

THE DAY HIS EYES ARE OPENED

AN ORDINARY TARTU TRAIN FROM THE LATE FIFTIES IN Tallinn's Baltic Station on a September morning. In the new, or actually the old Baltic Station, rebuilt from wartime ruins of the original limestone structure.

The train is an ordinary six-car milk train. The kind that halts at every whistle-stop for two minutes, and at every official station for five or ten, taking an hour and a half longer to get to Tartu than the Pihkva, Moscow, or Riga trains do. So it is actually incomprehensible why so many people use it besides those traveling to the whistle-stops. If you don't assume they do so because the ticket is in fact some twenty kopecks cheaper. No doubt, there are those who don't weigh or very strictly calculate the half-hours spent on a train, even among people who wish to arrive at Tartu at a very precise hour.

For a long time now, the cars have not been those niggardly, toy car-like rattletraps, those spoils of war used for a while after its end—with their wheels like duck's feet on lengthened axles to fit the gauge of our Eastern European tracks. From either side of any of those cars, you stepped directly out into the blazing sunlight or the rain or the cold,

whatever the weather happened to be just then. No cars have long been our own old, normal, prewar ones. The brown linoleum floor still smelling of mustiness and freshness; under your bottom, worn, brown oil-colored benches; as a headrest for your neck, stalwart old plywood rubbed to a gleam; leaning on the bench back supports, foreheads, necks, sports caps, slouch hats, women's hats, headscarves, berets, and many kinds of bare heads. Not that many passengers, actually. Besides me, in the row where I've got my seat by the window, only one freckled boy who I think is Aruküla, I think, and whom I do not recall, and, at the window directly opposite me, that woman.

About sixty, with ash-blond, gray-peppered hair, cheekboned, blue-eyed, every once in a while she looks like a mixture of an Estonian farm woman and a city woman. Her glance childlike: swift in touching your face, demanding. As it falls, I get the feeling that I may have seen her somewhere before and that I will finally recall a name to name her. So I prefer to open the morning's *People's* and become absorbed in Nikita Sergeyevich's' morning speech about cultivating corn, and, hidden in the shadows of the newspaper, to remain sheltered from all possible obligations.

A minute before the train takes off, yet another passenger enters the car. A tall, thin man about forty-five, in a suit too light a shade of gray for September. Thin, lined, tanned face beneath his forehead, with a receding hairline, is such that, if you were to divide his humanity by likeness into two theatrical masks, you would say: tragic rather than comic, but with an undeniable glint of inner humor. The man stops at the aisle between the benches, eyes the woman opposite me, and suddenly, with a small, slightly hesitant, but nevertheless visible nod of recognition and greeting. He even seems to bow slightly beneath his suntan. Then, in the half-articulated

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worn, brown oil-colored benches; as a headrest for the scruff
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A minute before the train takes off, yet another passenger
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humanity by likeness into two theatrical masks, you would
say: tragic rather than comic, but with an undeniable dash
of inner humor. The man stops at the aisle between our
benches, eyes the woman opposite me, and suddenly makes
a small, slightly hesitant, but nevertheless visible bow of
recognition and greeting. He even seems to blush a bit
beneath his suntan. Then, in the half-articulated mumble

characteristic of such circumstances, he asks whether the empty place next to me is empty, and, upon my nod, he takes a seat.

The train has taken off. Lilleküla's roofs of cardboard and tin, moist with the gray morning dampness, slide past windows tearstained with fog. I glance from behind the newspaper and make my next attempt to ascertain the human and social characteristics of my two neighbors. In all likelihood, the woman can be categorized as *housewife*. A housewife not so much from an urban home as from a home in the suburbs or a village, a home with a small garden and an apple orchard somewhere near the village meeting house and the library. The woman's inexpensive but new, clean, gray cloth shoes as well as her inexpensive but barely worn bluish-gray autumn coat, plus her blue silk headscarf, beneath the edge of which grayish hair is visible on her weather-beaten cheekbones, all indicate as much. Yet this conjecture is called into doubt by the unpretentious, matter-of-fact air of authority and presence one intuitively feels from the woman's bearing, a trait or aura that is, it seems, expressed with greater ease and more self-evidently by women involved in public or professional activity than by men.

I'm unable to say anything about the man. Perhaps only that he certainly isn't a bureaucrat. He gives the impression of being an intelligent, nervous person who discerns everything. A person whose nature it is to be uncertain about his vulnerable freedom, and because of this uncertainty, he is inconstant. In fact, I'm unable to describe him more concretely than to say that he must be an artist of some sort. Not professionally, perhaps, but spiritually. And the latter can always be argued if, for example, this enigma should enigmatically prove to be an accountant for, say, "Salvage" in his professional life.² And the use of "artistic soul" to explain essence and appearance is all the more relevant at the time our story takes place. For, as far as I can recall, the end of the fifties was a time when there were no artists and poets to be

found among salvage workers any longer, and employed as night guards and boiler operators had come into vogue.³

My neighbor turns to look out the window. To must look directly past my nose. He has very bright eyes and his glance, directed toward the window, seems spasmodic. Then the woman opposite me extends her hand, which has been drawn into her coat sleeve until now because of the cold. She has a massive, gold wedding ring on her finger, and her hand, despite the care with which it is washed, betrays an autumn of garden work. She extends her hand and touches my neighbor's knee, "Pardon me, my dear man—tell me, where do we know each other from?"

She has a surprisingly pure and resonant, but even surprisingly loud voice. So deep an alto that her voice must be audible across many rows of benches.

My neighbor turns toward the inquirer politely, smiling, and blushes again: "Well I was Comrade Kaasik's student. At Varbola High School. Kaasik was my principal. He taught us Estonian. . . . I was there—"

Mrs. Kaasik—for that is who she must be—raises the palm of her hand into the air toward her conversational partner; she smiles and moves her hand from left to right, apparently means: stop your talk. This is in fact what my neighbor interprets Mrs. Kaasik's motion, and, either blushing anew or continuing to blush, he remains silent. His expression is filled with questions quelled only by politeness and the circumstances: But why then ask in a public place if you don't want me to mention contacts and names audibly . . . ?!

But right then, in a tone just as audible, Mrs. Kaasik explains the situation, "My dear young man—unfortunately my hearing is poor. But let's try to remedy the situation at this moment—"

She opens a large, iron-mouthed, fairly worn

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found among salvage workers any longer, and poets employed as night guards and boiler operators had not yet come into vogue.³

My neighbor turns to look out the window. To do so he must look directly past my nose. He has very bright gray eyes and his glance, directed toward the window, seems a bit spasmodic. Then the woman opposite me extends her hand, which has been drawn into her coat sleeve until now because of the cold. She has a massive, gold wedding ring on her finger, and her hand, despite the care with which it has been washed, betrays an autumn of garden work. She extends her hand and touches my neighbor's knee, "Pardon me, young man—tell me, where do we know each other from?"

