

LEDA AND THE SWAN

Gönül Pultar

WHEN THE FIRST ARTICLE of his series “From an Eastern University” appeared, he thought of her. Not that she had ever been off his mind. He thought of her having said “True orgasm is seeing your words in print.” He had been mildly startled because it seemed to clash with her apparent reserve. She had shown him a local literary magazine with her poems in it. It was then that he had come to realize that there was more to her than he had assumed. It was perhaps then that their relationship had taken a different turn.

He had signed up for this exchange program that sent teachers of English from the U.K. to the former socialist regimes and vice versa, at a time when everything seemed to have come to a dead end in his life. He was not a teacher of English by profession. It was known to be what one resorted to when all else failed. He had thought it only happened to others. Well, it had almost happened to him. He had not known Eastern Europe except for the occasional stopover and had been glad of the opportunity this job would give him, not only to get to know a country, a region, but to witness, so to speak, history in the making, now that so many changes were taking place there.

Had he also counted on meeting some girl, some real-life equivalent of the artist-painter in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*? All he knew was that he had been much annoyed when he had learned that he must share an office with some local woman, whom he envisaged as being fat and formless like so many he saw in the streets, and at least middle-aged by the sound of her titles. It had been part of his general annoyance at what he had encountered on his arrival. The pay was much less than he had expected, the cost of living much higher than he had imagined, the university was a new one situated in ugly blocks far outside the city, and the “free accommodation” he had been promised a tiny flat in one of these blocks.

“Lack of office space,” the department head had explained in a heavy accent. It had never entered his mind that this Elsbietta Odichewska might also mind having to share an office with a foreigner who found fault with everything in her country. For that is how he had been at first. He had carried over the state of irritation he had brought with him. The Kingdom of the Gods is within us.

Eric and Marc had not even bothered to see their father off. Geneviève *had* come to the airport, making a point of honor nevertheless of not flinching from the attitude that had been hers during the past months, remaining detached to the end, even in the last-minute kiss on the cheek she had given him. Debts hovered in his mind, accumulated over the months and preventing him from concentrating on anything else, debts that would take more than a year to melt away, taking out big chunks of his salary.

Elsbieta. She had turned out to be lovely. He could no longer picture to himself how she had seemed

to him at first. He had gotten to know her too well for that. He did remember having noticed the blue eyes first. Later, he would want to lose himself in the immense serenity of those eyes, bathe his soul in their promise of boundless sanctuary. He had noted the white hairs as well, intermingled with the ever so blond, in a blend that created much of her charm. Yes, she was in her early forties all right, a married woman with four children, but her years had given her a composure that exuded a silent calm. There was nonetheless a girlishness about her that made him immediately think she might perhaps be inexperienced in sex.

Is that how he described her to Cees, his Dutch colleague and next-door neighbor in the blocks, which they called the Golan Heights, one lonely, nostalgic night over the *genever* some Dutchman *de passage* had brought? "You must be in love with her," Cees had said, Cees who always managed to meet "native women," as he called them, very much experienced in love and sex, but always wanting to exploit him in some way.

It was Cees again who had taken him to a party given by a friend of a friend working at some embassy, where he met Ulla. Ulla was Swedish and worked as a press attaché at the Swedish embassy. From the very start she took the lead, getting her secretary to order the tickets for that first concert they attended together, to book for that first weekend at the world-renowned historical site a visit to which was a must.

He liked Swedish women. He liked the outgoingness and earnestness of the northern European gal. He himself had married a Frenchwoman, but now with spunky Ulla, he was reminded of his student years with its many conquests and tremors.

Indeed, for a time, it was as if the carefree period of his youth had come back. What became important was to enjoy the immediate moment, to spend this temporary span of time in this country in as worthwhile a fashion as possible. That meant good dinners in interesting restaurants, travel, and sight-seeing as much as possible. Ulla took him as her escort to some of the official parties, shared news dispatches with him, made him watch cable TV which he had never bothered to get in the U.K. Never had he been so much in the center of things, learned so much about world politics, discussed such a variety of issues with people from such an assortment of nationalities as in this city which had seemed a backwater to him only a few months ago.

Ulla and he had been accepted as a couple. He never wore a wedding ring anyway and Geneviève was so far away. The two of them talked on the phone every now and then, and wrote to each other even more rarely. There had to be grave news, such as the accidental death of their dog, for Geneviève to want to share anything with him.

Ulla obliterated the outer core of loneliness he had slipped into since his arrival. With her it was sex without complications, with no strings attached. For Ulla had made plain from the very beginning that she had no intention of ever being tied down to this "seedy Irishman unemployable in the West" as he self-deprecatingly defined himself.

