

IRINA ON THE BEACH

CANNES, 1937

When she left the station, a leaf fell close to her feet. The first leaf of autumn, she said to herself, then immediately corrected herself: the first leaf of autumn that I've taken notice of. She was surprised by the contrast between the summer sky and the fallen leaf.

The sun still hadn't risen, even though it was a quarter to eight. Her light step and slender figure occasionally attracted the look of the men in the street, more than her face, which was too discreet to be thought of as beautiful. As the sun began to appear, gilding the roofs and upper balconies, she headed down through the streets until she could feel the sea: she'd left her case in a locker at the station. In her bag, together with her sunglasses, there was only her bathing costume, a small towel and her purse.

She was drowsy, after having spent a sleepless night on the train. She didn't feel like sleeping; her nervousness about how her visit would go, made it impossible for her to sleep. She sat down on the terrace of a café, in a street that was still in the shade, and adjacent to a glinting green fringe of sea. She had a coffee, and took just one bite out of a croissant; she couldn't swallow anything. She paid and headed for the little square named after Frédéric Mistral; there she spotted a house from which three bathing costumes were hanging: a man's, a woman's and a boy's. She thought it wasn't good to stare at the house like this, so she disappeared round the corner and went for a stroll on the wharf, until she finally headed back, slowly. Once she'd returned to the square, a window in the house opened and a woman's hand removed the man's and the boy's bathing costumes and vanished into the darkness of the flat. Irina didn't move; she stayed there, waiting.

A tall man and a boy came out of the house. At thirty-eight, he was still as

slender and flexible as a sapling in a spring breeze. Irina didn't decide to take a few, hesitant steps after them until they were well ahead of her. The man and the little boy crossed a park in which there were palm trees, olive trees and rubber plants, and then entered a dark underground tunnel which led to the promenade; she walked faster. She followed them, more and more determined, knowing that she would catch up with them. In the tunnel, which muffled her steps, she started to run. When she came out into the sunlight, she slowed but, just a hundred metres ahead of her, she saw the tall man moving forward fast, almost dragging the boy along. She had no choice but to quicken her pace and almost break into a run if she wanted to catch up with them on the promenade, given that she couldn't imagine walking over to them on the beach in shoes with heels. She needed to have a serious talk with him and the beach would lessen the solemnity of their meeting, which might well be the last one they would ever have. That meant that if they now turned left and went down the steps to the beach, her journey would have been in vain. She walked as fast as she could, paying no attention to the clicking of her heels on the paving, shortening the distance between her and the two silhouettes ahead. Then the man slowed his pace, and, still walking, got out a handkerchief so the boy could blow his nose. The fast walking had given her spots before her eyes and she thought she might fall. But her heels went on moving forward while the sea breeze caressed her short hair with golden reflections and played with her light, translucent skirt. Her heels rapped out their tune on the paving...and the man, as if against his will, turned around. He stood stock still; his eyes, unmoving, stared at her.

"Well... so you came," he said, more aloof than surprised, "despite what I wrote to you..."

Just then, two short, elderly people passed by, carrying brioches and a baguette for breakfast; they went up to the man and also said hello to the boy:

"Quel matin! Glorieux! Bonjour, petit! After dinner, come over with your wife, the Dujardins'll be there too, we can play a game of bridge."

The man, still under the effect of the unexpected meeting with Irina, was

speechless; all he could do was give them a bewildered smile and a nod.

The couple went away and the boy, who wanted to go to the beach, tugged at his father's hand.

Irina saw another acquaintance waving to the man and the boy. To stop them from getting away, she murmured:

"I'm here ... I have to... we have to..."

The middle-aged man who had just waved, came up, pacing like a soldier. He said hello to Vladimir in Russian and looked at her with curiosity. An excessive curiosity which, Irina thought, was close to rudeness.

When the man left, the little boy gave another strong tug at his father's hand, so that they could finally go, but his father didn't pay any attention to him. Quietly, he looked at her as if he couldn't believe that she was really there with him; then he lowered his head.

"How long are you going to...?"