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She opens a large, iron-mouthed, fairly worn leather

handbag, rummages through it a little, and takes out an odd piece of equipment. It consists of a flashlight casing, the type sold twenty years ago: in other words, a blue-green plaid tin hull, and where the reflector and bulb were once situated, a tiny funnel covered with wire mesh has been mounted. Attached to the case, at the end of a thin, yard-long wire, is an old eyeglass temple, that is, the part of the eyeglass frame that rests on the ear. At the center of the temple's curve, fastened to the casing by three wires, is a bright metal lens, apparently surplus Japanese audio-technical equipment, sits on a shaft like a spider in a web.

Mrs. Kaasik pushes the edge of her scarf and her gray hair away from her ear, she places the temple behind her ear so that the lens is positioned in the opening of her ear, and she extends the mesh-covered funnel toward my neighbor's mouth.

"Let's try now. Sometimes this gadget does work. I asked, where do we know each other from?"

In a normal voice, my neighbor says into the funnel, "I went to Varbola High School. I graduated in 1935. Mr. Kaasik was our principal. And you substituted for our earth science and geography teacher a few times."

Mrs. Kaasik shakes her head. "No. It's not working now," she says in a tone audible to half the car. She opens her apparatus at the bottom and pulls out an ordinary flashlight battery. "Let's see if it's got any current in here. That's simple to do, with your tongue. They used to teach this kind of thing in second grade. Isn't that so?"

My neighbor nods patiently and Mrs. Kaasik tests the terminals with the tip of her tongue.

"But it's still sourish. I think so, anyway. You try it too—" She thrusts the battery under my neighbor's nose, and he in turn tries the terminals with the tip of his tongue.

"Yes. There certainly still seems to be a current here—"

"What did you say?"

"Pardon me," says the man. He takes the tin case into his

hands, presses the battery back inside, and says into the funnel that is to serve as a microphone, "Yes. There certainly still seems to be current here."

"So, you see," says Mrs. Kaasik victoriously, stating the volume of the voice she has heard. "Didn't I say it from time to time? You see, my hearing worsened gradually. For a long time I more or less got along. It's only been lately that things have gotten worse. Now I'm on some kind of waiting list. For a hearing aid. But that takes time. Then my nephew Ain, a tinkerer, made me this. So, where do we know each other from?"

The man explains for the third time.

"And what is your name?"

"Suursepp," says the man, "Edgar Suursepp."

"Listen," calls Mrs. Kaasik. "This is a nuisance—"

"What, what?" puzzles the man.

"Of course! This contraption," Mrs. Kaasik flashes her apparatus, "is on strike again! What was your name?"

"Suu . . ."

"No, no. Don't tell me! I can't hear anyway. I know we'll do, we'll turn to old-fashioned, tried and true methods. Just a second—" She opens her large purse again and pulls out a medium-sized writing pad and a pencil. "Now write down your name for me here!" She looks at Suursepp and gets the impression that he's stalling. And maybe that's actually. Mrs. Kaasik says: "Write boldly. Oh, there's something I'm suspecting about this. It's my conversation pad. My names are jumbled up here. Unimportant ones and important ones. Mostly unimportant, though. Are you sure? Why? A single conversation in a train car doesn't mean anything anyway. There's something very interesting about me. I remember your face clear as a bell. But not your name."

The man writes his name down on Mrs. Kaasik's pad.

"Yes!" shouts Mrs. Kaasik, once again at a volume throughout half the car. "It's coming back, it's coming back! You're that tall, curly-headed boy—you were probably

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"Yes!" shouts Mrs. Kaasik, once again at a volume audible
throughout half the car. "It's coming back, it's coming back:
you're that tall, curly-headed boy—you were probably in the

ninth grade then. We used to say, his name could also be Titmouse! You were, well, in the same class as Taaver and those . . .

The man nods, smiling, and Mrs. Kaasik recalls, "Taaver, who's an Academician now, and Maripuu, who was a minister for a while, and also that . . . Randmäe, who was given something by the Germans. What was it he got?"

"I don't remember, actually," mutters the man, but then he remembers after all: "An iron cross, with oak leaves, wasn't it?" (Peering from behind the edge of *The People's Voice*, I can clearly see that he is ashamed about this same Randmäe.) "But then he died shortly afterward—"

Mrs. Kaasik recalls: "Yes, he lost his legs and then he died. Poor boy. And what was he to do, in fact—no legs under him and that cross around his neck. But listen—you yourself—tell me who and what you are now. But speak quickly. My box is working at the moment."

My neighbor turns his thin but broad shoulders slightly to the right, then to the left, as people do when trying to avoid a question.

"I—I began to study agronomy. My father was a gardener, in fact. And nothing appealed to me more. I chanced to study in Denmark. Father had studied there, and he had friends there. When the Germans forced their way in—during the spring of '40—I barely got out. Since that time I've been musing with soil here. And I've taught about musing with soil. Tried to write a little about it. For twenty years already. Very quietly, very inconspicuously—"

"Why so very inconspicuously?" asks Mrs. Kaasik. It seems to me she isn't pleased that a former student of hers and her husband's has proved to be so very inconspicuous.

My neighbor responds in a muffled voice, smiling sourly, "You know, as a person who was here during the German period.⁴ A person who'd studied abroad. A person who hadn't agreed with everything in the interim. So, the more unobtrusive, the better."

"Oh, I didn't hear the end," calls Mrs. Kaasik, silent again!"

"There must simply be a contact loose," says "but now while we're moving, with everything there's no way to fix it."

"What did you say?" asks Mrs. Kaasik, and she hands her writing pad to the man.

The man writes a few lines on the pad. I am unable to stretch over far enough to read what, I want to stare openly.

Mrs. Kaasik glances at what's been written, looks out the window for a moment, and then turns to her neighbor again.

"Are you married?" She holds out the pad to him.

He nods and the matter is settled.

"And what's your wife's profession?"

The man takes the pad from Mrs. Kaasik and holds it to his knee so that I'm able to read: *She's a soil musser landscape architect.*

"Oh, that's precious," says Mrs. Kaasik ardently. "I know, I think it's terribly advantageous for marital harmony if the husband and wife have their work in common. What do you think so?"

