoke quickly and with irritation, it made him quite cross to hear them speak as if they were unaware of the situation his wife had found herself in for the past three years; the ideas they come up with, he thought, as if she'd lived a normal life before… But then another thing occurred to him, now he spoke almost casually, as if telling an anecdote, his fury having evaporated again… the other day, on the spur of the moment, he'd gone to the University Library, he thought he would check in the card index to see which of her translations and books had disappeared and he found no index card with her name on it, not a single one, her name had vanished and… he couldn't help himself and added… so had mine, actually.

The babel of voices resumed, everyone except his brother and his wife considered it their duty to react with an indignant comment. Who would have thought just four years ago that this kind of thing could happen?! But it had. He was only listening with half an ear, as he'd heard all this a hundred times before, in relation to other people as well; when this new era began, he too had often voiced his indignation, but it had turned into endless waffling about the same subject, the flogging of a dead horse, it was now part and parcel of everyday life and therefore it was pointless even to discuss it; but just then, perhaps thinking along the same lines, and in an attempt to move on to practical business – it was getting late – Martin asked him: "By the way, have you given any thought to the funeral, and who might give the eulogy?"

He felt as if someone had whacked him on the head with a truncheon. No, he hadn't given that any thought at all.

He saw the funeral as being somewhere way off in the far distance, but it hadn't occurred to him that a funeral, like a mass, consists of several phases, stages, the eulogy being one of them. He knew at once that he wouldn't be able to come up with the name of anyone who could give the eulogy. The few people they were still in touch with had also been cast aside, so he couldn't ask them to make a public appearance and give a speech, or turn to Jozef B,– "how about you, could you do it?" – by doing so, he would only put his former colleague into an awkward position since he, too, was glad he'd managed to find a job in a building company while his wife was allowed to keep her post at the publishing house. And as for the others, those still allowed to appear in public, to lecture and publish: every one of them would think him thoughtless and impudent to expect them to do such a thing, and in private they would think, she shouldn't have meddled so much, she brought it upon herself, and they would find some excuse or other. Even if he went begging from one person to the next, he wouldn't find anyone. He piped up in a feeble voice: "Not really, I can't think of anyone who could give the eulogy."

Martin must have expected this kind of reaction since he'd kept quiet for so long, then he got up from the armchair and went over to the phone saying, "Let me try something."

He talked to someone whom he addressed as Jožo. Martin first explained what this was about, now the other person would come up with an excuse and apologize, and after a while, Martin would return to the armchair and say, "Oh well, that hasn't worked out." He stopped listening. What a disaster, he thought. Because there has to be a eulogy.

Martin returned to the armchair and said, "Well, that's one thing sorted out." And then turning to him: "He asked me to tell you that he'd be honoured to do it – Dr Jozef Felix."

Jozef B said, almost shouting: "Why, that's wonderful. A university professor. Head of the translators' section of the Union of Writers. That'll be almost official. An outstanding critic, it's a shame he doesn't write more reviews…"

Well yes, all he was writing now were essays on Renaissance writers. He remembered reading Felix's reviews as a student at *gymnázium,* or grammar school, when he first started reading literary journals. But he still couldn't understand how Felix could have agreed as if it were the most natural thing to do. Surely he must have known that it could get him into trouble. He'd been fired from the university long before, in the early fifties, at the time when politically conscious students could decide on these matters. Whereas Felix was anything but politically conscious. That was why he didn't get involved in 1968. He didn't want to have anything to do with this regime and for that reason he didn't argue with it either. He didn't give a damn about this regime, its unspoken rules and prohibitions, its damned, disgusting rules of the game. But now he says he'd be honoured. He is not afraid. No, that wasn't really the point, there were others who were not afraid either, it was just a cliché that everyone was afraid. Everyone had to make a living, that was their main consideration. Should they forget these considerations for a… eulogy – was it worth the risk? It wasn't, and yet the professor thought it was worth it, he was asked to do something he felt he ought to do, and he agreed to do it. And it didn't matter if he was taking a risk for the sake of something small or something large… But maybe that was not what went through the professor's head … he hadn't really known him at all until last summer when he and his wife were on holiday in Orava, somewhere near the Polish border, staying in a cottage their friends the Kollárs had found for them, and it was near there that they met Felix who'd grown up in a village nearby and used to come here with his family in the summer. They had all squeezed into his car and he drove to their cottage, they

picked some brushwood, lit a bonfire, roasted some bacon, drank a bottle of wine and sat in the meadow in front of the cottage until sunset.