He had not been getting any sex lately at home, and he had unconsciously tried to hide from himself the suspicion that his wife must—once again—have a lover.

When was it that he was haunted for the first time by Elsbietta as he made love to Ulla?

It was Ulla who first became jealous of Elsbietta. She had stopped by his office one Monday morning, after spending Sunday night in his flat, before going on to work. He may have had an early class,

and Ulla may have untypically lingered in the flat after he left. Anyway, she had not expected to find Elsbietta in the office; in fact, had not expected to find anyone there, since he had never mentioned an officemate. His not having done so had been unnatural, of course. Ulla, ever so sharp, had immediately seized upon the reason for his silence. It had been an awkward, troublesome moment, with Ulla acting out, making it unnecessarily, tactlessly evident the two of them were “together,” being cordial to Elsbietta with an effusion that bordered on condescension. It was a scene of *ménage à trois* he made certain was never repeated, but Ulla had a way from then on of trespassing, of phoning when he was out of the office, and leaving messages for Elsbietta to deliver that left no doubt as to the nature of their relationship.

And Elsbietta accepted all this in silence, without comment or complaint, in the same manner that she received his acerbic remarks on her country from the very first day. Remarks that quickly changed, due to her handling of them, into witty ones which she responded to in like tone, and there started between them a *badinage* in which they both excelled and which they mutually enjoyed. There grew between them a complicity which for the first time in his life, he realized, began wiping out the real loneliness within him, the essential, metaphysical solitude one carries within oneself.

Elsbieta was no average local academic. Her father had been a career diplomat, and she had lived all over the world from the moment she had been born until she was married. She spoke very good French and Italian. Her vocabulary in French was far superior to that of the simple-minded Geneviève and the remarks she made in French occasionally made it clear she had a very good knowledge of the culture. She could also recite Dante in Italian, which she modestly claimed, with her cheeks almost coloring, was no great feat. She knew Russian as well, they all did, and he found himself listening in fascination to interpretations of *Anna Karenina* and *The Idiot* that were totally novel to him. She had chosen nevertheless to study English literature, and had written her doctoral dissertation on William Butler Yeats, which rendered her able now to speak with great authority on the Byzantium poems or “Leda and the Swan.” Clearly she knew Yeats better than he did.

Very soon it became apparent that in her he had found his match, and she in him, though they never spoke of it, preferring instead to discuss on end poems, novels, plays. Transposed on an island of their own, they were startled when a student came to require attention and call them back to reality. They found it increasingly more difficult to extirpate themselves from each other, from this universe they created with words, to go to their respective classes. They were almost pathetic, not wanting to leave, with one eye nevertheless on the wristwatch waiting for the last possible minute, pretending, as the worldly-wise individuals they were, that this was mere shoptalk between two professionals.

He found that his conversations with her far exceeded those he made in her company. That is what made him realize he had fallen for her, that he was no longer impartial toward her. He would catch himself talking to her for hours on end during those solitary periods in the flat when Ulla was busy with delegations and had no time for him. Yet the next day, in the office, he would consider his statements irrelevant, or too revelatory.

His life with Ulla had taken on a pattern, with him spending most weekends in her flat in the diplomats' quarter in a fashionable part of the city. He found her tiresome sometimes, had found out soon enough that for her Dvorak and Smetana were mere commodities for consumption. Cees, who was part of the same group, of the circuit of foreigners who were on the periphery of the diplomatic corps,

watched and saw everything and said, "Ulla of the diplomatic facilities." But that was unfair, it was not just the drinks at a discount rate from those firms that catered to diplomats, nor all the Western perishable goods and other privileges she had access to. It was a way of life. A way of life both familiarly Western and fascinatingly cosmopolitan he would not be able, he believed, to give up easily. The cosmopolitan element was a novelty; it had been a revelation for him. He had always worked at some ingrate job while leading the secluded life of a novelist trying to make it.

Elsbieta, on the other hand, laid her cards on the table from the very first. She invited him to her home along with other members of the department, and introduced him to her husband and teenage children, demonstrating an integrity which made him ashamed of himself. With her there could be no furtive escapade, as the *badinage* of the first days would have led him to believe. She had a large home in the old part of the city and her husband, whom in the blur of his jealousy he persisted in seeing as boorish, was a former Communist bureaucrat, now a high official.