Once again, Mrs. Kaasik's enthusiastic pointings resounds across many benches. Her far-reaching voice with its half-telephoned tone has long since caught the attention of fellow travelers in close proximity. Those sitting at the opposite window, each seemingly in her own book, have been so absorbed in following the conversation for some time now that it's obvious they are pretending to read. The flash of their glances and the corners of their mouths constantly betray the truth of their attention. A middle-aged woman is sitting next Mrs. Kaasik, and I can see no more than the nape of her neck and a freshly curled, brownish frizz of hair. She gets up for the third time, it seems, and ad-

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attention of fellow travelers in close proximity. Two coeds
sitting at the opposite window, each seemingly involved in
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the corners of their mouths constantly betray the true object
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neck and a freshly curled, brownish frizz of hair. She now
gets up for the third time, it seems, and adjusts her

suitcase on the luggage rack—although it needs no adjusting—simply to take a sidelong, curious glance at Mrs. Kaasik “with her currant eyes,” as they used to write in bygone days. At the window neighboring that of the coeds, two men are plugging away at cards on a small window table. One younger, with badly shorn, light hair and a strapping, ruddy-face, phylum *machine operator of the broad fields*;⁵ the other, older, thinner, darker, more smug, more crooked, is, let’s say, a small systems supplier of some sort. Ruddy-face says in passing, his eyes with their white eyelashes narrowed, “Hey, Auntie here’s got a thing for evaluating marital bliss.”

“And why not,” says the supplier softly, driveling. “Look at that knockout hairdo of hers. She’ll see to that bliss business with her husband lickety-split. If the old guy’s up to it, that is—”

From Suursepp’s and my glances, and perhaps from the young coeds’ blushes as well, Mrs. Kaasik notices that something’s been said to her from the card players’ direction. She turns their way, smiling—I notice that she still has pretty, dark blue eyes—and she looks at the two faces smiling at her, the red one and the earthen gray one.

“Did you . . . add something interesting . . . to our conversation? Please—” She extends her pad toward the men, and for a moment the dissonance between her smile and theirs simply makes me uncomfortable. As she finishes trawling through her impressions, she puts the men’s repartee in its correct context. Even before the machine operator has a chance to wave off her pad and call out to the supplier—“Damn it, I already told you, pass!”—even before that, Mrs. Kaasik turns toward Suursepp for a moment, as if a bit saddened, and she asks, unperturbed: “So—don’t you find that a husband and wife’s mutual profession . . .”

Suursepp says, “Just a moment, allow me. . . .” From atop Mrs. Kaasik’s handbag, which is sitting on her lap, he takes her apparatus into his own hands and tears out the

battery. He straightens out and bends the contacts, jigs the wire from the contact points, massages the tiny earpiece, puts the battery back into the case, and blows into the earphone with the wire mesh cover. The train stands motionless at Raasik Station for the duration of this activity. Then it starts off again, and the clickety-clack-clickety of its wheels immediately halves the audibility of their conversation for the neighbors. Suursepp extends the temple of the apparatus back to Mrs. Kaasik, and she fastens it to her ear.

“Well, is it working—?” asks Suursepp through the microphone.

“What do you know—it’s working!” Mrs. Kaasik says out.

“Very good,” says Suursepp smiling. “My response is long to write on the pad, in fact. You see—” His tone changes from the louder, more dashing tone of an instant to that of reminiscing. His listeners apparently caught some embarrassment, and as a result he speaks very softly. But it appears that, when she takes the trouble to use Mrs. Kaasik’s emergency hearing apparatus works exceedingly well. “Yes, yes. It certainly is nice for spouses to have a mutual profession. Not just theoretically. Practically. Mutual discussions and advice save you sometimes. It certainly has no greater significance in a marriage than my experience. A marriage requires *so many* diverse congruities and incongruities as well—which are often congruities from the standpoint of a marriage—I’m not in a so-called mutual marriage. No, no. Tiiu says that straight out, too. I have nothing to be ashamed of in this. Yet, actually, the two of us are very much in the same field. Well, we’ve lived together for fifteen years. That’s true. But we’ve also been close to divorce many times. And we are even now. So happiness requires—I don’t know what. Luck, presumably. Happiness and a mutual profession doesn’t work any wonder.”

“Why, then, a *wonder*, namely . . .,” says Mrs. Kaasik, in what seems like a conciliatory tone. “*But why not a wonder*?”

the luggage rack—although it needs no adjustment to take a sidelong, curious glance at Mrs. Kaasik with her currant eyes," as they used to write in the past. At the window neighboring that of the coeds, Suursepp is plugging away at cards on a small window box, with badly shorn, light hair and a strap-on face, phylum *machine operator of the broad* other, older, thinner, darker, more smug, more confident, let's say, a small systems supplier of some sort. He says in passing, his eyes with their white eyelashes, "Hey, Auntie here's got a thing for evaluating

"Not," says the supplier softly, driveling. "Look at the hairdo of hers. She'll see to that bliss business—her husband lickety-split. If the old guy's up to it,

Suursepp's and my glances, and perhaps from the fact that Mrs. Kaasik notices that someone has said to her from the card players' direction. She is smiling—I notice that she still has pretty eyes—and she looks at the two faces smiling at her and the earthen gray one.

"... add something interesting . . . to our conversation—please—" She extends her pad toward the men, and for a moment the dissonance between her smile and her words makes me uncomfortable. As she finishes her impressions, she puts the men's reparations in their correct context. Even before the machine operator can wave off her pad and call out to the supplier, "I already told you, pass!"—even before that, she turns toward Suursepp for a moment, as if a bit and she asks, unperturbed: "So—don't you find the husband and wife's mutual profession . . ."

She says, "Just a moment, allow me. . . ." From Mrs. Kaasik's handbag, which is sitting on her lap, he tears out the apparatus into his own hands and tears out the

battery. He straightens out and bends the contacts, jerks the wire from the contact points, massages the tiny earphone, puts the battery back into the case, and blows into the funnel with the wire mesh cover. The train stands motionless in Raasik Station for the duration of this activity. Then it takes off again, and the clickety-clack-clickety of its wheels immediately halves the audibility of their conversation for their neighbors. Suursepp extends the temple of the apparatus back to Mrs. Kaasik, and she fastens it to her ear.

"Well, is it working—?" asks Suursepp through the large microphone.

"What do you know—it's working!" Mrs. Kaasik calls out.

"Very good," says Suursepp smiling. "My response is too long to write on the pad, in fact. You see—" His tone changes from the louder, more dashing tone of an instructor to that of reminiscing. His listeners apparently cause him some embarrassment, and as a result he speaks very softly. But it appears that, when she takes the trouble, Mrs. Kaasik's emergency hearing apparatus works exceedingly well. "Yes, yes. It certainly is nice for spouses to have a mutual profession. Not just theoretically. Practically as well. Mutual discussions and advice save you sometimes. But it certainly has no greater significance in a marriage. In my experience. A marriage requires *so many* diverse congruities. And incongruities as well—which are often congruities from the standpoint of a marriage—I'm not in a so-called happy marriage. No, no. Tiiu says that straight out, too. So I've nothing to be ashamed of in this. Yet, actually, the two of us are very much in the same field. Well, we've lived together for fifteen years. That's true. But we've also been close to divorce many times. And we are even now. So happiness requires—I don't know what. Luck, presumably. Having a mutual profession doesn't work any wonder."

