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King, Queen, Knave

VLADIMIR NABOKOV



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KING, QUEEN, KNAVE

VLADIMIR NABOKOV

*Translated by Dmitri Nabokov
in collaboration with the author*

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FOREWORD

Of all my novels this bright brute is the gayest. Expatriation, destitution, nostalgia had no effect on its elaborate and rapturous composition. Conceived on the coastal sands of Pomerania Bay in the summer of 1927, constructed in the course of the following winter in Berlin, and completed in the summer of 1928, it was published there in early October by the Russian émigré house “Slovo,” under the title *Korol’, Dama, Valet*. It was my second Russian novel. I was twenty-eight. I had been living in Berlin on and off, for half a dozen years. I was absolutely sure, with a number of other intelligent people, that sometime in the next decade we would all be back in a hospitable, remorseful, racemosa-blossoming Russia.

In the autumn of the same year Ullstein acquired the German rights. The translation was made competently, as I was assured—by Siegfried von Vegesack, whom I recall meeting in the beginning of 1929 when passing with my wife posthaste through Paris to spend Ullstein’s generous advance on a butterfly safari in the Oriental Pyrenees. Our interview took place in his hotel where he lay in bed with a bad cold, wretched but monocled, while famous American authors were having quite a time in bed and so forth, as was, it is often said, their wont.

One might readily conjecture that a Russian writer in choosing a set of exclusively German characters (the appearances of my wife and me in the last two chapters are merely visits of inspection) was creating for himself insurmountable difficulties. I spoke no German, had no German friends, had not read a single German novel either in the original, or in translation. But in art, as in nature, a glaring disadvantage may turn out to be a subtle protective device. The “human humidity” (*chelovecheskaya vlazhnost’*, permeating my first novel, *Mashen’ka* (published in 1926 by “Slovo” and also brought out in German by Ullstein), was all very well but the book no longer pleased me (it pleases me now for new reasons). The émigré characters I had collected in that display box were transparent to the eye of the era that one could easily make out the labels behind them. What the labels said was fortunately not too clear but I felt no inclination to persevere in a technique assignable to the French “human document” type, with a hermetic community faithfully described by one of its members—something not unsimilar, in a small way, to the impassioned and boring ethnopsychology which depress one so often in modern novels. At a stage of gradual inner disentanglement, when I had not yet found, or did not yet dare apply, the very special methods of re-creating a historical situation that I used ten years later in *The Gift*, the lack of any emotional involvement and the fairytale freedom inherent in an unknown milieu answered my dream of pure invention. I might have staged KQK in Rumania or Holland. Familiarity with the map and weather of Berlin settled my choice.

By the end of 1966, my son had prepared a literal translation of the book in English, and this was placed on my lectern beside a copy of the Russian edition. I foresaw having to make a number of revisions affecting the actual text of a forty-year-old novel which I had not reread ever since its proof had been corrected by an author twice younger than the reviser. Very soon I asserted that the original sagged considerably more than I had expected. I do not wish to spoil the pleasure of future collators by discussing the little changes I made. Let me only remark that my main purpose in making the translation was not to beautify a corpse but rather to permit a still breathing body to enjoy certain innate capacities which inexperience and eagerness, the haste of thought and the sloth of word had denied me formerly. Within the texture of the creature, those possibilities were practically crying to be developed or teased out. I accomplished the operation not without relish. The “coarseness” and “lewdness” of the book that alarmed my kindest critics in émigré periodicals have of course been

preserved, but I confess to have mercilessly struck out and rewritten many lame odds and ends, such as for instance a crucial transition in the last chapter where in order to get rid temporarily of Franz who was not supposed to butt in while certain important scenes in the Gravitz resort engaged the attention of the author, the latter used the despicable expedient of having Dreyer send Franz away from Berlin with a scallop-shaped cigarette case that had to be returned to a businessman who had mislaid it with the author's connivance (a similar object also figures, I see, in my *Speak, Memory*, 1966, and quite properly, too, for its shape is that of the famous *In Search of Lost Time* cake). I cannot say I feel I have been losing time over a dated novel. Its revised text may soften and entertain even such readers as are opposed, for religious reasons no doubt, to an author's thriftily and imperturbably resurrecting all his old works one after the other while working on a new novel that has now obsessed him for five years. But I do think that even a godless author owes too much to his juvenilia not to take advantage of a situation hardly ever twinned in the history of Russian literature and save from administrative oblivion the books banned with a shudder in his sad and remote country.

I have not said anything yet about the plot of *King, Queen, Knave*. This plot is basically new and unfamiliar. In fact, I suspect that those two worthies, Balzac and Dreiser, will accuse me of gross parody but I swear I had not read their preposterous stuff at the time, and even now do not quite know what they are talking about under their cypresses. After all, Charlotte Humbert's husband was not quite innocent either.