"Don't worry, I'm leaving today. You don't have anything to be worried about," she said, irritated, and despite having reserved a room for three nights in a hotel in front of the station, given that she had no intention of leaving so soon.

"Daddy, I'm off. I want to go for a swim. Give me my swimming trunks."

"Just a moment, Mitia, we'll be there in a moment," he said to the little boy, while still looking at Irina. And, as aloof as ever, this time he spoke to her: "Wait, don't go yet. It's true that we need to talk."

She didn't recognise him, he'd never spoken to her like that before.

"Which hotel are you staying at?"

"The one in front of the station. Wait a minute, what's it called....? The Travellers' Hotel? The Foreigners' Hotel? The English Hotel?"

She was nervous and couldn't remember the name of the hotel where she'd made her reservation. And she'd also completely forgotten that she'd just said she was leaving very soon, on this same day.

She had imagined him differently. She remembered that, just a few weeks ago, he had written her a letter saying that if she wanted, he would be with her. Wherever that might be. Perhaps that other town on the Riviera where it was forever spring; yes, spring, that was her season...but now the leaves were beginning to fall. "Yes, we'll go off together somewhere," she'd written back to him. That was how she'd reacted to his news that his wife had found out about their correspondence and that the situation at home was hellish.

And now the two of them were face to face, weakened by nerves.

The boy went on tugging at his father.

"Why did you stop writing to me, Volodia? Where are all those promises about us being in a dark tunnel but that soon we would see a glimmer of light which would bring us to the sun, fresh air, freedom?"

"I couldn't do anything. There's no point in talking about it because at home the situation was so awful that I reached a point when I was panicking and..."

Irina coughed a little because she was suffocating. However, she quickly mastered her jealousy and pain, and, as dispassionately as possible, said:

"Yet, don't you ever think about how I felt? Without you, with hardly any letters..."

"Don't torture me. Tell me, what should I do?"

"Come with me. Right now."

"But I can't slam the door on fourteen cloudless years, just like that".

A cloudless life. He always repeated these three words *ad nauseam* (in his letters, too). Irina turned around.

She'd heard a little bell ringing in the distance: a donkey was walking up the street, its hooves painted red. It was being led by a man wearing a red Phrygian cap.

"I'm going, there's no point in standing here. It would better if we never saw each other again."

"Irina, please, be patient. Everything will pass, and things will be the way they were before. Wait for me, and I'll come and see you in the wintertime."

"On your own?"

"Well... I don't know. I can't promise you that for sure. But I'm certain that everything will get sorted out somehow, soon. You'll see."

The donkey was closing in on them, its bells were ringing joyfully, and the boy tugged at his father yet again. He read out the sign hanging on the animal's side:

—*Freddie, La Regina di Gelato*. Daddy, I want an ice-cream from the donkey, he's brought it for me! For me, Daddy!"

And he stamped his feet on the pavement, pulling his father in the direction of the little ass with redoubled energy.

The man continued to ignore him and paid no heed to the pulling. In a quiet

voice, he told her:

"I have to go."

"You have to go? So go."

She turned to leave herself; she saw that the man wanted to stop her, that he made a movement as if to hold her back. She left, hearing, through the decisive clicking of her heels, how the man shouted after her:

"Don't go, Irina! Everything'll be alright!"

She headed for the beach. She took off her high-heeled shoes and lay down. Even through the towel, she felt that the sand was still cold after the September night. As she lay, she could hear the shouting of children playing in the water. The sun grew hotter and hotter. She wanted to go into the water but didn't have enough energy to put on her bathing suit. She sat up on her towel and looked around. The beach had filled up in the meantime. She spotted the man. He was sitting on a towel, like her, and was watching the boy, who was playing with a bucket in the water and showing him something. His towel was quite close. The man didn't look at her, not even once, as if she weren't there. Then she saw a slim woman walking over to the boy. She said something to him, gave him a pat on the cheek, and stretched out her towel next to the man's. He smiled at her as if nothing had happened, as if she, Irina, was not there, as if she had never existed. The woman sat in front of the man and he rubbed sun cream into his wife's back with his dark, almost black hands. Then the woman swiftly turned over and lay on her stomach; Irina noticed how pleasant the woman found the sun and the warmed-up sand.