The people around the table were still talking about the professor, Viera H, the translator, who used to share an office with him after he was sacked from the university and was working as an editor in a publishing house.

He suddenly felt enormous gratitude towards Martin R and realised once again that there was something about him that reminded him of his own father: the burly silhouette, the shape of his skull perhaps, and although there was no facial resemblance, he had exactly the same blue eyes as his father. The image of his father that hadn't quite faded from his memory. He had never mentioned this to his wife.

When the visitors started running out of things to say, Viera H said: "As we're all gathered here, why don't we draw up the death notice together." Suddenly his brother spoke up, he would see to this, his father-in-law was a typesetter who had retired but would still go to the composing room every now and then for a chat with his old friends: if he brought the text, he would typeset it and print it, he could take it down tonight on his way home, provided he had a finished text.

"Well then, let's get started," Viera H addressed those present. She asked for a pen and some paper, then everyone's eyes turned to him. And again, he was caught off guard. He only knew one thing for sure: "I just don't want any of that hackneyed stuff… bowed down in deepest sorrow… mourning our dear… that sort of thing… It ought to be brief and to the point."

"OK, we'll leave that out," she said to encourage him. He thought about it for a while but nothing occurred to him so he started, groping: "This is to inform…", but Jozef B cut in indignantly: "For Christ's sake, how can you start this way, this is not an official document, you might as well start like the village crier: "Oyez, oyez, oyez… Hear ye…" Perla B interrupted

her husband's outburst of rhetoric and calmly proposed: "It is with the profoundest sadness that we announce…" that's right, he thought, some clichés were unavoidable… and before long they got to the point in the notice where the name of the deceased would appear in a larger font, his sister-in-law thought the award his wife had been given should be included, it was usual after all, but he dismissed the idea, they may have declared her an Artist of Merit but later blacklisted everything she'd received the award for. Well, in that case, his sister-in-law insisted, it should at least say "writer and translator", but he rejected that too, she was no longer either of those, she was just a housewife and pensioner, that could come after her name, "housewife and pensioner" but that might sound ludicrous, and could even be regarded as a provocation… and some twenty minutes later – Viera H who acted as the recorder had to cross out and rewrite some passages several times, as one person would suggest one wording, someone else another, – it was all done, just one last thing was needed at the end, said Viera H: "The funeral will be held…" but that should be left blank. He would find that out tomorrow, ring his brother and he would fill in these details.

She passed the paper with these few lines and all the redactions over to him to read through but he couldn't see anything without his glasses on anyway so he just stared at the piece of paper thinking that if he tried to do this tomorrow on his own, it might have taken him a couple of hours to cobble together, he would stop at and stumble over every word and end up being unhappy with the result anyway. He was still staring at the piece of paper when Martin asked: "Is it going to be a church ceremony or a civil one?"

He shrivelled up inside, withdrawing into himself: they probably wanted a church funeral, everyone in her family had had a church funeral. But she had left the church long before they met, it was nothing to do with him; was he sup-

posed to return her to the fold now? “A civil one,” he replied drily. Martin explained: “The reason I asked was because that will determine what kind of epigraph will appear in the top left-hand corner.”

Now he understood. If it were a church funeral, they would pick something from the Bible, they could find five suitable quotes on any page, but in this case? Again, he was at a loss.