"Why, then, a *wonder*, namely . . .," says Mrs. Kaasik, in what seems like a conciliatory tone. "*But why not a wonder*,

in fact?!" she continues, suddenly animated. I'd almost like to say coquettishly, but that wouldn't be quite correct. "What is a wonder, in your opinion? I think it's highly dependent upon the person experiencing the wonder. *Do they see or don't they see—*" And then she asks suddenly: "Do you have children?"

"One son," responds my neighbor, slightly bored.

"Oh, this cowbell—it's gone silent again! Write, please," and Mrs. Kaasik holds the pad out to my neighbor. He writes and Mrs. Kaasik calls out in total candor: "Only one son?! Why only one child?! Where will we end up this way?!"

My neighbor blushes visibly. "Well, you see, it turned out that way. . . . And you?" he asks, apparently in a clever attempt to divert his interlocutor's attention elsewhere. "As I remember, you have more children, don't you?"

"Oh, my cowbell isn't working! I didn't catch that. Write, please—" says Mrs. Kaasik, holding out the pad.

My neighbor writes, and the woman responds immediately.

"Us—yes. We certainly did. If we'd had only one son, we wouldn't have a single one now. We had five children. Four boys and one girl. In order of age, as they were, so they went. Vello was lost at Velikie Luki.⁶ On the right side.⁷ Meelis was lost at Sinimäed.⁸ On the wrong side."

Suursepp's face was a foot and a half away. With detailed clarity, I see his acridly raised upper and repellingly thrust-out lower lip, the barely perceptible toss of his head tending toward the side, the quiver of his half-lowered eyelids and lashes. Yes, I see clearly how Mrs. Kaasik's overly audible and childish clear utterances are again making my neighbor suffer. Apparently it is nothing more than the politeness instilled in him by those very same Kaasiks that now compels him to remain here and to continue the conversation. Mrs. Kaasik explains:

"Aksel wasn't on either side. He went to Finland in '43,

from there to Sweden, and now he's in Australia. He to become an archaeologist. Already in '39 he went to those Vassars and Schmiedehelms,⁹ and whoever they were, to digs on Saaremaa and wherever. Well, after Estonia, such a thing became inconceivable for him. In Tallinn, he worked at a phonograph factory. And now he's manufacturing ties in Brisbane"—Mrs. Kaasik smiles and smiles—"an industrialist, so to speak. He himself, alone, employs nine workers. Three of the workers are Estonians. His wife is an Australian woman and his children are Australian children. Well, and then we had Jaanus. It was his fate to be accepted by the physics department at Tartu University in '51. Because his father was under arrest at the time. He then went to Moscow and there they found him quite suitable for the university. And that's where he stayed. He completed his master's last year and wants to get a Ph.D. degree. But now he has a Russian wife and Russian children—

"Well, and what of it," says Suursepp, "if she's a nice woman and they're nice children." By the way, I have the idea with what degree of conviction he's saying that. It seems his words are indeed meant to console, but has he really forgotten that her cowbell isn't working? I can't be sure of that. If he does remember, then his words are intended, of course, to speak, for all listening ears—to indicate that he has, in a way, rate, disputed Mrs. Kaasik's vicious nationalism. . . .

Mrs. Kaasik extends the pad to him: "Write, please. You didn't understand."

Suursepp writes, and Mrs. Kaasik immediately looks up. "She's really a nice woman. And they're nice children. So, actually speaking, I can't have anything against it. After all, love doesn't ask about such a thing. It's just that I think there's too much love of that sort, we'll soon disappear from this earth as a people. And love could also be such a thing that would enable us to live on as a people. What?"

Suddenly she stops and looks at Suursepp a bit provocatively, it seems. "Listen, Suursepp—Suursepp was

continues, suddenly animated. I'd almost like to wonder, in your opinion? I think it's highly upon the person experiencing the wonder. *Do they see—*" And then she asks suddenly: "Do children?"

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Suddenly she stops and looks at Suursepp a bit provocatively, it seems. "Listen, Suursepp—Suursepp was your

name, wasn't it, or am I confusing you with someone? No? I'm looking at the expression on your face and I must ask: am I saying something forbidden? Is such talk still forbidden, then?! That can't be! I don't believe it! Tell me, what's happened in your life to make you—such a frightened Titmouse?! It's true we all used to think that way, only we didn't express it in a public place. But that time is past now! Or do you think it's still going on?"

Mrs. Kaasik extends her pad to Suursepp. In fact she forces it into the man's palm and watches him with a slightly provocative expression. He puts the pad on his knee so that I read his words along with Mrs. Kaasik.

He writes: *I don't know!* And he underlines his words. And then, in order to return the conversation from this questionable aside to an appropriate direction, he also writes: *But your daughter?*

As the train is going clickety-clack-clack, probably already on the other side of Tapa, Mrs. Kaasik explains, "And then we also had, yes, Helvi. The youngest. Twenty-one now. All's well with her. She's studying Estonian at the Pedagogical Institute in her father's footsteps. She was accepted straight from high school without even an interview. For Father was already back then—"

"Oh, is that so?! So Mr. Director is back?!" Suursepp is audibly amazed, and it's unlikely that this is intended to divert the conversation from daughter to father. "It seems to me, I'd heard in the meantime that . . ."

Apparently he wants to conclude: ". . . heard that Director Kaasik died there." But, upon receiving this contrary information, he joyfully cuts off his sentence. Mrs. Kaasik extends the pad to him and he writes: *How have things gone for Mr. Kaasik?*

At this, our entire end of the car, at least, gets a detailed picture of Mr. Kaasik's fate during the interim. And Suursepp, it seems to me, is given a more precise description than he would wish, at least about some of the details.

Mr. Kaasik's tale had its origins long ago. In the fall of 1940, during the Vares government,¹⁰ a county newspaper had published an interview with the principal of a vocational secondary school. Why had Kaasik, in fact, been interviewed? Probably because his leftist political views were known locally. And probably also because, long before that, he'd had a fundamental disagreement with the Minister of Education, a general during the Estonian independence.¹¹ So, in the eyes of those like-minded people, he had become something like the hero of the day. And, in the interview, the ambitious new editor of the county newspaper had printed a sentence by Mr. Kaasik, probably the most famous sentence of the interview, in fact: *But what kind of flag is more beautiful than the red flag—beneath our blue sky and on our black soil and in our pure heart?!*

"Suursepp, you do remember," says Mrs. Kaasik, forgivingly, "he was a bit of a romantic—"

Suursepp nods and writes on the pad, so that I read along: *Like many Estonian language teachers of his generation.*

And Mrs. Kaasik nods thankfully.