By contrast, the sun irritated her, she didn't know where to hide. She didn't feel any kind of attachment to the Italians of Cremona; at that moment, she was, more than ever, a Kokoshkin from Saint Petersburg. In a nearby changing

booth she put on her bathing costume but didn't dare to get close to the water. Perhaps from there she would see his look, which she would find unbearable. Besides which, she had no strength left. She looked around her but she found the children who were playing with buckets and spades, with inflatable lilos and beach balls and animals, repellent. She turned over so as not to see the colours of the bathing suits and the parasols, as well as the shining sea and sun. She didn't want to have all that in her sight, she would have preferred it if the sky had clouded over and if it had even poured with rain. Yes, it would be much better if there were a downpour.

Lying with her face to the sun, she was unable to move. Suddenly she heard some Russian being spoken and a voice: let's meet at three in the park. It was his voice, but once again it sounded cold and distant. She half opened her eyes: the shape of his head looked as if it had been cut out from the burning midday sun. She couldn't see his face, which was in shadow. She recalled that in the most recent letters he had sent her, there was always something strange, something which hadn't been there before. Like this voice. She sat up, brushed sand off her and looked at the sea without seeing it.

Vladimir was also looking at the sea; he was paddling his feet just a few metres away from her. Right now the sea is the colour of her eyes, he said to herself, a thought that struck him as stupid and kitschy. *Poshlost'*, a beautiful Russian word meaning vulgar, banal, or common. But common though that image may have been, the fact was that there was no change either in the colour of her eyes or that of the sea. When, in February of that year, 1937, after a presentation in a Paris bookshop, that slender thirty year old woman had come up to him, asking if he could sign a book for her, he could see nothing but the turquoise blue of her eyes, which momentarily dazzled him. He kicked at the white tip of a wave to oust that unwanted image, but in vain; it came back again

and again. Then, in February, the girl's friendly, youthful mother invited him and her daughter for tea in a café where they discovered that, during the first two decades of the century, they had belonged to the same social circle in Petersburg; the lady was the widow of the politician Kokoshkin, who had been assassinated, and he, Vladimir, had immediately felt at home, sensing as he did a strong bond with these women who had lost their husbands or fathers in the same way as - once they had emigrated to Berlin - fanatic Russian nationalists had assassinated his father. The daughter, Irina Kokoshkina, called herself Gaudanini, which was the surname of her Italian grandfather, a violinist from Cremona. Later he visited them at their home several times, and wrote to Vera, who had stayed with little Mitia in Berlin - which is where they'd lived up until then and where, despite her Jewish origins, she held down a well-paid job - to say that he found the two women charming. After a time, however, he noticed that mother Kokoshkina sometimes made a fool of herself by constantly praising her daughter as if wanting to sell her to the highest bidder, and he began to focus entirely on Irina.

They went to the cinema to see old films that both of them loved, and also to see the latest ones; they investigated cafés and bistros, bookshops and parks and soon became an inseparable couple, known to the Russian immigrant community. When, later, he saw that Irina devotedly ran her hand along the furrow that his head had made in the pillow, or that she kept his cigarette butts in the ashtray as if they were relics, he got frightened and wrote long letters to his wife begging her to come to Paris as soon as possible. However, given that Vera didn't know what was going on, he wasn't in any hurry: "First we should visit your mother. I promised to do it," she wrote. Then he tried another angle: "Can't you see that in Germany the sky is darkening over you? You're Jewish, how can you go on living in that Hitlerian nest of anti-Semitism? You need to get out before they do something horrible to you!" But Vera replied that she was well treated and greatly appreciated at her workplace. And over and over again she started talking about Yelena Nabokova: "We can't do that, Volodia, we have to go and see her as soon as possible."

He knew that Vera was right about that, they had to go and see his mother.