Speaking of literary air currents, I must admit I was a little surprised to find in my Russian text so many "*monologue intérieur*" passages—no relation to *Ulysses*, which I hardly knew at the time; but of course I had been exposed since tender boyhood to *Anna Karenin*, which contains a whole scene consisting of those intonations, Eden-new a hundred years ago, now well used. On the other hand, many amiable little imitations of *Madame Bovary*, which good readers will not fail to distinguish, represent a deliberate tribute to Flaubert. I remember remembering, in the course of one scene, Emma creeping at dawn to her lover's château along impossibly unobservant back lanes, for even Homais nods.

As usual, I wish to observe that, as usual (and as usual several sensitive people I like will look huffy), the Viennese delegation has not been invited. If, however, a resolute Freudian manages to slip in, he or she should be warned that a number of cruel traps have been set here and there in the novel.

Finally, the question of the title. Those three court cards, all hearts, I have retained, while discarding a small pair. The two new cards dealt me may justify the gamble, for I have always had a ivory thumb in this game. Tightly, narrowly, closely, through the smart of tobacco smoke, one edge has squeezed out. Frog's heart—as they say in Russian Gulch. And Jingle Bells! I can only hope that my good old partners, replete with full houses and straights, will think I am bluffing.

VLADIMIR NABOKOV
March 28, 1966
Montreal

The huge black clock hand is still at rest but is on the point of making its once-a-minute gesture; the resilient jolt will set a whole world in motion. The clock face will slowly turn away, full of despair, contempt, and boredom, as one by one the iron pillars will start walking past, bearing away the vaults of the station like bland atlantes; the platform will begin to move past, carrying off on an unknown journey cigarette butts, used tickets, flecks of sunlight and spittle; a luggage handcart will glide by, its wheels motionless; it will be followed by a news stall hung with seductive magazine covers—photographs of naked, pearl-gray beauties; and people, people, people on the moving platform themselves moving their feet, yet standing still, striding forward, yet retreating as in an agonizing dream full of incredible effort, nausea, a cottony weakness in one's calves, will surge back, almost falling supine.

There were more women than men as is always the case at partings. Franz's sister, with the pallor of the early hour on her thin cheeks, and an unpleasant, empty-stomach smell, dressed in a checked cap that surely one would never see on a city girl; and his mother, small, round, all in brown like a compact little monk. See the handkerchiefs beginning to flutter.

And not only did they slip away, those two familiar smiles; not only did the station depart removing its newsstand, its luggage cart, and a sandwich-and-fruit vendor with such nice, plump, lumpy, glossy red strawberries positively crying to be bitten into, all their achenes proclaiming their affinity with one's own tongue's papillae—but alas gone now; not only did all this fall behind; the entire old burgh in its rosy autumn morning mist moved as well: the great stone *Herzog* in the square, the dark cathedral, the shop signs—top hat, a fish, the copper basin of a barber. There was no stopping the world now. In grand style houses pass by, the curtains flap in the open windows of his home, its floorboards crackle a little, the walls creak, his mother and sister are drinking their morning coffee in the swiftdraft, the furniture shudders from the quickening jolts, and ever more rapidly, more mysteriously travel the houses, the cathedral, the square, the sidestreets. And even though by now tilled fields had long been unfolding their patchwork past the railway car window, Franz still felt in his very bones the receding motion of the townlet where he had lived for twenty years. Besides Franz, the wooden-benched third-class compartment contained two old ladies in corduroy dresses; a plump inevitable red-cheeked woman with the inevitable basket of eggs in her lap; and a blond youth in tan shorts, sturdy and angular, very much like his own rucksack, which was tightly stuffed and looked as if it had been hewed of yellow stone: this he had energetically shaken off and heaved onto the shelf. The seat by the door, opposite Franz, was occupied by a magazine with the picture of a breathtaking girl; and by a window in the corridor, his back to the compartment, stood a broad-shouldered man in a black overcoat.

The train was now going fast. Franz suddenly clutched his side, transfixed by the thought that he had lost his wallet which contained so much: the solid little ticket, and a stranger's visiting card with a precious address, and an inviolate month of human life in reichsmarks. The wallet was there all right, firm and warm. The old ladies began to stir and rustle, unwrapping sandwiches. The man in the corridor turned and, with a slight lurch, retreating half a step, and then overcoming the sway of the floor, entered the compartment.

Most of the nose had gone or had never grown. To what remained of its bridge the pale parchment-like skin adhered with a sickening tightness; the nostrils had lost all sense of decency and faced the flinching spectator like two sudden holes, black and asymmetrical; the cheeks and forehead showed

geographical range of shades—yellowish, pinkish, and very glossy. Had he inherited that mask? And if not, what illness, what explosion, what acid had disfigured him? He had practically no lips; the absence of eyelashes lent his blue eyes a startled expression. And yet the man was smartly dressed, well groomed and well built. He wore a double-breasted suit under his heavy overcoat. His hair was sleek as a wig. He pulled up the knees of his trousers as he sat down with a leisurely movement, and his gray-gloved hands opened the magazine he had left on the seat.