When did they first begin to desire each other? They started to be more at ease in the company of others, giving free vent to the banter that had now become such an essential part of their relationship, indicating an intimacy that was not there. When they were alone, it became difficult to talk, as if words hurt—the real words that had to be uttered, that would make them face reality, not the reality of students and test papers and department meetings but the one inside themselves. Words that would not only reveal their feelings, but themselves to each other. For through her, through his love for her, lie had discovered a self for which he had been groping all these years yet never reached.

Sometimes they deliberately hurt each other by remaining totally aloof and discussing indifferent matters. She had not been to the West for many years and he would tell her about the latest television programs, or the hypermarkets, or the rush hour, anything to fill the silence so laden with significance. There was so much to tell, so much she did not know, that had happened in the West recently and that had not filtered through to her.

So he played the clown for her, reenacting every little gimmick he remembered. And she listened starry-eyed; listened and lived through him all that she had been missing for years.

He became her buffoon, sometimes even getting up from his desk to gesticulate and mimic. She, his queen, would laugh wholeheartedly, and he would love those moments because she was able to shed her reserve and be herself. Her reserve was almost second-nature, so long had it been part of her, throughout the long years of Communism.

As she laughed from the depths of her heart he would know that she was not indifferent, that he had touched in her a sensibility she could no more deny to herself than he could. Yes, he would reflect later, it was during those long hours when he interminably painted for her scene after scene from the West and she indefatigably listened, mesmerized, that he actually seduced her.

It was also during these same sessions that so much of the West he had taken for granted and considered indispensable became, before her, who heard of it for the first time, not merely comical but insipid, gaudy, shallow in his eyes. He came to realize that during all those years in London he had blinded himself to whatever was real and genuine and authentic, imprisoning himself in the hubbub of an everyday grind that left no time for either feelings or thoughts.

All the while his desire for her became so intense that it made him ache, ache in all his soul. His lovemaking with Ulla became affected, enhanced by a dimension that had not been there before, with

all the ache and love and desire he felt for Elsbietta. Ulla was pleasantly surprised perhaps, yet was more apprehensive, because she was sharp and sensed something.

For a long time, they, that is to say he and Elsbietta, sought a way out, trying to find a place to be alone and happy together, or so he thought. He thought they both felt the same way, because he did. He could not take her to his flat as there would be too much idle talk: in the Golan Heights situated in the middle of nowhere all comings and goings were noted. The big hotels downtown were out of the question since they reminded him of Cees and his "native women." On the other hand, the sight of two middle-aged academics surreptitiously making an entry into some sordid *maison de passe* somehow seemed out of the question.

Then one day, when his desire and his ache for her overcame everything else, he took her. To this day, he cannot remember who made the first move; it was surely a *pas de deux* that brought them together and made them melt in each other.

It was after the first semester ended and the department was almost deserted. The students were on vacation of course but the staff should have been at work since formally they only had a month's leave per year which they would take in the summer. But Communism had bequeathed among other things this lax attitude toward work, an attitude he could not understand, raised as he was in the Protestant work ethic. He was not a Marxist and had been relieved like everyone else in Western Europe that the Iron Curtain had fallen and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe had been liberated. Yet that winter he saw that Communism had long ago already collapsed from within and had not been functioning for quite some time.

"This is nothing, it is worse in factories and government offices. People just don't show up. Here at least they come when they have a scheduled class," Elsbietta had explained once.

Elsbieta. He had not ever called her that in his mind after that day. She had become Beth. His lovely Beth.

He had kept coming to the university even during the winter vacation. It was not only a matter of work ethic. She had told him not to come: he was here for a short period of time and should spend his free days roaming the city that was so beautiful now that everything was white. The fact is that he had developed the habit, ever since the boys were small, of writing all his letters at the office and he was now trying to catch up on his correspondence. He still had those belated Christmas cards to write.

As the weeks wore on, he found himself coming to the office later and later, until that day when he arrived only after four o'clock, when the mail was distributed, to look at his pigeonhole in the Faculty Room. He found her in the office, correcting an exam paper. One of her students had been sick and had taken a makeup exam. As the staff was not officially on vacation, no one left town and everyone made an appearance every now and then, as she did now, to see to some unfinished business. Suddenly, it seemed as if too many people had come in that day. There was too much bustle in the corridor, and they had to wait a long time until the voices died down. It had become dark by then, yet by tacit agreement, neither one left.

Her skin was unexpectedly soft for her age and she herself docile without being passive. From the curtainless windows came the reflection of the snow, almost lustrous, piercing the dusk, enveloping

them in its clarity. They were in perfect accord. As his heartbeats slowed down to normal, he found himself in harmony with the world and with himself.