But there was an obstacle; Irina Guadanini was in Paris! He knew that he ought to go to Berlin, collect his family, snatch Vera and Mitia from the claws of the Nazis and take them to Prague, to his mother's house, spend a month or two there and then go all three to another place, anywhere, far from Paris, where the Russian community in exile knew about his feelings for Irina. But he couldn't make up his mind to act, and instead of doing anything he spent whole days with Irina. He didn't even feel like writing, he only took a daily break to write letters to Vera, thus soothing his bad conscience. But he kept on hearing its voice, despite himself. He came out in a rash and began to suffer from insomnia.

Why couldn't he live without Irina?, was she that attractive? He wondered as he helped Mitia put on his rubber ring while the boy splashed about. Instead of stunning beauties, he always went for slender, lively women; Irina, moreover, had a gift for word games. He knew that she wrote mediocre verse inspired by Anna Akhmatova: how could such a great poetess have left a trail of devoted mediocre poets in her wake? He also knew that Irina was no scholar, and hadn't even had enough schooling; her ignorance meant that she made mistakes when she wrote in French. But this thought flew out of his head, replaced by the image of Irina's tenderness and sensuality. He had by now spent fourteen years with Vera: fourteen marvellous, sunlit, cloudless years, he whispered to himself and repeated the word 'cloudless' which he had, just a moment ago, spoken when he and Irina were talking about his marriage. He had barely known Irina for six months, four of which he, Vladimir, had been out of Paris. Irina had been a spring surprise for him, could he possibly wave goodbye to a happy marriage after a two month relationship? He knew that it was conceivable: in his novels, again and again, he had written about how love could trump common sense and take away everything that was good and sacred in life.

A month before leaving for Cannes, he had convinced Vera to go with Mitia to his mother's house in Prague. He would wait in Paris for a visa to Czechoslovakia. In the meantime his Nansen passport had expired and the French authorities had refused to extend it: it seemed that he would have to

pick one up in Berlin, something he had no intention whatsoever of doing. In the end, all these problems were solved and Yelena, Vladimir's mother couldn't stop smiling as she walked under spring sunlight with her Volodia and his wife and son through the Malá Strana neighbourhood and through Stromovka park, where the rhododendrons were in flower, all the way to the Troja Palace.

Vladimir took a short break with Vera to the spa town of Františkovy Lázně, where they stayed in the Egerlander hotel. The spa had a shady garden with peacocks walking about in it. Vladimir was being treated for the severe rash which first a French doctor and then a Czech one had diagnosed as psoriasis, caused by nerves; had he been under a lot of pressure recently?, both doctors asked. The thermal waters helped relieve the rheumatism which plagued Vera all year long. When with her, he realised that she saw her as a friend, almost as a sister, and that his mind was always on Irina in Paris.

After a few days, someone sent an anonymous letter to Vera, from Paris to Prague, which was just a few pages long, written in French, albeit by a Russian hand, in which Vladimir's relationship with Irina was explained in detail. Vera believed it, everything was described in a highly credible way. Vladimir denied it. Vera didn't doubt his word. Later on, he felt tortured by a bad conscience and found it difficult to pretend that everything was as it always had been. He wrote to Irina: "This inescapable vulgarity of having to put up a front. Suddenly, you become aware of how things really are and you feel evil, monstrous." Still, he asked her to keep on writing to him, that he couldn't live without her letters, and sent her the address of the Prague bookseller V. Korff, in whose bookshop he was due to have a presentation, so that she could write to him.

Towards the end, he said goodbye to his mother, not thinking that it would be for the last time. He went to Mariánské Lázně where he stayed in the Ville Busch with Vera, her sister and Mitia. There, he wrote his story about Germany: *Cloud, Castle, Lake*. It seemed that finally he was saying goodbye to Germany for good, he longed to express his loathing of the Germanic mind-set... Was the story really about that? In the narrative, he also included his fears of losing Irina. Yes, he suspected that something dreadful would happen, and that he

would have to let her go for good.

Once they were in Cannes, however, it was he himself who told Vera that he and Irina were corresponding. Vera made a terrible scene and forced him to tell the whole truth. Time and again, Vera repeated that if he couldn't live without Irina he should go and stay with her in Paris.

"Not now," he muttered, downcast.