Viera H made a tentative suggestion: “It should be a quote from a poet she translated. Lermontov, for example…” That translation of hers had been widely read back in the day, many people knew entire passages by heart, but now no one of those present could recall a few appropriate lines; he himself had never even read it properly, as everything that poet had written was in the grand Romantic vein, demonically dark. No, it would be up to someone else to recall some lines of poetry. But no one said anything.

“All right, a quote from someone else then,” Viera offered. All eyes turned to him. He was to come up with a few lines by a poet she had translated that would work as an epigraph. He strained to think, as if it were a matter of life and death. A few disjointed fragments drifted through his mind, some talk of death…, well, if this had sprung up from his memory, it must have come from a translation they had worked on together… as he himself would never have translated any verse… now it was more than just fragments, now he knew these words were spoken by a character in a play, so it could have been only one thing… he walked over to the bookcase, took out a thick volume of Shakespeare, *Tragedies, Part One*. It must have come from that most famous tragedy of his… it was something Hamlet says shortly before he dies, his last soliloquy, here, he’s found it… Here are the four lines from which a few vague shreds had surfaced. He read them out in his customary nervous and muffled voice without emphasis, like something from a newspaper report.

He was met with a chilling silence. Everyone was silent in unison. He looked at the faces around him and concluded that it probably wouldn't do. Only after a while did Viera H say: "Let me see." He pushed the book towards her, pointed to the four lines, Viera became absorbed in it as if studying it deeply and suddenly exclaimed: "But this is excellent, we just have to leave out the two lines in the middle!" and she read out the first and fourth line in a firm, expressive, almost exalted voice, and suddenly everyone started to move, nod, yes, that would make an excellent epigraph, and he lapped up their communal agreement as if it were rapturous applause. He breathed a sigh of relief. This was his great victory that evening.

Viera sat down to the typewriter and typed up a clean copy. The room was abuzz again, everyone was talking over everyone else, including his brother who started chatting to Jozef B, whom he had met a few times after dragging the latter home to their flat in the city centre when he was still sharing it with his brother. Everyone was exceedingly happy to have accomplished something useful together, only he remained sitting by himself, smoking a cigarette, proud to have found a suitable epigraph, and one that came from their joint translation at that. And he would have remained sitting there like that if Martin hadn't made a move to get up from the armchair: "Well, we've achieved as much as could have been achieved," he stated contentedly. This sounded like a signal to the others, and everyone started getting up and heading for the hallway for their coats. His sister-in-law came up to him and said that she would of course come along to the funeral parlour tomorrow – of course, he thought, she would now act on behalf of the family. The cousin mentioned that the autopsy report had to be collected from the Institute of Pathology, she would deal with that, she'd take a day off tomorrow and go with them; they agreed on a time to meet. By then the others were all waiting by the front door of the

flat and after brief goodbyes and handshakes some took the lift and others started walking down the stairs.

He went over to the kitchen window to watch everyone leave, the way he and his wife used to look out of the kitchen window when their visitors left late at night.

Martin and Viera R were already walking down the hill, the cousin took the street going up, Jozef B was getting into his car with his wife Perla and Viera H, and only his brother still stood by the outside gate, as his wife said something to him. Jozef had already started the engine when his brother went over to his car and stood there for quite a while expounding something, upon which Jozef switched off the engine, got out of the car and rang his doorbell.

As Jozef came out of the lift, he apologised for returning. He invited him into the kitchen. No, no, he was just popping back with a message from his brother, he'd just do that and go, the women were waiting in the car.

So, his brother Pavol wanted him to know – Jozef began, hedging around sheepishly, with circumlocutions and parentheses – he hoped it wouldn't make him cross, this wasn't his idea, and of course he understood very well how he might feel, no one would be happy in these circumstances – and please don't take this the wrong way, for heavens' sake. "Ehm, well, I'm sure you'll understand, so let me get to the point, obviously, it would be completely understandable, I don't know what I would do if I were in your shoes, well, basically, you will be all alone here in this flat," he said, finally getting to Pavol's message: he'd be here all alone and might be tempted to have a drink or two, so his brother offered to stay here with him, while he, Jozef, would give his brother's wife and daughter a lift home, there was enough room in his car, and surely he agreed that it would be better to let his brother stay, to be on the safe side.