He did not know whether he should send the articles to her. Yet, not sending them was in a way senseless as they were full of allusions only she would understand. They were also, between the lines, filled with regret. Regret at not having visited the city more extensively, gotten to know the country and its society more deeply. Regret at having spent all his time trotting after Ulla and her friends to semi-diplomatic receptions that now meant nothing to him.

Having clung to that group seemed all the more futile since it had disbanded soon after his departure. Ulla had been posted back to Stockholm but decided she was not really made for a nine-to-five job and resigned. She was now in Hong Kong from where she sent news dispatches that made her fame and fortune. She never wrote to him. That is to say, she had left a message on his answering machine one day, asking for his fax number or his e-mail address. Since he had neither, communication with her had stopped. Cees himself had left the country, having married a Greek girl he met during the summer. She was an art historian with a rich father and they were now living in Thessaloniki, writing together a book in English on the history of Ottoman architecture in that city, she providing the material and he the English.

Cees and his bride flew to Amsterdam for Christmas and stopped over in London on their way back to see a publisher for their book. They met for drinks. Geneviève was as usual unable to make it, so he went alone. The newlyweds were obviously very much in love and unashamedly conspicuous about it, in blatant accusation of what he himself had missed.

"The whole department knew it," Cees said. "You were both transformed. It was so beautiful to watch the two of you. It was like a ray of sunshine in that bleak life we were leading. She loved you so much."

He had also loved her with all his being. He had loved her with a love he had not known he was capable of.

She had turned out to be the most unscrupulous mistress ever. Nothing was impossible for their love. Nothing was too *osé* for her. So many women, he knew from experience, lead such ordinary lives, unable to go beyond received rules of conduct, unable ever to transcend mediocrity, whether in sex or in life. As do so many men. As do so many men, he kept telling himself as he and his Beth forgot everything else to be happy.

She took him to the apartment of relatives who had gone to Canada and who had asked her to water their plants for them while they were away.

He would always remember the first time they went there. As soon as they got in and shut the door of the apartment, they immediately flew into each other's arms and started kissing wildly, almost ferociously, then and there at the entrance. It was the culmination of many years of loneliness, they both knew, of frustration with so many other encounters, deception with so many other people. Of having had all those long years to be untrue to themselves in order to cope with the banal existences they had had to call life. It was like a torrent being unleashed now, each seeing revealed from within the depth of his and her being the inner necessity for communion with another soul that had, they now realized, always been there in themselves, dormant but existent. It was like one of the grand mysteries being un-

covered, with both suddenly aware of the necessity, in order to be transported out of one's ordinary self, of such a communion in life, and of the violent physicality of it.

Later, much later, he started kissing her on the cheek, with a gentleness he did not know he was capable of. They clung to each other, both ashamed and ecstatic over their ferocity; desperately holding each other with a tenderness matching the rapacity. For years after that he would be reminded of the intensity of the tenderness, as never again would he experience the same sensation with any other woman. She had tears in her eyes and disengaged herself to say laughingly, "We don't have to remain here, you know."

The master bedroom turned out to be unexpectedly stylish, all the more so after the smelly, dingy entrance of the building. They dispensed with foreplay. She was one of those rare women, as he was to find out in the days to come, with whom one did not have to go through the sometimes tedious ritual if one did not feel like it. With her it was all or nothing. At times the foreplay would be a whole act of lengthy lovemaking all by itself when they would deploy all their inventiveness and ingenuity, attempting to surpass through such gestures their otherwise bland quotidian. Or it would be superfluous. They would reach for each other immediately. He would know that she had been thinking of him all the time they were away from each other, just as he had been thinking of her, and that throughout those long hours, they both in their imaginations had already made love with each other a hundred times.

She was insatiable of course, as insatiable as Geneviève had been during the days of their euphoria and as all the other women he had known. No woman ever is not, if she is frank about it. When they finally lay wrapped in each other, he knew, although the setting was unfamiliar, that he had *found himself*, reached his true self, however difficult it would be to explain to anyone what it was he felt. It was as if he had attained grace. Never again did he want to lose this sense of the authentic and the genuine and the real that, he now understood, had been lacking in his life and which he now experienced with an acuity that almost hurt.

He felt at peace with himself and became indulgent towards others, towards Geneviève and the boys. Perhaps they were missing him as much as he was missing them. Perhaps he was also at fault; had failed them as husband and father. After all, he had left them behind, knowing very well none of them could have followed him. He should take a few days off before classes reconvened, now that his debts were to a great extent paid, and fly over and see them. He should look up his widowed father, who was probably lonely in his village and perhaps bring him back here for a few weeks.