"Not now, you say? And tomorrow yes?" Vera shouted in desperation. Or maybe it didn't happen that way, Vera didn't shout and neither did she feel desperate, not for a moment, or maybe just at the start of this scene. Perhaps she spoke to him coldly, with disdain. As if addressing an overflowing rubbish bin. She didn't care if they separated; she probably wanted to.

"Not now," he repeated in dismay.

"If not now, when?"

"Not now," he repeated once more, like a monk reciting a litany. It was a stupid thing to do, but he couldn't help it. All he knew was that right then, he wasn't going to leave Vera and Mitia. She wanted to go off on her own with Mitia so that he would never see the boy again. He, however, wasn't sure if he would be able to suppress his desire for Irina in the future. He didn't want to lose Mitia, nor Vera either, but he didn't have the strength to give up Irina. It was during this time that he wrote letters full of love and jealousy.

"I always feel so much like talking to you, that even if I have hardly any time to spare, I can't help but write to you, even if only just a few words. Each time I am more aware that I can't share you with anyone, but, can you renounce everything for me? Panic, despair...I love you so much..."

She answered him with verses by the poetess Julie de Lespinasse:

Je vous écris et je déchire mes lettres.

Je relis les vôtres – elles me paraissent toujours trop courtes.

(I write to you and tear up my letters.

I read yours – they always seem too short to me.)

He couldn't help it, he noticed a couple of mistakes she'd made when copying these French verses. But what would bother him when done by others, made him feel that Irina was closer; he saw her as being more human and so even more desirable.

He'd already spent several months plagued by doubts and on the edge of madness. He had just lived forty-eight hours of family hell. Despite his desperate situation, he felt partly relieved; the cat was out of the bag.

Yes, he felt relieved; but not that much. He still didn't know what he was going to do in the end and hoped that he wouldn't have to give up Irina. Towards the end of those forty-eight hours during which neither he or Vera had slept or eaten, until they collapsed from exhaustion, his wife told him:

"I'm going to give you a month to think everything over. If you decide to go, please do it as soon as possible. But if – once the time is up – you are still living with us, with your family, I will take it as a promise that you will stay with Mitia and myself. After which, you will no longer have the right to leave us."

The temperature of the trattoria next to the rock was pleasantly cool, but when

Irina dove into the street's summer heat just before three, she felt herself weakening. Fortunately, the park was nearby. She sat down on a bench near the entrance, in the shade of a plane tree. A butterfly-shaped leaf fell from the tree onto her lap. She didn't brush it away. The park was empty, except for an elderly woman who was dozing at the entrance to the public lavatories, in the shade of a fig tree.

The bells of a nearby church struck three o'clock.

With Vladimir, everything had a hint of desperate urgency. When he returned to Paris from Prague in early July, his family had installed themselves in the home of a cousin of his wife's, and he in the home of some friends, the Fondaminskys. They had four days to meet up with each other before he went with his family to Cannes, where he wanted to stay until the summer. Vladimir told her that when he was buying the train tickets in Mariánské Lázně, he was offered the chance to pay half-price and get free tickets to the Universal Expo in Paris, on the condition that they travelled via Germany. They finally made it to the Gare de l'Est and visited the Expo that very day. There were two huge pavilions standing side by side: the German and Soviet ones, respectively; the former disgusted them... So much vulgarity and absurdity, as Vladimir put it, put them off and they left at once. Later, once this family obligation was over, and thanks to the Gallimard publishing house, he and Irina were able to see each other every day. It turned out that Vladimir had to negotiate the publication of his novel *Despair*, which would be the first to be translated into French from the English version; Vladimir had done the English translation himself, with the help of an experienced English publisher. The negotiation with the publishing house was the pretext that allowed him to get out of the house and see Irina.