Yes. Because of Mr. Kaasik's well-known general opposition to the educational authorities in power during the occupation, he had initially removed him from his position as county school director and then from his job as teacher to boot. Initially he had been shoved into a job at the local educational library. But then, along with lists of books designated for destruction, directives had arrived stating that the library must be purified. Mr. Kaasik had ridden to Tallinn to protest, and in a week he'd been fired. By that time the sentence praising the red flag had also been brought to the attention of the appropriate bureau. In March '42, he had come for him.

"Well, what's the use of talking about how it was for those who've been through those things know for themselves. Those who haven't, won't know anyway. So, yes, only those who went to all the old school officials. At least the . . ."

It it, or am I confusing you with someone? No? at the expression on your face and I must ask: something forbidden? Is such talk still forbidden? That can't be! I don't believe it! Tell me, what's in your life to make you—such a frightened Tit—true we all used to think that way, only we didn't a public place. But that time is past now! Or do's still going on?"

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"Well, what's the use of talking about how it was. Those who've been through those things know for themselves. And those who haven't, won't know anyway. So, yes, of course I went to all the old school officials. At least the ones who

held forth even the slightest hope of a favorable response. Suursepp, you're probably old enough, you know yourself: such trips bring more sadness than joy. But joy as well, in some instances, in some completely unexpected circumstances, you know . . ."

Mrs. Kaasik had also found a lawyer who had written a splendid petition for her. "And, in addition," says Mrs. Kaasik emphatically, "one that didn't compromise August's dignity in any way. That was also very important, you understand—" And the lawyer had worked for almost no remuneration. "You know, he'd said right out: you yourself have nothing, what could I take from you, then? Just bring me a couple of packs of cigarettes, Maret or Ahto or Caravan . . ."

In any case, five or six of the more courageous men among Mr. Kaasik's colleagues had signed the petition. And Mrs. Kaasik had taken it where necessary.

"At that time the children and I were living with August's sister and her husband at their place in the country. You see, in the city there wouldn't have been anything for the children to eat. Linda and Martin agreeably tolerated our presence there. And about a year later, August was freed. Of course we didn't even consider working at a school, neither he nor I. I tended Martin's pigs and August dug a ditch. And then the Germans were gone, too. And then the new bosses, the Andresens¹² and who all else, reinstated August as principal at Varbola. I had a full-time job teaching natural history. Yes, indeed. And life was what it was. You yourself remember, of course, I've no need to talk about it. We had lost three boys. But at that time the four of us were still together. Again and still. But you remember, of course, Suursepp—my August's tongue was a bit unrestrained. And he was a bit vain. Like men in general. So, of course, from time to time he opened his mouth about one thing or another. As a live human being is wont to do. And then once, in a speech, he explained to the students—this is God's honest truth, I

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myself was listening—he described the sentence he'd imprisoned for by the Germans. But when the time came '50 wasn't it,¹³ the issue was again raised that Pri Kaasik, who had been principal during the bourgeois od, was openly advocating the blue, black, and white to the students!¹⁴ For he'd mentioned the blue sky and black soil, hadn't he! What color but white could a heart possibly be! And, in addition, there had been the exhortation to duplicity: for what else could that tale the beautiful red flag and the pure heart mean? It meant the children wave red flags openly, but they should keep their hearts white! Once again August was removed from his job of principal with a clatter and—sent to jail. It was simply, you understand, simply that the speed required for relearning was too great for him—"

And I must admit: I didn't even understand what how much of Mrs. Kaasik's last sentence was irony. If there was irony, then what proportion of that irony was directed at the political circumstances and what proportion at human dim-wittedness or overconfidence? Or was it perhaps simply a neutral statement. . . . Suursepp apparently wished to interpret it in the latter spirit. During Kaasik's long talk he has been tinkering with her apparatus and now he says into the microphone: "An Estonian course, a type slow to relearn things."

Apparently the apparatus has begun to function because Mrs. Kaasik says: "Not always, not at all August—very much so. I recall as much from 1940 on. It was difficult all that relearning was for him. Just imagine me to school one morning and saying to Inspector Kopp, *rade* Kopp. When he's been *Mr.* Kopp the entire time when he's been your colleague but not your friend the slightest. August was simply flattened by that. But that Comrade Kopp—you remember him, don't you? Of course. The inspector, after all—"

"No, he wasn't around yet in my day," notes Suursepp

THE DAY HIS EYES ARE OPENED

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Kaasik had also found a lawyer who had written a petition for her. "And, in addition," says Mrs. Suursepp emphatically, "one that didn't compromise August's honor in any way. That was also very important, you understand—" And the lawyer had worked for almost no money. "You know, he'd said right out: you yourself bring it, what could I take from you, then? Just bring a couple of packs of cigarettes, Maret or Ahto or Car-

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At that time the children and I were living with August's mother and her husband at their place in the country. You see, there wouldn't have been anything for the children. Linda and Martin agreeably tolerated our presence. And about a year later, August was freed. Of course, he didn't even consider working at a school, neither did he attend Martin's pigs and August dug a ditch. And the Germans were gone, too. And then the new bosses, the Americans¹² and who all else, reinstated August as principal. I had a full-time job teaching natural history. And life was what it was. You yourself remember, I've no need to talk about it. We had lost it. But at that time the four of us were still together. It was still. But you remember, of course, Suursepp—his tongue was a bit unrestrained. And he was a bit of a man in general. So, of course, from time to time he was in my mouth about one thing or another. As a live person is wont to do. And then once, in a speech, he said to the students—this is God's honest truth, I

myself was listening—he described the sentence he'd been imprisoned for by the Germans. But when the time came, in 1950 wasn't it,¹³ the issue was again raised that Principal Kaasik, who had been principal during the bourgeois period, was openly advocating the blue, black, and white colors to the students!¹⁴ For he'd mentioned the blue sky and the black soil, hadn't he! What color but white could a pure heart possibly be! And, in addition, there had been that base exhortation to duplicity: for what else could that tale about the beautiful red flag and the pure heart mean? It meant let the children wave red flags openly, but they should keep their hearts white! Once again August was removed from the job of principal with a clatter and—sent to jail. It was simply, you understand, simply that the speed required for relearning was too great for him—"

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"No, he wasn't around yet in my day," notes Suursepp.

"A mobile hustler and organizer like him, with a tuft of hair hanging down his forehead and he himself always a bit sweaty," Mrs. Kaasik recalls. "I remember what he did clear as can be. Two days before the June takeover¹⁵ I was substituting for a geography teacher, and I myself was in the lecture room. Mr. Kopp made a speech to the students in the morning—under a picture of Päts, you remember—and he pointed to the picture and talked about *our dear President* and tears streamed down his cheeks. I saw it with my own eyes. I was three steps away. But in the autumn he again made a speech to the children in that very same spot. Only then Stalin's picture was already hanging there in place of Päts's. And I was three steps away again. And Kopp spoke about the *great leader of the workers of the world*. And tears were again running down his cheeks. Streaming, again. August has been incapable of that. His whole life, he's been so stingy with his tears that . . ."