The shudder that had passed between Franz's shoulder blades now tapered to a strange sensation in his mouth. His tongue felt repulsively alive; his palate nastily moist. His memory opened its gallery of waxworks, and he knew, he knew that there, at its far end somewhere a chamber of horrors awaited him. He remembered a dog that had vomited on the threshold of a butcher's shop. He remembered a child, a mere toddler, who, bending with the difficulty of its age, had laboriously picked up and put in its lips a filthy thing resembling a baby's pacifier. He remembered an old man with a cough in a streetcar who had fired a clot of mucus into the ticket collector's hand. These were images that Franz usually held at bay but that always kept swarming in the background of his life greeting with hysterical spasm any new impression that was kin to them. After a shock of that sort in those still recent days he would throw himself prone on his bed and try to fight off the fit of nausea. His recollections of school seemed always to be dodging away from possible, impossible, contacts with the grubby, pimply, slippery skin of some companion or other pressing him to join in a game or eager to impart some spitterish secret.

The man was leafing through the magazine, and the combination of his face with its enticing cover was intolerably grotesque. The ruddy egg woman sat next to the monster, her sleepy shoulder touching him. The youth's rucksack rubbed against his slick sticker-mottled black valise. And worst of all, the old ladies ignoring their foul neighbor munched their sandwiches and sucked on fuzzy sections of orange, wrapping the peels in scraps of paper and popping them daintily under the seat. But when the man put down his magazine and, without taking off his gloves, himself began eating a bun with cheese, glancing around provokingly, Franz could stand it no longer. He rose quickly, he lifted like a martyr his pale face, shook loose and pulled down his humble suitcase, collected his raincoat and hat and, banging his suitcase awkwardly against the doorjamb, fled into the corridor.

This particular coach had been hooked on to the express at a recent station, and the air in it was still fresh. He immediately felt a sense of relief. But the dizziness had not quite passed. A wall of beech trees was flickering by the window in a speckled sequence of sun and shade. He began tentatively to walk along the corridor clutching at knobs and things, and peering into the compartments. Only one had a free seat; he hesitated and went on, shaking off the image of two pasty-faced children with dusky black hands, their shoulders hunched up in expectation of a blow from their mother right on the nape as they quietly kept sliding off the seat to play among greasy scraps of papers on the unmentionable floor at the passengers' feet. Franz reached the end of the car and paused, struck by an extraordinary thought. This thought was so sweet, so audacious and exciting, that he had to take off his glasses and wipe them. "No, I can't, out of the question," said Franz under his breath, already realizing, however, that he could not conquer the temptation. Then checking the knot of his tie with thumb and forefinger he crossed in a burst of clangor the unsteady connecting plates, and with an exquisite sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach passed into the next car.

It was a second-class Schnellzug car, and to Franz second-class was something brightly attractive, even slightly sinful, smacking of spicy extravagance like a sip of thick white liqueur or that enormous grapefruit resembling a yellow skull that he had once bought on the way to school. About first-class one could not dream at all—that was for diplomats, generals, and almost unearthly actresses! Second-class though ... second.... If he could only get up the courage. They said his late father (a seedy notary) had on occasion—long ago, before the war—travelled second-class. Yet, Franz could not make up his

mind. He stopped at the beginning of the corridor, by the placard listing the car inventory, and now was no longer a fence-like forest glancing by but vast meadows majestically gliding past, and, in the distance, parallel to the tracks, flowed a highway, along which sped lickety-split a lilliputian automobile.

The conductor just then making his rounds brought him out of his difficulty. Franz bought a supplement promoting his ticket to the next rank. A short tunnel deafened him with its resounding darkness. Then it was light again but the conductor had vanished.

The compartment that Franz entered with a silent unacknowledged bow was occupied by only two people—a handsome bright-eyed lady and a middle-aged man with a clipped tawny mustache. Franz hung up his raincoat and sat down carefully. The seat was so soft; there was such a cosy semi-circular projection at temple level separating one seat from the next; the photographs on the wall were so romantic—a flock of sheep, a cross on a rock, a waterfall. He slowly stretched out his long legs and slowly took a folded newspaper from his pocket. But he was unable to read. Benumbed with luxury he merely held the newspaper open and from behind it examined his fellow travellers. Oh, they were so charming. The lady wore a black suit and a diminutive black hat with a little diamond swallow. Her face was serious, her eyes cold, a little dark down, the sign of passion, glistened above her upper lip and a gleam of sun brought out the creamy texture of her neck at the throat with its two delicate transverse lines as if traced with a fingernail across it, one above the other: also a token of all kinds of marvels, according to one of his schoolmates, a precocious expert. The man must be a foreigner, judging by his soft collar and tweeds. Franz, however, was mistaken.

“I’m thirsty,” said the man with a Berlin accent. “Too bad there’s no fruit. Those strawberries were positively dying to be sampled.”

“It’s your own fault,” answered the lady in a displeased voice, adding a little later: “I still cannot get over it—it was such a silly thing to do.”

Dreyer briefly cast up his eyes to a makeshift heaven and made no reply.