The day came when they had to say goodbye, after which she would go home on the metro, and he would walk to his next meeting in the Café Flore, where the poet Jules Superville and the writer and artist Henri Michaux were waiting for him. They said goodbye in front of the Saint-Michel art deco metro station. Once again, he said that everything would get sorted out and that they'd be able to see each other again, that it was just a matter of time; both of them would

have to be patient. Given that Vladimir wasn't giving any indication that he was going to leave his family, she didn't ask what, precisely, was going to get sorted out or how. She kept silent so as not to spoil their last moment together. Still, she later reproached herself for not having asked him how he thought he was going to fix everything. And indeed, that was why she had travelled to Cannes.

When he left for Cannes with his family, he began writing to her often and each letter was, for her, a ray of sunlight in the darkness of her solitude; later on, the gaps between letters grew wider and wider. She wrote a poem about this and, after thinking it over carefully, sent it to him.

But Vladimir's words of love were sounding emptier and emptier until they got to the stage where they felt lifeless. Perhaps they're conditioned by deep dejection, she told herself. More and more often he asked her to forgive him, saying that "for many different reasons our correspondence needs to be less frequent". In the end, he asked her to stop writing to him "for the time being". When he finally confessed that since his wife had found out they were still writing to each other, his home had become an inferno, she offered to come to Cannes so that the two of them could leave there together...forever. He asked her by return of post for God's sake not to come. She did anyway: she had to find out if there was still hope. And despite his prohibition, in another letter she copied some verses by the poet Polonsky:

She trembled and whispered to me:

«Listen, we'll flee!

We'll be as free as birds!"

There was no reply from Cannes.

The church bells struck half past four.

The sun, which was heading west, reached the bench on which Irina was sitting. She got up. There was no point in waiting any longer. The voice on the beach which had asked her to meet up in the park must have been a

hallucination.

With her bathing costume and towel, she sat on the beach in the same place where she had lain in the morning. What wouldn't she give to see him again! But in the space around her, neither he nor his family were to be seen, and their towels had gone. She walked up and down the beach, letting the waves bathe her feet. It was so pleasant...as if the sea water wanted to give her what Vladimir had denied her. She wandered lost in her thoughts but never forgetting for a moment that he was somewhere close by. Even though she wouldn't have noticed it, he could have been watching her. She felt as if she were onstage, and could not allow herself to make the tiniest mistake, so as not to disappoint this invisible audience.

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Meanwhile, after lunch and a nap, he had left the house with Vera and Mitia, walked across the park, and entered the tunnel in which they could hear the echoes of a train passing overhead. After eating, he hadn't been able to write anything. He couldn't get Irina out of his head, he would have liked to have gone out and seen her. But that was impossible. The storm at home hadn't yet abated and Vera was still keeping an eye on him. Although both of them were making an effort to be pleasant, agreeable and attentive, their marriage was still full of tension. He had to tread carefully, he had to play his role well. Vera could read him like an open book, she saw everything.

When they emerged from the tunnel, the sun dazzled him. An ice-cream seller passed them on the beach, and Vladimir offered two scoops to Mitia, mainly in order to gain time and get his bearings a bit.

"I want strawberry and lemon," the boy exclaimed.

"I'll just have one scoop, of vanilla," Vera was smiling, "'And what do you want, Volodia? You're daydreaming again."

"I'm thinking about the next chapter, you know..." he said, trying not to make his voice sound disagreeable because of Vera's comment.

Just then, he spotted Irina floating along the beach, light on her long legs, picking up seashells and using her feet to press water down into the sand.

"Daddy, Daddy, can't you hear us?"

"Volodia, which ice-cream do you want?"

Irina paused, the sea was in the background, he saw her eyes: it looked as if someone had pierced her head to make two holes through which she could see the sea's turquoise waves. Yes, he was right! Her eyes were exactly the fascinating colour of the Mediterranean before sunset, he thought.

Then he answered:

"Me? Raspberry, of course, like always."

That Vera had pestered him about a silly ice-cream, had put him in a bad mood.

Vera found their usual spot, laid out the towels and Mitia went off to build a castle where the waves met the sand. Vladimir didn't accompany his son; Irina was getting closer to the boy and his castle.

"Volodia, I want to sunbathe quietly for a while," Vera said as she finished her little scoop of yellowish ice-cream, "Go and play with Mitia, please, I wouldn't want anything to happen to him."