"Well, what's the use of talking about tears anymore now that Mr. Kaasik is back happily—"

Suursepp says this rushing a bit, and it's a bit cheap on his part. So I conceal my smirk in the shadow of the newspaper. An acid smirk over my neighbor's attempt to slither past the rough spots, as they say, at any price, even at the price of logic. But Mrs. Kaasik's apparatus has gone on strike again in mid-sentence.

"What did you say? Why shouldn't there be any more talk about tears?"

Mrs. Kaasik offers Suursepp the pad, but Suursepp is fiddling with the wire to her hearing box, which makes me think: is this so his response, which argues against tears—and only such a response could be expected, of course—would be, as they say, audible to all possible ears?

"Well, can you hear now?" asks Suursepp.

"Yes," Mrs. Kaasik calls out cheerfully. "Why mustn't I mention tears anymore?!"

"Because," Suursepp says into the microphone and, it

seems to me, in a tone louder than necessary, "because Mrs. Kaasik has returned safely, I hear—"

"Yes," says Mrs. Kaasik in a hollow tone, "he certainly back—the third year, already—" And it seems to me she is also still drawing a deep breath. "But of course it wasn't those tears I was talking about! Oh, there have certainly been tears spilled, too. Hardly any by him, of course. Certainly no, not by him. But by me, yes. Oh I don't conceal—"

And now Suursepp gets his punishment. For attempting to sneak past the tears at all just then, because such an attempt deserves punishment. Especially if you yourself haven't even been among those who precipitated them. Those who provoked them might even somehow be forgiven their attempt to weasel past. And of course Suursepp is punished especially because, in attempting to avoid tears and concern, by pretending not to notice, he mixed those tears with tears of stupidity—and affectation. Mrs. Kaasik recalls

"I clearly recall one great weeping spell. . . . You know, I stood in the hallway of the tribunal—in February, I think February '51—on Roosikrantsi Street, or wherever it was, what was formerly the home of wealthy folk—and I waited, and I knew that there somewhere, in one of those rooms, August was being sentenced. . . . The relatives of those being tried probably weren't even permitted to stand there, actually. But no one came to chase me out. And when I had waited a couple of hours and paced along the sawdust scattered on the stone parquetry—then, escorted by two soldiers flanking him on either side, August was brought into the hall and led through the hall, past me—I hadn't seen him for a year. I wanted to absorb him totally in my glance. I was old and gray and transparent somehow—but actually I saw only his mouth. To me his mouth looked strangely young and young. And I was all ears and expectation, and I listened for what his mouth would utter. After all, he had to tell me what the decision had been. Although we were forbidden to speak to each other. And, as he went past me, quietly b

the hustler and organizer like him, with a tuft of hair down his forehead and he himself always a bit nervous. Kaasik recalls. "I remember what he did clear two days before the June takeover¹⁵ I was substitute geography teacher, and I myself was in the lecture. Mr. Kopp made a speech to the students in the hall under a picture of Päts, you remember—and he pointed to the picture and talked about *our dear President* and beamed down his cheeks. I saw it with my own eyes three steps away. But in the autumn he again came to the children in that very same spot. Only the picture was already hanging there in place of the one that was three steps away again. And Kopp spoke about *the great leader of the workers of the world*. And tears were running down his cheeks. Streaming, again. I had been incapable of that. His whole life, he's been crying with his tears that . . ."

What's the use of talking about tears anymore now that Kaasik is back happily—"

She says this rushing a bit, and it's a bit cheap on her to conceal my smirk in the shadow of the newsstand smirk over my neighbor's attempt to slither through the spots, as they say, at any price, even at the expense of her. But Mrs. Kaasik's apparatus has gone on strike and she can't say a word.

And you say? Why shouldn't there be any more tears?"

Kaasik offers Suursepp the pad, but Suursepp is fidgeting with the wire to her hearing box, which makes me wonder at his response, which argues against tears—there's no response could be expected, of course—they say, audible to all possible ears?

"Can you hear now?" asks Suursepp.

Mrs. Kaasik calls out cheerfully. "Why mustn't I hear anymore?!"

Suursepp says into the microphone and, it

seems to me, in a tone louder than necessary, "because Mr. Kaasik has returned safely, I hear—"

"Yes," says Mrs. Kaasik in a hollow tone, "he certainly is back—the third year, already—" And it seems to me she's also still drawing a deep breath. "But of course it wasn't those tears I was talking about! Oh, there have certainly been tears spilled, too. Hardly any by him, of course. Oh no, not by him. But by me, yes. Oh I don't conceal—"

And now Suursepp gets his punishment. For attempting to sneak past the tears at all just then, because such an attempt deserves punishment. Especially if you yourself haven't even been among those who precipitated them. Those who provoked them might even somehow be forgiven their attempt to weasel past. And of course Suursepp is punished especially because, in attempting to avoid tears of concern, by pretending not to notice, he mixed those tears with tears of stupidity—and affectation. Mrs. Kaasik recalls:

"I clearly recall one great weeping spell. . . . You know, as I stood in the hallway of the tribunal—in February, I think, February '51—on Roosikrantsi Street, or wherever it was, in what was formerly the home of wealthy folk—and I waited and I knew that there somewhere, in one of those rooms, August was being sentenced. . . . The relatives of those being tried probably weren't even permitted to stand there, actually. But no one came to chase me out. And when I had waited a couple of hours and paced along the sawdust scattered on the stone parquet—then, escorted by two soldiers flanking him on either side, August was brought into that hall and led through the hall, past me—I hadn't seen him for a year. I wanted to absorb him totally in my glance. He was old and gray and transparent somehow—but actually I saw only his mouth. To me his mouth looked strangely red and young. And I was all ears and expectation, and I listened for what his mouth would utter. After all, he had to tell me what the decision had been. Although we were forbidden to speak to each other. And, as he went past me, quietly but

