

I closed the lid of the piano and put on a new dress. It was black and white, tight fitting, with a little skirt that came down to just above the knee. The black gloves came to just above my elbow. The new sandals, white and high heeled, hurt me. So what now? I'll go to a café, I thought, or to the cinema or to visit some friends. Or I'll go dancing, and break these new sandals in! I just had to flee, to get well away from my home.

"A glass of red wine, please!"

Red wine didn't appeal to me as much as white, but I wanted the wine to be deep burgundy, so that everything would look right. On the little café table there was a small glass vase in the shape of a tube, with a blood-red rose in it.

Over the reflections of the wine on that white tablecloth, I projected mental images of yesterday's party: a few poets had read their surrealist verses . . . and on a wicker chair, a single leather glove had been left behind.

On the first chord  
the dancers shook wings made of girls' arms  
like moths at the first light of dawn . . .

One of the poets had been reading some of his work, and when the applause died down, he continued:

. . . the knees,  
lean knees  
like two skulls with silky garter crowns  
from the desperate kingdom of love . . .

I stared at that leather glove. I noticed a hole in the glove, as if someone had skewered it with a knife.

All that evening I had felt stabbing pains in my index finger, as if the knife hadn't been thrust into an empty glove, but into my own flesh.

"What a surreal still life!" laughed one of the young poets who I'd met in Paris. He was trying to start up a conversation with me, about the latest tendencies in philosophy. But my finger hurt and I didn't feel like chatting.

Now I was projecting images of yesterday's party on the reflections from the wine. I ordered another glass. When I'd drunk half of it, I said to the waiter, who was flying past me,

"Bring me a knife. I don't want one with a round blade. It's got to have a point and be really sharp. A knife for cutting meat!"

I took another sip of wine. With the tip of the knife I cut around the shape made by my splayed fingers on the table, my hand and my arm sheathed now in the black lace glove that reached up to above the elbow, where a kind of wainscot of white skin separated the black glove from the edge of my sleeveless dress.

I noticed that the men at all the surrounding tables were watching me.

I stuck the knifepoint into one of the spaces between my black-gloved fingers. Then into the space between the fingers

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next to it. I repeated this again, and yet again. Several men tensely got up from their chairs and stood, stock-still, as if they were all set to rush to my assistance. I sped up the stabbing. The knifepoint jabbed the wood of the table, again and again. Several pairs of eyes hung in the air, motionless, alert . . .

What beautiful evenings,  
when the city looked like a clock, a kiss, a kite  
or a sunflower, bending . . .

I was singing the poems from yesterday's surrealist party as I played with the knife, which was flying through my fingers. Its point scraped my ring finger. No matter. Then it cut my thumb. I didn't care. More and more men were jumping out of their seats. Once they were up, they didn't move. Drops of blood were filtering out through the black lace of my gloves. I increased the pace, singing . . .

What beautiful Sundays,  
when the city looks like a ball, a letter, a mandolin  
or a bell clanging  
in the sunny street  
the shadows of the pedestrians were kissing each other  
and people went on their way strange and anonymous . . .

A man came up to me, without daring to interrupt my game. I didn't see him. I sensed he was there, but I was concentrating on the knife that was thrusting itself between my fingers all on its own. My black gloves were now embroidered with blood. Silence reigned in the Café Louvre that evening, though it was chock-full.

Suddenly everything around me started to dilute, then vanish into the heavy fog that thickened the more I sunk into it.

I came to in my bed at home. Somebody was bandaging my fingers and a male voice said with a drawn-out, sing-song foreign accent: "Wine and blood, and the virgin point, black though it is with desire, everything under a pink flag . . . You will fall in love with someone, you foreign beauty, and then you will kill your beloved, or you will send him to death or to the auto-da-fé, convinced it is the best thing for you both"

The song melted into the night.

My grandmother was sitting next to my bed when I woke up.