Ah, so this was his Pavol's wife's rescue mission, she wanted to make sure that he wouldn't get hammered at home or hit the bottle somewhere on the town tonight. Now he understood Jozef's hesitancy: he was slightly embarrassed to be the bearer of this message and every one of his sheepish prevarications was intended just as a kind of conspiratorial wink-wink – who knows what I'd get up to in your place – and it was because of this wink-wink that his brother didn't come up himself: Pavol was a teetotaller, while Jozef used to drink like a fish, they'd been on a few pub crawls together, a long time ago, when he was still married to his first wife, before Perla domesticated him, and that was why he was a more suitable messenger, one who could show the requisite understanding. He assured Jozef that there wasn't a drop of alcohol in the house. And he'd had enough for today anyway, he really must believe him, he couldn't wait to go to bed and he wouldn't budge from the house. He had to be fit tomorrow.

So can your brother rely on that? – Yes, one hundred per cent, he assured him once more, smiling at the touching care on the part of Jozef, his brother and his wife, he could be absolutely sure of that. "Oh great," said Jozef happily, reaching for the door handle and repeating, "and please don't be cross with me," and then, from the lift, "see you".

He went back to the kitchen window, looked down and a while later he saw Jozef talking to his brother and Pavol gesturing, probably not convinced by his assurances, but his former colleague was already getting into his car and so his brother, his wife and daughter also got into theirs, both cars reversed into the street, turned to go downhill and soon disappeared round the corner.

He didn't resent his brother and his wife for coming up with this, they'd had their experiences with him. But this time what he said to Jozef was true, there wasn't a drop of alcohol in the house and he was sure he wouldn't leave the house for a moment. No, there was no danger of that. Over the

past two weeks it happened perhaps three times that as he went shopping for his supper on his way home from hospital he would get a small bottle of brandy which he would slowly sip at home, holding long, self-flagellating monologues. But today the shops had closed by the time he left the hospital, and he wouldn't have bought anything anyway, not even for supper. He was quite shaken by those final hours, and if he hadn't received the phone call from the hospital, he would have turned on the TV, switched off the sound and sat there watching impassively, thinking with trepidation of the following day.

Now he was less shaken than right after he returned from the hospital this evening, everything inside him had quietened down and all he felt was a void. Someone had left, slamming the door shut, never to return. And he was left here in this flat, all alone. Tomorrow he would make all the necessary arrangements, come back home, the door would close and he'd be here all alone again. That was all there was to it.

Quite a while had passed since both cars disappeared from view around the corner below his block. They must have parted ways at the crossroads by now, heading in different directions. Jozef B with Perla and the translator Viera H would soon be home, but his brother lived far away, having recently moved to a housing estate 12 kilometres away, where the first village on the bank of the Little Danube used to be, along a new four-lane carriageway beyond the end of town. He was still standing in the kitchen, his elbows propped up on the wide stone windowsill, gazing at the empty street three floors below. The street was lit by fluorescent lights that shone purple. One of them, a little further down from his house, closer to the bend in the street, was broken and emanated a steady buzz. Nothing stirred in the empty street illuminated by the fluorescent lights three storeys below.

He would wait for a car to pass by.

Goodness, he thought, how many hours he had spent in this flat, at this kitchen window, leaning on the stone. Hours and hours; since the day they moved here the hours would add up to days or weeks, even months perhaps. He was capable of gazing down as if he were high on drugs. Gazing out of the window helped him pass the time. Sometimes he felt like those pensioners he remembered from his childhood, who lived in old houses on the outskirts of town and would sit motionless by their windows, much smaller than this one, staring mindlessly at the street as if they weren't taking anything in. Now he, too, was a little like those pensioners – he was still years away from retirement age although his wife had been receiving her pension for about a year now, but she never stood by the kitchen window watching what was happening in the street, except sometime while cooking, or when he asked her to come and take a look at something – but pensioner or not, he was out of work, spending his time

lost in idleness and a void: he had to keep busy and fill the time somehow, so he stared out of the window.