clearly he said: 'Ten years. Let's try to make it through. Right?' I nodded enthusiastically and smiled encouragement with all my soul. . . . Then he had passed and was on the other side of the door and gone. And I stood there—and I began to cry. It's embarrassing to admit, but uncontrollably. For in my stupidity I had somehow still hoped that they would set him free. And that ten years—I had also considered it a possibility, of course—but when it suddenly became a reality it seemed to me just like being buried alive—I stood there, my shoulder against the wall, and quaked with tears. Then a young soldier boy passed close by me. I don't believe he was from that building. Or God knows. Apparently he wasn't permitted to speak to me. Or he didn't want to. But in passing he said, half mumbling, and generously, you understand—generously: *'Nu, mamasha! Nu, značit ty plačeš'? Detskii srok že stariku dali.'*¹⁶ And then he was gone. And at first I didn't grasp whether this had been solace or mockery. I squeezed my eyes shut and thought: which was it? And the soldier's sad, pimpled child's face rose before my eyes, and I felt a searing shame that I had doubted him. I wanted to run after him and say: Dear boy—you really don't know what you're saying, but—thank you! Because you said it out of the kindness of your heart! And I understood that ten years was actually only a child's portion—for at that time the majority of sentences were twenty-five plus five. . . . But the boy's frayed military coat and high military boots were already far away and it was embarrassing for me to run after him. . . . So I dried my tears and rode home to Varbola. After all, Jaanus and Helvi were waiting, and they wanted to know what news I'd bring. For their sake, I couldn't be too weepy. And do you know, because of the children, it turned out that I wept relatively little. For I thought: who will they have to lean on if their mother constantly turns on the waterworks . . ."

"Right, of course," Suursepp was in agreement with Mrs. Kaasik, "what's the sense of crying?"

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"Well, I don't know," said Mrs. Kaasik. "Perhaps, right amount, crying also serves a purpose. It's unlikely nature has simply given it to people for no purpose. It ably cleanses a person of something. But I didn't even time for waterworks. There was nothing for me to Varbola anymore. I had already been fired from my school long ago, and they wanted me to vacate my ment. Because a new teacher was to come from Tall replace August and myself. And, in fact, I was al exchange apartments with him. Four rooms in Varbol room and a half in Tallinn, but still. And I found a Tallinn too, as a salesperson in a bookstore. They didn me in that senior sales job long, it's true. I was still bird's wife. And perhaps I hadn't kept my mouth enough about everything either. So, from being the salesperson for new books, I became the newest sales for old books. In an antiquarian bookshop, right. salary of fifteen rubles above the lowest wage. But religious, I'd still say: as if by God's own hand. F couldn't have managed on my salary anyway: Jaanu already a sizable young man, and Helvi a sizable girl. wanted to send August a package every month, and if ble money as well. So I had to sell something. But things had been confiscated. Except for three bec chairs and a dining table. Only the books were left, by miracle. They had remained in the country at Martin's we moved. There were at least a couple thousand vo in fact. Carefully selected things. When August's se had been decreed and the confiscators came over place, according to a moral principle of some sort I probably have directed them to those books. But I another moral principle. I didn't direct them there then, bit by bit, I began to bring the books to the cit Martin's and to sell them in the antiquarian booksh you know, from that time on, when I began working antiquarian bookshop, Comrade Wolf-ear decreed—

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"Of course," Suursepp was in agreement with Mrs. Kaasik. "What's the sense of crying?"

"Well, I don't know," said Mrs. Kaasik. "Perhaps, in the right amount, crying also serves a purpose. It's unlikely that nature has simply given it to people for no purpose. It probably cleanses a person of something. But I didn't even have time for waterworks. There was nothing for me to do in Varbola anymore. I had already been fired from my job at school long ago, and they wanted me to vacate my apartment. Because a new teacher was to come from Tallinn to replace August and myself. And, in fact, I was able to exchange apartments with him. Four rooms in Varbola for a room and a half in Tallinn, but still. And I found a job in Tallinn too, as a salesperson in a bookstore. They didn't keep me in that senior sales job long, it's true. I was still a jailbird's wife. And perhaps I hadn't kept my mouth shut enough about everything either. So, from being the senior salesperson for new books, I became the newest salesperson for old books. In an antiquarian bookshop, right. For a salary of fifteen rubles above the lowest wage. But were I not religious, I'd still say: as if by God's own hand. For we couldn't have managed on my salary anyway: Jaanus was already a sizable young man, and Helvi a sizable girl. And I wanted to send August a package every month, and if possible money as well. So I had to sell something. But all our things had been confiscated. Except for three beds and chairs and a dining table. Only the books were left, by some miracle. They had remained in the country at Martin's when we moved. There were at least a couple thousand volumes, in fact. Carefully selected things. When August's sentence had been decreed and the confiscators came over to our place, according to a moral principle of some sort I should probably have directed them to those books. But I chose another moral principle. I didn't direct them there. And then, bit by bit, I began to bring the books to the city from Martin's and to sell them in the antiquarian bookshop. Do you know, from that time on, when I began working at the antiquarian bookshop, Comrade Wolf-ear decreed—he was

our director, an understanding man—I don't know whether you know him—he decreed, yes, a price five or ten rubles higher for each book than he would have paid strangers. So that the children and I managed to live, and Jaanus even got a new coat in which to attend the university. And then those missing ones suddenly began to return, and soon they were coming in droves. All his life, August has never been among the first in anything, and he wasn't among the first to return either. But in the spring of '56 he came home."

Mrs. Kaasik looks at Suursepp and then at me as well with such an animated, cheerful face, as if she weren't telling me that August had returned home in '56, after six years of imprisonment instead of ten, but rather that August had won the silver for the decathlon at Melbourne. . . .

Meanwhile, with a smile of relief, Suursepp draws back his lower lip, which had, in the meantime, been thrust forward worriedly and rejectingly. "Well, you must certainly have wept buckets then?" he says—and it seems to me that's to indicate, ever so slightly, that her harmless tears, tears of joy, had still been noticed.

"Then—yes!" says Mrs. Kaasik victoriously. "But those were tears of a third kind, actually. Those I won't discuss."

"Listen to that, Juss!" The supplier, who has managed to remain entirely silent in the interim, titters at the machine operator over his cards, and he winks at Mrs. Kaasik. "Well, it must certainly have been a hell of a party for you and awful hard on the bedsprings when papa came back home after six parched years! But that Hog-ear or Lop-ear or whatever his name was, didn't his ear sag a bit when papa came home? Heh-heh-heh."

That's uttered quite a distance from Mrs. Kaasik's microphone, and one might suppose that she doesn't hear it. But there's also a kernel of truth in this: I needn't hear everything. And then she says as if in passing, lightly but very clearly, very audibly, and in Suursepp's direction of course:

"By the way, my hearing and this apparatus of mine—it

certainly is a hassle and a problem. But it does also have a good attribute: I needn't hear everything. The abundance of pathetic people who've grown awry—I've no time to hear. And even when I do hear, I don't hear them. I entered that art."

"That's an essential art, of course," Suursepp says. Apparently he fears that the supplier might feel he has been apprehended and begin to set matters aright, so that he can breathe the same breath, Suursepp asks: "But now, of course, everything's fine with you? In recent years? What does Mr. Kaasik do now?"