So my nocturnal adventure had been a hallucination, a dream fashioned from that recent surrealist party, I reasoned. But . . . under my bed sheet, unmoving, lay my left hand, disfigured by thick, white, bloodstained bandages.

About a month after I'd played with the knife, I was coming back one night from a party at the home of some friends, who were distinguished architects. The sky was becoming light, I was humming softly as I walked, a little unsteadily. I stopped in front of my house to look for my keys. Then a man stepped out of the house opposite—I wasn't expecting that, and it startled me. The man's hair was long and unkempt, and he wore an unironed shirt that flapped wildly about him. He was dragging along some packages, or rather enormous bundles, the kind that Gypsies or farmworkers carry with them. He was walking slowly; the bundles were heavy. Although it was warm, the man was trembling. I don't know why I was reminded of the ill-treated horse of my childhood.

I found my keys and went in, banging the beech-wood door shut. Then suddenly, I realized: that man was my neighbor. Yes, he was the one I'd seen at the window opposite. I'd never seen him properly, and besides, he'd always been with his wife. That man was leaving for good, I knew it. I don't know why, I had the feeling he was leaving me as well.

A few weeks later, a short-haired gentleman with sunglasses appeared at the window opposite. He was kissing my female neighbor's bare back.

But with the dances and the dinner parties hosted by Prague's intellectual elite, I soon forgot the man with the bundles, and the woman at the window.

"Waiter, bring me a glass of white wine, please!"

After having placed the book I'd brought—Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*—on the café table, I lit a cigarette.

A few steps away, next to the window of the Café Louvre, a man with a shabby briefcase in one hand was observing the café as if searching for someone in particular. He looks familiar, I thought, but I couldn't recall where I'd met him. Probably at some party or other. When he caught my gaze, I blew out cigarette smoke.

"At last!" he said, as if we'd had an appointment.

I took a sip from the glass the waiter had brought and quickly paid the bill before the man could beat me to it.

He'd sat down opposite me, having put his briefcase on the floor, and was now watching me in silence. I pretended to read my novel. I thought about how all the men I'd ever met had tried to start conversations. This one remained silent and looked at me with curious eyes.

I drank quickly, wanting to leave. The wine went to my head. The man picked my glass up by its stem and took a sip. I looked at him, surprised and offended.

"I'm sorry if I've bothered you in any way," he said.

I didn't say a word.

After a pause, he said, as if to himself, "An elegant woman reading Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* . . . that's something you hardly ever get to see."

He had a bass voice, like an opera singer's, and spoke with a strong foreign accent. All the same, the implied judgement in what he had said made me look at him disapprovingly. But he

paid that no mind and went on. This time he addressed himself directly to me, "It's quite a coincidence you are reading Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* because the other day somebody showed me a reproduction of a Holbein painting of a dead Christ taken down from the cross. Dostoevsky must have seen that painting, and been so impressed by this painting that he wrote some reflections on it in *The Idiot*."

"I haven't reached that part yet," I said apologetically.

"With reference to that image of Christ, Dostoevsky says that after seeing the painting a believer could lose his faith."

"Why?" I asked.

"I've asked myself the same question. Dostoevsky doesn't explain why. Later, when I was able to look carefully at the painting, I understood: the dead Christ is more human than divine, in fact Christ is simply a man steeped in misery, shorn of his hopes and aspirations, without questions or doubts. He is bereft of any kind of greatness, even the greatness conferred by freedom. He is a man lonelier than the Christ in Haydn's *The Seven Last Words*, who is afforded the ultimate consolation of tragedy. Holbein's painting is neither a majestic tragedy nor a pleasant drama in *adagio e cantabile*, but an absolute vacuum. Holbein's Christ is a man stripped of all attributes save that of insignificance. It is as if the painter were telling the spectator: this is you. Then the spectator will become aware of his own terrestrial misery, so far away from the solemnity of the divine. He might lose his faith: his god has died when what he needed was an immortal god."

My companion picked up the book and leafed through it for a while. After a silence, which to me seemed long, he said happily, "We shall now have dinner."