But in fact, there was usually something happening down below.

For example, in the afternoons women would emerge from round the bend and walk up towards the house, women who lived somewhere in this street, with carrier bags full of shopping in both hands. How many times he had wondered how they could lug those loads of theirs up this steep pavement. Whenever he himself went shopping, he would drive down to the supermarket or to the town centre. And every time he would remember his mother, who also used to carry heavy bags up to the third floor of their old flat in the centre of town. In the final years before she died, she would just shuffle about but at least once in a while she had to go out shopping, a sheer joy for her, a form of self-fulfillment, even though she was no longer really up to it and literally had to drag herself up the stairs with one hand on the banisters, stopping somewhere along the way, wheezing so heavily and loudly that he could often hear her upstairs in the flat, making him dash down, take her bags, take her by an arm and drag her upstairs… and if he didn't hear her, she would come into his room, bent double and gasping for air, and tell him she'd left the bags on the first floor, or on the landing between the first and second floor, would he mind going down to fetch them… and she would go and lie down straight away… As late as the end of 1960 she would still sometimes go to the ice stall at the back of the market hall for a block of ice: they had one of those primitive ice boxes you loaded ice into, and even he would be completely exhausted from carrying the ice, and his mother was well over seventy in 1960. She must have been a dreadful sight, lugging one of these slabs of ice in a shopping bag because whenever she ran into someone she knew, they would take the bag off her and carry it right to the front door of their flat; on a few occasions a young

man, a complete stranger, had carried it for her… What a dolt he'd been then, a self-absorbed idiot, not to have thought of buying a proper fridge, because he was earning by then, but a proper fridge was a luxury, which was why his mother had never asked him to buy one and his wife had never suggested it either, because she had never set foot inside their kitchen. Only when Edo Friš got divorced and was about to downsize from a huge flat to a studio, he offered to pass on all kinds of things at ridiculous prices, so he'd taken two large armchairs, in one of which his mother would later sit in front of the TV, as well as a smart linen cupboard and several other items, including a proper fridge.

Sometimes he would stand by the window and watch as the fog descended on the city, with thousands of tiny lights blinking as they stretched along the outskirts all the way to the Slovnaft refinery, then the chain of lights below the hill would also disappear and lazily billowing clumps of fog would drift ever closer until even the outline of the house across the street would vanish, leaving just the odd lit-up window and a short section of the street below visible, and he could feel a surge of dampness all the way up here behind the kitchen window… Yes, of course, he thought, there was something to look at down there most of the time.

A car would zoom past every minute or so, entire convoys of them at certain hours on some days, and he'd try to guess the car make from above and read their number plates to see if the cars were local or maybe even foreign. On Sunday evenings many cars would head down the hill on their way home from the three or four restaurants up in Horský park and its environs and from the allotments where fruit trees grew on the sunny slopes facing the Danube; groups of young people would stroll down, usually in high spirits, sometimes singing, or shouting at one another, having fun… but quite often a car would screech before the bend as there was no warning sign and the drivers rarely noticed until the last

minute that they needed to slow down. He could never tell if the sudden screech was caused by the brakes or the tyres but he was convinced that some braked so abruptly just before the bend on purpose, to show off, *mancovať sa* – here his train of thought came to a halt: *mancovať sa* was one of those words that was being used less and less and which few in this city knew anymore, while in the old days, in arguments and rows with other boys the word would inevitably turn up as a powerful insult – *ty mancér*, you show-off, you – drivers like these wanted to show off before some young female sitting beside them, impress them with their driving skills or brag about their fancy car, so they'd slam on the brakes hard and the car would judder to a stop in an instant, screeching but without veering off to the side.