“It’s your own fault,” she repeated and automatically pulled at her pleated skirt, automatically noticing that the awkward young man with the glasses who had appeared in the door corner seemed to be fascinated by the sheer silk of her legs.

“Anyway,” she said, “it’s not worth discussing.”

Dreyer knew that his silence irritated Martha unspeakably. There was a boyish gleam in his eye, and the soft folds about his lips were undulating because he was rolling a mint in his mouth. The incident that had irritated his wife was actually pretty silly. They had spent August and half of September in Tyrol, and now, on the way home, had stopped for a few days on business in that quaint little town, and there he had called on his cousin Lina with whom he had danced in his youth, some twenty-five years ago. His wife had flatly refused to accompany him. Lina, now a roly-poly creature with falling teeth but just as talkative and amiable as ever, found that the years had left their mark on him but that it might have been worse; she served him excellent coffee, told him about her children, said she was sorry they were not at home, asked about Martha (whom she did not know) and his business (about which she was well informed); then, after a pious pause, she wondered if he could give her a piece of advice....

It was warm in the room where around the aged chandelier, with gray little glass pendants like dirty icicles, flies were describing parallelograms, lighting every time on the same pendants (which for some reason amused him), and the old chairs extended their plush-covered arms with comic cordiality. An old pug dozed on an embroidered cushion. In reply to the expectant interrogatory sign of his cousin he had suddenly said, coming to life with a laugh: “Well, why don’t you have him come to see me in Berlin? I’ll give him a job.” And that was what his wife could not forgive him. She called it “swamping the business with poor relations”; but when you come down to it, how can one po

relation swamp anything? Knowing that Lina would invite his wife, and that Martha would not go any circumstance, he had lied, telling his cousin that they were leaving the same evening. Instead Martha and he had visited a fair and the splendid vineyards of a business friend. A week later at the station, when they had already settled down in their compartment, he had glimpsed Lina from the window. It was a wonder they had not run into her somewhere in town. Martha wanted to avoid her seeing them at all cost, and even though the idea of buying a nest of fruit for the trip appealed to him greatly he did not put his head out of the window, did not beckon with a soft “psst” the young vendor in the white jacket.

Comfortably dressed, in perfect health, a colored mist of vague pleasant thoughts in his head and peppermint in his mouth, Dreyer sat with crossed arms, and the soft folds of the fabric in the crook of his arms matched the soft folds of his cheeks, and the outline of his clipped mustache, and the wrinkles fanning templeward from his eyes. With a peculiar blandly amused gleam in his eyes he gazed from under his brows at the green landscape gliding in the window, at Martha’s handsome profile rimmed with sunlight, and the cheap suitcase of the bespectacled young man who was reading a newspaper in the corner by the door. Idly he considered that passenger, palpating him from all sides. He noted the so-called “lizard” pattern of the young fellow’s green-and-garnet tie which obviously had cost ninety-five pfennigs, the stiff collar, and also the cuffs and front of his shirt—a shirt incidental which only existed in an abstract form since all its visible parts, judging by a treacherous gloss, were pieces of starched armor of rather low quality but greatly esteemed by a frugal provincial who attaches them to an invisible undergarment made at home of unbleached cloth. As to the young man’s suit, it evoked a delicate melancholy in Dreyer as he reflected not for the first time on the pathological short life of every new cut: that kind of three-button, narrow-lapelled blue jacket with a pin stripe had disappeared from most Berlin stores at least five years ago.

Two alarmed eyes were suddenly born in the lenses, and Dreyer turned away. Martha said: “It is all so silly. I wish you had listened to me.”

Her husband sighed and said nothing. She wanted to go on—there were still lots of pithy rebukes she could make but she felt the young man was listening and, instead of words, leaned her elbow abruptly on the window side of the table leaf—pulling up the skin of her cheek with her knuckles. She sat that way until the flicker of woods in the window became irksome; she slowly straightened her rigid body, annoyed and bored, then leaned back and closed her eyes. The sun penetrated her eyelids with a solid scarlet, across which luminous stripes moved in succession (the ghostly negative of the passing forest), and a replica of her husband’s cheerful face, as if slowly rotating toward her, got mixed up in this barred redness, and she opened her eyes with a start. Her husband, however, was sitting relatively far, reading a book bound in purple morocco. He was reading attentively and with pleasure. Nothing existed beyond the sunlit page. He turned the page, looked around, and the outside world avidly, like a playful dog waiting for that moment, darted up to him with a bright bound. But pushing Tom away affectionately, Dreyer again immersed himself in his anthology of verse.

For Martha that frolicsome radiance was simply the stuffy air in a swaying railway car. It was supposed to be stuffy in a car: that is customary and therefore good. Life should proceed according to plan, straight and strict, without freakish twists and wiggles. An elegant book is all right on a drawing-room table. In a railway car, to allay boredom, one can leaf through some trashy magazine. But to imbibe and relish ... poems, if you please ... in an expensive binding ... a person who calls himself a businessman cannot, must not, dare not act like that. But for that matter, perhaps, he may be doing so on purpose, to spite me. Just another of his show-off whims. Very well, my friend, keep showing off. How nice it would be to pluck that book out of his hands and lock it up in a suitcase.