"I haven't got time for dinner," I answered sharply.

I didn't know why he looked at me with such alarm. You could read his eyes like a book. Like the eyes in the stable at my parents' home.

He got up and helped me up from my seat.

"I'm going home," I said, as sharply as before.

"Fine, fine." He drew out the vowels.

He walked me along the streets of the Old Town. We came up to the riverside docks.

"Here, please do go in."

He leaned back against the wall to let me pass. In that dark street, his face was a shadowy chamber with two windows behind which stretched a green, transparent sea, lit up by the rays of the sun.

He took me by the elbow and led me into a small basement restaurant with a gothic arch. The place was full, I noticed with relief, but the restaurant's owner seemed to know my companion and managed to fit a little table for two from somewhere, covered by a white tablecloth.

"I'll stay, but only for a little bit," I said.

The owner placed a bottle of red wine between us, followed by a huge portion of roasted meat and mountains of rice garnished with fresh parsley.

I noticed that this good-looking man, so different from the glasses-wearing intellectuals with their pale, weak faces, ate in the most exquisite fashion.

He held the ends of his cutlery in his long fingers; slowly, he cut away little pieces of meat, placing them in his mouth like a swallow feeding its young. When he raised his hands they seemed no more than the wings of a bird. He ate slowly, with pleasure, but his main concern was for my own comfort. He was aware of every move I made, he served me wine and water. He got up to help me sit more comfortably. He served me pieces of meat, and lettuce leaves, and did all this with the utmost discretion.

"You are a Polish prince."

"No."

"A Hungarian duke, then."

"No."

"Then you must be a count."

"No."

"But you *are* an aristocrat."

"No."

"I have noble origins and I can detect them in others."

"In Russia, there has been a revolution."

He made his hands fly up then let them fall, sliding, down to his sides. Russia . . . the revolution . . . an explosion . . . chaos . . . many things destroyed. It was a simple, clear, eloquent gesture. And beautiful. An expressive watercolor sketched with only a couple of brushstrokes.

"Your father was a prince, then?"

By way of reply, his hands flew up again, only to fall straight back down again, like the broken wings of a swan. It occurred to me that I shouldn't be asking this sort of thing.

Should I never again ask then? Did I imagine there was supposed to be some kind of a future for us?

"His name was Ivan," said my companion, "So mine is Ivanovich."

"Ivanovich, that sounds like it came out of some Russian folktale."

"My childhood was a bit like a Russian folktale. My parents took me to the churches. To the Russian Orthodox churches."

"To pray there, I suppose. I know about all that! The saints, God!"

"God, yes, expressed as beauty. And beauty expressed as God. My parents took me once a week. It was there that I discovered true beauty. Spiritual fathers with endless white beards in black tunics that reached all the way to the floor. They spoke the words of the mass in low, melodic voices. When I came out of the church, I found myself in the middle of a stunning white silence, the silence of endless Russian solitude, blinded as I was by the icy sun, by snow and ice."

I took large sips of the country wine from Mělník, my companion served me some more rice. After having spoken about the icy solitude of Russia, he fell into a long silence; he was clearly in a world of his own. Bit by bit, this enigmatic foreigner's silence, his absence from my world, started to bother me.

"Mr. Ivanovich, do you have no intention of asking me who

I am?"

"No. I know who you are. You are Venus, born out of silence."

His words affected me deeply. I'd never heard anyone speak like that. Perhaps words that were similar, but none said in this way. The men in the intellectual circles that I frequented, invented poetic metaphors and hurled them into women's laps as if they were bouquets of violets. But they did so because they were enamored of their own cleverness. When they addressed a woman, deep down they were really only talking to themselves. Yet this man spoke in such a simple, frank manner, and his words were addressed directly to me.

He excused himself and went over to the owner of the restaurant. They argued for quite a while. The owner shook his head obstinately: no, absolutely not. My companion pointed to the paintings on the walls; his eyes shone as he did so. I realized that those paintings were made by him.