"I'll be right there, I just want to finish my ice-cream. The boy is well within

reach. Nothing's going to happen to him."

"Sure, but I'd be happier if..."

Vera didn't complete the sentence, turned over on her stomach, sunk her face in the towel and exposed her back to the sun.

Irina went up to the first wall of the castle Mitia was building, and smiled at the boy who, oddly, gave her a naughty grimace before returning the smile. She walked around the castle and sat down on her towel, a little further along. Vladimir gave her a look full of gratitude, but she was watching the waves that were coming towards her, then slipping back without touching her; she was deep in thought. Then Vladimir went over to Mitia and, his back to Irina, helped him to finish the castle; it was the best way to ward off the perplexity he felt now that he was able to see her. He tried to think only about the game, and in no time at all built a Gothic castle with four towers complete with embattlements, walls and bridges.

"Look Mummy, this is where the dungeons are," Mitia shouted excitedly, showing his mother one of the towers, "And this is the stable where the horses are kept. Can you hear them whinnying? The one with the white mane is mine!"

A chilly breeze had started to blow, and Vera began to put her things into a large bag. The beach was emptying quickly. Vladimir didn't allow himself to look back at the beach until they were at some distance along the promenade. Then he looked back eagerly. Irina was still sitting, watching the sea, her head lowered. Full of desire, and despondent, for the last time he examined that long neck and that rounded nape which merged slowly into her short, wavy hair. He sensed there would be no more meetings, then tried to engrave this image in his memory. Yes, for the last time.

She let her feet take her where they would. She went to the lighthouse. Once there, she sat down and looked at the sea, and wondered if she had made some mistake, thinking back over the period before they met for the first time – she had been so eager to meet that attractive writer who stood out among the others like a solitary poplar in the middle of a meadow. In fact, they'd met a year before the presentation, during his previous visit to Paris. Afterwards, he had written to her occasionally, most of the letters being joint missives to her and her mother. Irina was convinced that he had been inspired by her when he wrote the short story *Spring in Fialta* about a beautiful and extraordinary *femme fatale*. He assured her that he had written it before meeting her, but Irina didn't believe him; she appeared in the story as a woman who marked the destiny of other men, this being the image she had of herself. The fact that Vladimir was married didn't bother her much – she liked him and wanted him for himself, she didn't feel that anything else mattered. He had never hidden the fact that he had a family from her, and she had known that anyway, before they met. He had warned her that he was happily married, but she believed in the power of love. She analysed it all again and recalled the conversation they'd had in the morning, and then she realised what things she should have kept quiet about and what things, on the contrary, she should have said loudly and clearly, but hadn't.

Someone sat down next to her; she didn't want to see who it was, she had the feeling it was him, she could almost feel his presence. This closeness calmed her down, it always did. But no. He wasn't sitting next to her and never would again. It was all over.

It was getting dark, the sun had set a good while ago and the sea was turning violet. She heard little bells ringing and turned her head: it was the donkey with the red hooves again, *La Regina di Gelato*. The animal was surely heading home, where it would stuff itself with hay and go to sleep. Everybody was going home, the only person who didn't know what to do was her. The sleepwalker. She got up, caressed the little donkey's mane and headed for the centre. To the

station. But before she got there, she turned right into a side street and came out into the little square from which she could see his window. In the meantime, night had fallen.

She said to herself: I must know where I stand. He had always told her to wait, to be patient, that everything would get better, that he couldn't live without her, but couldn't live without his wife and child, either. He had to make a decision. She should tell him why she had come. Yes, she should go up to his house, call at the door, introduce herself and tell everybody why she had come. The denouement would come of its own accord.

There was light in just one window of the house. The three bathing costumes were hanging on the line again: his, hers and the boy's; a table lamp lit up the interior, yellowish light illuminating the wall and table; there was nobody in the room. After a short while, the light dimmed, a shadow moved in front of it. In front of the lit lamp, Irina saw the dark silhouette of a slender feminine figure.

At that instant she turned and left, without looking behind her. The objective of her visit had been achieved. She knew where she stood. The denouement had come of its own accord.