At that instant the sun seemed to lay bare her face, flowing over her smooth cheeks and lending an artificial warmth to her eyes with their large elastic-looking pupils amid the dove-gray iris and

adorable dark lids slightly creased like violets, radiantly lashed and rarely blinking as if she were constantly afraid of losing sight of an essential goal. She wore almost no make-up—only in the minute transverse fissures of her full lips there seemed to be drying traces of orange-red paint.

Franz, who had been hiding behind his newspaper in a state of blissful nonexistence, living on the outside of himself, in the chance motions and chance words of his travelling companions, now started to assert himself and openly, almost arrogantly, looked at the lady.

Yet only a moment ago his thoughts, always tending to morbid associations, had blended, in one of those falsely harmonious images that are significant within the dream but meaningless when one recalls it, two recent events. The transition from the third-class compartment, where a noseless monster reigned in silence, into this sunny plush room appeared to him like the passage from hideous hell through the purgatory of the corridors and intervestibular clatter into a little abode of bliss. The old conductor who had punched his ticket a short while ago and promptly vanished might have been as humble and omnipotent as St. Peter. Pious popular prints that had frightened him in childhood came to life again. He transformed the conductor's click into that of a key unlocking the gates of paradise. So a grease-painted gaudy-faced actor in a miracle play passes across a long stage divided into three parts, from the jaws of the devil into the shelter of angels. And Franz, in order to drive away the old obsessive fantasy, eagerly started to seek human, everyday tokens that would break the spell.

Martha helped him. While looking sideways out of the window she yawned: he glimpsed the sweep of her tense tongue in the red penumbra of her mouth and the flash of her teeth before her hand shot up to her mouth to stop her soul from escaping; whereupon she blinked, dispersing a tickling tear with the beat of her eyelashes. Franz was not one to resist the example of a yawn, especially one that resembled somehow those luscious lascivious autumn strawberries for which his hometown was famous. At that moment when, unable to overcome the force prying his palate, he convulsively opened his mouth, Martha happened to glance at him, and he realized, snarling and weeping, that she realized he had been looking at her. The morbid bliss he had shortly before experienced as he looked at her dissolving face now turned into acute embarrassment. He knit his brows under her radiant and indifferent gaze, and, when she turned away, mentally calculated, as though his fingers had rattled across the counter of a secret abacus, how many days of his life he would give to possess this woman.

The door slid open, and an excited waiter, the herald of some frightful disaster, thrust his head in, barked his message, and dashed on to the next compartment to cry his news.

Basically Martha was opposed to those fraudulent frivolous meals, with the railway company charging you exorbitant prices for mediocre food, and this almost physical sensation of needless expense, mixed with the feeling that someone, snug and robust, wanted to cheat her proved to be so strong that were it not for a ravenous hunger she would certainly not have gone that long vacillating way to the dining car. She vaguely envied the bespectacled young man who reached into the pocket of his raincoat hanging beside him and pulled out a sandwich. She got up and took her handbag under her arm. Dreyer found the violet ribbon in his book, marked his page with it, and after waiting a couple of seconds as if he could not immediately make the transition from one world to the other, gave his knee a light slap and stood up too. He instantly filled the whole compartment, being one of those men who despite medium height and moderate corpulence create an impression of extraordinary bulk. Franz retracted his feet. Martha and her husband lurched past him and went out.

He was left alone with his gray sandwich in the now spacious compartment. He munched and gazed out of the window. A green bank was rising there diagonally until it suffused the window to the top. Then, resolving an iron chord, a bridge banged overhead and instantly the green slope vanished and open country unfurled—fields, willows, a golden birch tree, a winding brook, beds of cabbage. Franz finished his sandwich, fidgeted cozily, and closed his eyes.

Berlin! In that very name of the still unfamiliar metropolis, in the lumber and rumble of the first syllable and in the light ring of the second there was something that excited him like the romantic names of good wines and bad women. The express seemed already to be speeding along the famous avenue lined for him with gigantic ancient lindens beneath which seethed for him a flamboyant crowd. The express sped past those lindens grown so luxuriantly out of the avenue's resonant name, and ("derlin, derlin" went the bell of the waiter summoning belated diners) shot under an enormous arch ornamented with mother-of-pearl spangles. Farther on there was an enchanting mist where another picture postcard turned on its stand showing a translucent tower against a black background. It vanished, and, in a brilliantly lit-up emporium, among gilded dummies, limpid mirrors, and glazed counters, Franz strolled about in cut-away, striped trousers, and white spats, and with a smooth movement of his hand directed customers to the departments they needed. This was no longer a wholly conscious play of thought, nor was it yet a dream; and at the instant that sleep was about to trip him up, Franz regained control of himself and directed his thoughts according to his wishes. He promised himself a lone treat that very night. He bared the shoulders of the woman that had just been sitting by the window, made a quick mental test (did blind Eros react? clumsy Eros did, unsticking his folds in the dark); then, keeping the splendid shoulders, changed the head, substituting for it the face of that seventeen-year-old maid who had vanished with a silver soup ladle almost as big as she before he had had time to declare his love; but that head too he erased and, in its place, attached the face of one of those bold-eyed, humid-lipped Berlin beauties that one encounters mainly in liquor and cigarette advertisements. Only then did the image come to life: the bare-bosomed girl lifted a wine glass to her crimson lips, gently swinging her apricot-silk leg as a red backless slipper slowly slid off her foot. The slipper fell off, and Franz, bending down after it, plunged softly into dark slumber. He slept with mouth agape so that his pale face presented three apertures, two shiny ones (his glasses) and one black (his mouth). Dreyer noticed this symmetry when an hour later he returned with Martha from the dining car. In silence they stepped over a lifeless leg. Martha put her handbag on the collapsible window table, and the bag's nickel clasp with its cat's eye immediately came to life as a green reflection began dancing in it. Dreyer took out a cigar but did not light it.