"Yes, in principle everything's fine with us now," Mrs. Kaasik says as a matter of course, and she cheerfully looks at Suursepp directly in the eyes, with her eyebrows raised. "We moved from Tallinn to Varbola again. August's home city's always seemed alien to him, and now it has become entirely alien. But we've lived in Varbola for over twenty years. We found a small house there. We get a small pension. Eight hundred rubles between the two of us. So we don't starve. And we still have enough books left. To read or to sell. It would be good—as good as it could be—without sons—if it weren't for that misfortune—"

"What misfortune?" asks Suursepp—cautiously, and to me, and partly out of curiosity of course, but also because it would simply be unseemly not to ask.

"That misfortune with August's eyes," says Mrs. Kaasik.

"What's the matter with Mr. Kaasik's eyes?" asks Suursepp—with a certain sense of relief, it seems to me, perhaps because he knows that eyes can have only one kind of misfortune and not legal accidents?

And that is the situation at present, in fact. For Mrs. Kaasik says, "An eye ailment."

But, my God, how strangely she utters that. Not without a feeling of tragedy, but even victoriously so. Almost as if, in speaking about it, it's difficult for her to quell the smile that forces itself to the corners of her

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"Welll yess . . . A cataract? Or glaucoma?" asks Suursepp.

"Glaucoma," says Mrs. Kaasik, as before almost struggling with a smile I can't explain.

"And how much vision has Mr. Kaasik lost due to his glaucoma?" asks Suursepp.

"He's become totally blind," says Mrs. Kaasik. No, no, not downright cheerfully, not downright victoriously, it would be impossible to argue that, but with a strange radiance, nevertheless. "Yes, he became completely blind; the doctors said that in fact he had to become completely blind before they could operate on him."

"Well, glaucoma is more easily cured than a cataract, isn't it," says Suursepp, "but I don't know. Perhaps it's the opposite. And why did Mr. Kaasik develop that? After all, he never even used to wear glasses."

"Who knows why," says Mrs. Kaasik, smiling, as if forgivingly. "He already had symptoms over there. An eye doctor we went to said: that comes with surviving, and it's clear what he meant. But I don't believe it. There's so much talk now these days pro and con. Some say half the cases of gangrene were the fault of the camps. Malnutrition and frostbitten feet. Others say all recoveries from tuberculosis were supposedly due to the camps: the crystalline Siberian air and a diet of sauerkraut. And God knows, it wasn't so difficult for August in the camps. He only worked at logging a brief time. Later he was assigned to a ceramics shop. August maintains that there, even without my packages, he wouldn't have—yes, yes: 'Forgive me, but even without your packages I wouldn't have faced serious hunger there.' He says that the experience itself wasn't difficult, in fact. What had been depressing was that it was all accepted as a matter of course. He says that a year would certainly have sufficed for him to have seen, in sufficient detail, what he saw in six years. Supposedly, however, it had been interesting in a horrible way. All those different personalities and strategies for self-preservation jumbled together, like being in a smelting

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"Well, you know," Suursepp calls out, "it would be downright lucky in that case. . . ." But he leaves what he thinks would be downright lucky in this case to what anyone who wishes to can also think: in that case, it would be a downright lucky that Mr. Kaasik went blind. He can't, thank heaven, write.

No, no, Suursepp doesn't say anything like that. Suursepp merely asks with particular eagerness—of course he knows, perhaps in the shadow of my newspaper I've been doing him an injustice right from the start, an injustice in labeling him with superficial, cheap, generic names. It's an injustice, an injustice! Perhaps I'm merely projecting myself, Peter Mirk, upon him; Peter Mirk, a chance traveler in a chance train on a chance autumn morning? In any case, Suursepp asks with what seems to me is a special keenness. "But how are things, then—is Mr. Kaasik going to be operated on?"

"He was already operated on, in fact," says Mrs. Kaasik. In the same cheerful-enigmatic, take-it-or-leave-it tone.

"When? And where?" inquires Suursepp, with immediate interest now.

"Two weeks ago. In Tartu. At the eye clinic."

"And the result?" I have the feeling that Suursepp and I are asking this together.

"That I don't know," says Mrs. Kaasik almost in a whisper, and then she explains, returning to her former level: "The Professor said that August's case is complicated. The chances are fifty-fifty. The result should become known today. Today they're taking the bandage off his eyes."

"Aaaah . . . So this is why you're traveling?" I don't know whether it's Suursepp or me who asks.

"Yes," says Mrs. Kaasik, "I would have gone, of course. But the Professor phoned. We don't have a telephone in our house, but I gave him the schoolhouse number. They

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mind there. So the Professor telephoned, had me called to the phone, and told me to come. For he'd asked August what August would like to see when his bandage was removed, if he should see—"

"And August had said?" But we break it off, Suursepp and I, and we forgive each other a great deal—for we break it off and don't deprive Mrs. Kaasik herself of the opportunity to state August's wish.

"August had said," says Mrs. Kaasik, looking at Suursepp, at me, and at the young coeds seated beneath the opposite window, with the eyes of a joyful person. "August had said he'd be grateful . . . if the first thing he could see . . . were his wife . . ."

Mrs. Kaasik looks at us and smiles wordlessly: You all understand, of course.

But then she seems to feel that her joyful eyes may well with tears and get her into trouble in front of us, and that would indeed be too much, despite all her candor. So she quickly opens her large, iron-mouthed handbag and conceals her face behind the handbag's broad flap (inside it, there's a mirror of course) and, to conceal the temple of her hearing aid, she begins to arrange her gray wisps of hair beneath the edge of the scarf. She herself no doubt ceaselessly struggling with a smile. As, ten minutes before Tartu, the milk train rides along the twanging railroad bridge across the September flooded river.

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Toomas Vint

THE SWAN-STEALING

IN THE LATE SUMMER EVENING, WHEN THE DUSK FOLLOWING the sunset had muted the texture of the trees and the pedes who filled Kadriorg's white paths and pond area during daytime had flowed back to their homes, Elmer felt a desire to leave the park yet. He had long been fascinated by the fountain jet that shot skyward, its droplets, illuminated by projector rays, gleaming in crystalline rainbow hues. The patter of the falling water's restless rhythm had a peculiar effect that Elmer involuntarily recalled a past of a whitish-green, frothy waterfall which descended resolutely downward along a precipice bordered with ferns. The memory loomed very clear and colorful, and it possessed him with such force that he forgot all else. Sudden, an unfamiliar sound intersected the patter of the water. It was like a scream, but with a unnatural nuance. Elmer flinched and stood up.

Initially there seemed to be no one at all on that bank of the pond from which the sound emanated, but when he stepped closer to the water, despite the dusk his eyes discerned that, on the opposite shore, someone was struggling with a swan into a sack. The bird was struggling mightily, and the man was holding it by the neck and trying to assist from the

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