But for really dramatic scenes he had to wait until the winter.

It had to get quite cold outside, the icy snow turning solid and freezing on the ground. On such days, if he saw a car emerge from around the bend in the street and come closer, he would sometimes call out to Zora to come and watch: often the cars couldn't cope with the final, steepest stretch of the road and came to a stop just before the bend, their wheels spinning round on the spot. Some drivers would step on the gas in vain, the engine would wail, the car jerk forward no more than an inch, then reverse again and come to a standstill. The drivers used various strategies to deal with this, some would get out of the car, take out a shovel and start to shift the snow or break up the ice on the tarmac, while others would turn the car and drive up onto the pavement at an angle and then tackle the bend almost horizontally, that way they could navigate the bend on the most gentle gradient possible, which, in turn, entailed the risk of another car coming from above crashing into them. Others would get out and ring the nearest doorbell, probably to ask for grit, because after a while someone would come out with a bucket and

start sprinkling it onto the final stretch of the slope towards the top of the bend, while yet others just left their car where it stuck fast and continued on foot… yes, on such winter days all kinds of dramatic scenes would play out here.

But then again, he didn't always observe the world from this particular window – in summertime, and generally in warmer weather, he would stand with his elbows resting on the railing of a long balcony that stretched along the entire living room and afforded a view of both sides of the street. On days like these, in the afternoons, his wife would potter around the garden at the back of the house where they had a small plot allocated to them and spend days pulling out weeds that seemed to have been growing there for centuries. At first he used to help her but he found it terribly exhausting, while Zora had been used to gardening from her time in her parents' home and she accepted that this was not his sort of thing, sending him home to sit on the balcony in a deck chair and read. But lately he no longer enjoyed reading, and even though much of his life up until then had been spent reading, he now didn't manage to sit in the deckchair with his book for long before getting up, leaning on the railing and watching both ends of the street. From far off he could make out the faces of people as they got closer to the balcony, always harbouring the secret hope that one of them would be a friend who might spot him up there, turn into the paved courtyard and ring their doorbell, – and someone he knew would indeed walk past, people would still go this way and further up on their walks, but even if they did happen to look up and spot him, they would usually just give him a wave and continue on their way. And so, after a while, whenever he saw someone he knew approaching from one end of the street or the other, he would duck down into his deckchair, with the wooden boards of the balcony forming a kind of low fence and providing cover, while still allowing him to see a narrow section of the street through the gaps between the boards,

and he would wait for the acquaintance to pass. He wasn't interested in anyone waving to him from below, it upset him that they merely waved and that no one ever shouted: hello there, how are things, should I pop up for a moment? – not once had anyone shouted anything like that, although at one time he used to see many of these people quite often socially: one of those who went past regularly was Peter K, who lived only a few streets below the bend and passed his house almost daily on his walks. Many years ago, when he was still a dramaturg at the theatre, Peter used to come and drop in on him in the centre of town almost every day: together they would finish off a play, or even rewrite one, but he had stopped being a dramaturg a long time ago, so Peter had stopped dropping in on him while he still lived in the centre… Then there was Albert M. It would make him sad to see Albert walking by and not stopping. Albert had been his best friend for a few years after the war and they always had a lot to talk about, but then various things cropped up and their friendship began to cool off until not even its ashes remained. Yet no matter how often he told himself that he no longer kept in touch even with him, his former best friend, and even though he told himself, never mind, even if someone did come up, it would be just idle talk, they had no longer anything in common and in fact he wasn't specially interested in anything and would only have been disappointed… even so, he would have loved to have someone to chat to now that he no longer had a job and never went out, neither to the editorial office of a journal or publishing house, to a café or the writers' club. A few friends would still drop in from time to time, but most of them came to see his wife, the world of his friends had shattered, they would just give him a wave and keep walking, and yet he kept looking out, hoping to see… maybe not even an acquaintance… only now did it properly sink in that he wasn't really expecting an acquaintance, but rather some unknown acquaintance… someone who would