The dinner, particularly that wiener schnitzel, had turned out to be pretty good, and Martha was not sorry now that she had agreed to go. Her complexion had grown warmer, her exquisite eyes were moist, her freshly painted lips glistened. She smiled, only just baring her incisors, and this contented precious smile lingered on her face for several instants. Dreyer lazily admired her, his eyes slightly narrowed, savoring her smile as one might an unexpected gift, but nothing on earth could have made him show that pleasure. When the smile disappeared he turned away as a satisfied gawker drifts away after the bicyclist has picked himself up, and the street vendor has replaced on his cart the scattered fruit.

Franz crossed his legs like one very lame and slow but did not wake up. Harshly the train began braking. There glided past a brick wall, an enormous chimney, freight cars standing on a siding. Presently it grew dark in the compartment: they had entered a vast domed station.

"I'll go out, my love," said Dreyer, who liked to smoke in the open air.

Left alone, Martha leaned back in the corner, and having nothing better to do looked at the bespectacled corpse in the corner, thinking indifferently that this, perhaps, was the young man's story and he would miss it. Dreyer strode along the platform, drummed with five fingers on the windowpane as he passed, but his wife did not smile again. With a puff of smoke he moved on. He strolled leisurely, with a bouncing gait, his hands clasped behind his back, and his cigar thrust forward. He reflected that it would be nice some day to be promenading like this beneath the glazed arches of a remote station somewhere on the way to Andalusia, Bagdad or Nizhni Novgorod. Actually one could set off any time; the globe was enormous and round, and he had enough spare cash to circle

completely half-a-dozen times. Martha, though, would refuse to come, preferring a trim suburban lawn to the most luxuriant jungle. She would only sniff sarcastically were he to suggest they take a year off. "I suppose," he thought, "I ought to buy a paper. I guess the stock market is also an interesting and tricky subject. And let us see if our two aviators—or is it some wonderful hoax?—have managed to duplicate in reverse direction that young American's feat of four months ago. American Mexico, Palm Beach. Willy Wald was there, wanted us to accompany him. No, there is no breaking her down. Now then, where is the newsstand? That old sewing machine with its arthritic pedal wrapped up in brown paper is so clear right now, and yet in an hour or two I shall forget it forever; I shall forget that I looked at it; I shall forget everything...." Just then a whistle blew, and the baggage car moved. Hey, that's my train!

Dreyer made for the newsstand at a smart trot, selected a coin from his palm, snatched the paper he wanted, dropped it, retrieved it, and dashed back. Not very gracefully, he hopped onto a passing streetcar and could not open the door immediately. In the struggle he lost his cigar but not his paper. Chuckling and panting, he walked through one car, another, a third. In the next to last corridor a big fellow in a black overcoat who was pulling a window shut moved to let him by. Glancing at him as he passed, Dreyer saw the grinning face of a grown man with the nose of a baby monkey. "Curious," thought Dreyer; "ought to get such a dummy to display something funny." In the next car he found his compartment, stepped across the lifeless leg, by now a familiar fixture, and quietly sat down. Martha was apparently asleep. He opened the paper, and then noticed that her eyes were fixed upon him.

"Crazy idiot," she said calmly and closed her eyes again. Dreyer nodded amiably and immersed himself in his paper.

The first chapter of a journey is always detailed and slow. Its middle hours are drowsy, and the last ones swift. Presently Franz awoke and made some chewing motions with his lips. His travelling companions were sleeping. The light in the window had dimmed, but in compensation the reflection of Martha's little bright swallow had appeared in it. Franz glanced at his wrist, at the watch face sturdy and protected by its metal mesh. A lot of time, however, had escaped from that prison cell. There was a most repulsive taste in his mouth. He carefully wiped with a special square of cloth his glasses, and made his way out into the corridor in search of the toilet. As he stood there holding on to an iron handle, he found it strange and dreadful to be connected to a cold hole where his stream glistened and bounced, with the dark headlong-rushing naked earth so near, so fateful.

An hour later the Dreyers also woke up. A waiter brought them café-au-lait in bulky cups, and Martha criticized each sip she took. Dusk deepened in the faded fields which seemed to run faster and faster. Then rain began to patter softly against the window: a rillet would snake down the glass, stop hesitantly, and then again resume its quick downward zigzag course. Outside the corridor's windows a narrow orange sunset smouldered beneath a black thunderhead. Presently the light went on in the compartment. Martha looked at length in a little mirror, baring her teeth and raising her upper lip.

Dreyer, still replete with the pleasant warmth of slumber, looked at the dark-blue window, at the raindrops, and thought that tomorrow was Sunday, and that in the morning he would go to play tennis (which he had recently taken up with the desperate zeal of middle age), and that it would be a shame if the weather interfered with his plans. He asked himself if he had made any progress, unconsciously tensing his right shoulder, and remembered the beautifully groomed, sun-swept court in his favorite Tyrol resort, and the fabled player who had arrived for a local match in a white flannel overcoat with an English club muffler around his neck and three rackets under his arm, and then unhurriedly with professional gestures had taken off that coat, and the long striped scarf, and the white sweater under the coat, and then with a flash of his arm bared to the elbow had ringingly offered poor Paul von Lep the indolent and terrible present of the first practice ball.

"Autumn, rain," said Martha slamming her handbag shut.

“Oh, just a drizzle,” Dreyer corrected her softly.

The train, as if it were already within the magnetic field of the metropolis, was now travelling with incredible speed. The windowpanes had grown completely dark—one could not even distinguish the sky. The fiery stripe of an express flashed by in the opposite direction, and was cut off with a bang forever. It had been a hoax after all—that flight to America. Franz, who had returned to the compartment, suddenly clutched convulsively at his side. Another hour passed and in the murky gloom there appeared distant clusters of light, diamond-like conflagrations.

Soon Dreyer stood up. Franz, with a chill of excitement in all his frame, stood up too. The ritual arrival had begun. Dreyer pulled down his bags (he enjoyed handing them to porters through the window). Franz, standing on tiptoe, pulled at his suitcase too. Their backs collided elastically, and Dreyer laughed. Franz started putting on his raincoat, failed to find the armhole at the first poke, donned his bottle-green hat, and went out into the corridor with his reluctant suitcase. More light specked the darkness now and suddenly a street with an illuminated tram was revealed seeming under his very feet; it disappeared again behind house walls that were being rapidly shuffled and dealt out again.

“Come on, hurry!” implored Franz.

A minor station flew past, just a platform, a half-opened jewel box, and all grew dark again as if no Berlin existed within miles. At last a topaz light spread out over a thousand tracks and rows of white railway cars. Slowly, surely, smoothly, the huge iron cavity of the station drew in the train, which once grew sluggish, and then, with a jolt, redundant.

Franz descended into the smoky damp. As he passed by the car he had lived in, he saw his tawny mustached travelling companion lowering a window and hailing a porter. For a moment he regretted to have parted forever with that adorable, capricious, sloe-eyed lady. Together with the hurrying crowd he walked down the tremendously long platform, surrendered his ticket to its taker with an impatient hand, and continued past innumerable posters, counters, flower shops, people burdened with unnecessary bags, to an archway and freedom.

Golden haze, puffy bedquilt. Another awakening, but perhaps not yet the final one. This occurs not infrequently: You come to, and see yourself, say, sitting in an elegant second-class compartment with a couple of elegant strangers; actually, though, this is a false awakening, being merely the next layer of your dream, as if you were rising up from stratum to stratum but never reaching the surface, never emerging into reality. Your spellbound thought, however, mistakes every new layer of the dream for the door of reality. You believe in it, and holding your breath leave the railway station you have been brought to in immemorial fantasies and cross the station square. You discern next to nothing, for the night is blurred by rain, your spectacles are foggy, and you want as quickly as possible to reach the ghostly hotel across the square so as to wash your face, change your shirt cuffs and then go wandering along dazzling streets. Something happens, however—an absurd mishap—and what seemed real abruptly loses the tingle and tang of reality. Your consciousness was deceived: you are still fast asleep. Incoherent slumber dulls your mind. Then comes a new moment of specious awareness: the golden haze and your room in the hotel, whose name is “The Montevideo.” A shopkeeper you knew at home, a nostalgic Berliner, had jotted it down on a slip of paper for you. Yet who knows? Is this reality, *the* final reality, or just a new deceptive dream?

Lying on his back Franz peered with myopic agonizingly narrowed eyes at the blue mist of the ceiling, and then sideways at a radiant blur which no doubt was a window. And in order to free himself from this gold-tinted vagueness still so strongly reminiscent of a dream, he reached toward the night table and groped for his glasses.

And only when he had touched them, or more precisely the handkerchief in which they were wrapped as in a winding sheet, only then did Franz remember that absurd mishap in a lower layer of the dream. When he had first come into this room, looked around, and opened the window (only to reveal a dark backyard and a dark noisy tree) he had, first of all, torn off his soiled collar that had been oppressing his neck and had hurriedly begun washing his face. Like an imbecile, he had placed his glasses on the edge of the washstand, beside the basin. As he lifted the heavy thing in order to empty it into the pail, he not only knocked the glasses off the edge of the stand, but sidestepping in awkward rhythm with the sloshing basin he held, had heard an ominous crunch under his heel.

In the process of reconstructing this event in his mind, Franz grimaced and groaned. All the festive lights of Friedrichstrasse had been stamped out by his boot. He would have to take the glasses to be repaired: only one lens was still in place and that was cracked. He palpated rather than re-examined the cripple. Mentally he had already gone out of doors in search of the proper shop. First that, and then the important, rather frightening visit. And, remembering how his mother had insisted that he make the call on the very first morning after his arrival (“it will be just the day when you can find a good businessman at home”), Franz also remembered that it was Sunday.

He clucked his tongue and lay still.

Complicated but familiar poverty (that cannot afford spare sets of expensive articles) now resulted in primitive panic. Without his glasses he was as good as blind, yet he must set out on a perilous journey across a strange city. He imagined the predatory specters that last night had been crowding near the station, their motors running and their doors slamming, when still safely bespectacled but with his vision dimmed by the rainy night he had started to cross the dark square. Then he had gone to bed after the mishap without taking the walk he had been looking forward to, without getting his first taste of Berlin at the very hour of its voluptuous glitter and swarming. Instead, in miserable self-

compensation, he had succumbed again, that first night, to the solitary practice he had sworn to give up before his departure.

But to pass the entire day in that hostile hotel room amid vague hostile objects, to wait with nothing to do until Monday, when a shop with a sign (for the seeing!) in the shape of a giant blue pincer would open—such a prospect was unthinkable. Franz threw back the quilt and, barefoot, padded warily to the window.

A light-blue, delicate, marvellously sunny morning welcomed him. Most of the yard was taken up by the sable velvet of what seemed to be a spreading tree shadow above which he was just able to distinguish the blurry orange-red hue of what looked like rich foliage. Booming city, indeed! Out there all was as quiet as in the remote serenity of a luminous rural autumn.

Aha, it was the room that was noisy! Its hubbub comprised the hollow hum of irksome human thoughts, the clatter of a moved chair, under which a much needed sock had long been hiding from the purblind, the plash of water, the tinkle of small coins that had foolishly fallen out of an elusive waistcoat, the scrape of his suitcase as it was dragged to a far corner where there would be no danger of one's tripping over it again; and there was an additional background noise—the room's own groan and din like the voice of a magnified seashell, in contrast with that sunny startling miraculous stillness preserved like a costly wine in the cool depths of the yard.

At last Franz overcame all the blotches and banks of fog, located his hat, recoiled from the embrace of the clowning mirror and made for the door. Only his face remained bare. Having negotiated the stairs, where an angel was singing as she polished the banisters, he showed the desk clerk the address on the priceless card and was told what bus to take and where to wait for it. He hesitated for a moment, tempted by the magic and majestic possibility of a taxi. He rejected it not only because of the cost but because his potential employer might take him for a spendthrift if he arrived in state.

Once in the street he was engulfed in streaming radiance. Outlines did not exist, colors had no substance. Like a woman's wispy dress that has slipped off its hanger, the city shimmered and fell into fantastic folds, not held up by anything, a discarnate iridescence limply suspended in the autumnal air. Beyond the nacrine desert of the square, across which a car sped now and then with new metropolitan trumpeting, great pink edifices loomed, and suddenly a sunbeam, a gleam of glass would stab him painfully in the pupil.

Franz reached a plausible street corner. After much fussing and squinting he discovered the red blur of the bus stop which rippled and wavered like the supports of a bathhouse when you dive under. Almost directly the yellow mirage of a bus came into being. Stepping on somebody's foot, which once dissolved under him as everything else was dissolving, Franz seized the handrail and a voice—evidently the conductor's—barked in his ear: "Up!" It was the first time he had ascended this kind of spiral staircase (only a few old trams served his hometown), and when the bus jerked into motion he caught a frightening glimpse of the asphalt rising like a silvery wall, grabbed someone's shoulder, and was carried along by the force of an inexorable curve, during which the whole bus seemed to heel over and zoomed up the last steps and found himself on top. He sat down and looked around with helpless indignation. He was floating very high above the city. On the street below people slithered like jellyfish whenever the traffic froze. Then the bus started again, and the houses, shade-blue on one side of the street, sun-hazy on the other, rode by like clouds blending imperceptibly with the tender sky. This is how Franz first saw the city—fantasmally tinted, ethereal, impregnated with swimming colors in no way resembling his crude provincial dream.

Was he on the right bus? Yes, said the ticket dispenser.

The clean air whistled in his ears, and the horns called to each other in celestial voices. He caught a whiff of dry leaves and a branch nearly brushed against him. He asked a neighbor where he should get off. It turned out to be a long way yet. He began counting the stops so as not to have to ask again, and

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