He never did. The life he was leading held him back. For there was not only Elsbietta but also Ulla to whom he dared not say anything but kept on seeing as before.

With Elsbietta, "to water the plants" became a term to express their desire for each other. "Shall we go water the plants?" Sometimes it was yes, and off they would go, rejuvenated by an elation and newly found energy. Somehow, after that first afternoon of love, the office had become off limits. It was only later, with the sobering effect of reflection, that they had both individually realized what risk they had taken that day.

They devised a whole mechanism of leaving separately and meeting later. As he would depart from the building, already inhabited by a warmth and trepidation he could not control, he would feel, as love always makes one feel, transplanted onto another plane, much above common mortals and their petty preoccupations.

Sometimes, however, it was “No, I have to meet the children.” Talking about spouses, during that initial period, was taboo. They did not want to hurt each other, and also did not want to taint this magical universe they had created by mentioning people who had failed them earlier and thus were not magical.

He was to learn the apartment well. It belonged to a cousin of Elsbietta, a biochemist who had obtained a six-month grant to do research in a hospital in Toronto. If all went well, he hoped to remain in Canada and so had taken his wife and children with him. In the meantime, Elsbietta took care of the apartment, making sure, besides watering the plants, that monthly bills were paid and so forth. There was a sense of solidarity in this society which no longer existed in the West. Except perhaps in the villages such as his father’s, none of the people he knew, and certainly not Geneviève, would have taken on such a responsibility. The owner would have hired a company or *paid* an individual, whether related to him or not, to do the job.

The bedroom set was white lacquered Louis XV with gold trim and the furniture in the living room equally refined. Elsbietta explained that her mother was the daughter of a count; the effects in this apartment had belonged to her grandfather the Count. The bedroom set was magnificent, she knew, and many times, during a very difficult period, her cousin and his wife had talked of selling it. The Count? He had perished at Auschwitz. The Germans had attempted to exterminate not only the Jews but the whole intelligentsia, the entire upper crust in her country, a fact not always known, she explained.

She ended up giving him a key to the apartment, to facilitate his comings and goings. He got in the habit of coming to the apartment early to look around. He felt he was learning more, or just as much, about this society by studying this apartment as he would by roaming the streets of the city or getting to know locals. And it is probably through what he saw in that apartment that he learned most about the country.

It was especially the books on the shelves in the living room that amazed him. There were cheap editions of chemistry books in the local language; a great number of them, books that had been used again and again. That was natural. But then there were these other books in German, in hardbound leather with gold page ends. They were mostly philosophy books in ancient German lettering. Beth had told him once the Count had studied philosophy in Heidelberg.

The whole repertoire of the history of ideas seemed to stand before him. And now, looking at those books, which had survived war and Communism, it was as if he was looking at the whole of European culture, preserved here, encapsulated, just as the white lacquered bedroom set had been preserved as a memento to a way of life elevated to the scale of art. It was as if while the postindustrial Western world had moved on to some postmodern state, eerie and incomprehensible, here, the essence of what was true Western high culture had remained intact, almost arrested. This was something, he thought, that those living in the so-called free world throughout the years of what is now simplistically labeled the Cold War did not know, could not have surmised.

It was as if the real Europe was here, the Europe of his childhood and school days, which his elders had wanted fixated in his psyche through their moral teachings and the many courses they had made him take in school and at university. On the contrary, it had vanished, at a rate he had not been able to assess, so accelerated had the changes been since the end of World War II.

And so in the apartment one reached through stairs smelling of urine, he would lose himself deep

in reflection. Things fell into perspective the way they had not in London. There was also the benefit of distance of course; he could see clearly things he had not before, because of proximity, things concerning himself, his family, the U.K., Europe, and currents in history. It was there, in that apartment, surrounded by books by Nietzsche and Kant and free from enslaving icons of the postmodern age, that he thought out his next novel almost in its entirety.

Thus sometimes he would not even hear her open the door but would find her in front of him. She would have put on the perfume she had been wearing since their relationship began. It was a very sophisticated—and probably expensive—perfume, introducing a potent whiff of urbanity; an urbanity that had of course been denied her throughout the Communist era. She was now carrying the sophistication with a naturalness and enthusiasm that betrayed how much of bourgeois life she must have missed throughout the period; the candor was disarming. She would invariably have on one of those strict-looking suits career women all over the world have adopted. He would start undressing her right away, and each time she would look taken aback: despite her ardor she was a very timid person at heart. Like all men who are in love, he would tell himself that the woman he loved was a bundle of contradictions. He never overcame the timidity in her. But he enjoyed offending her sense of propriety. As he undressed her he would just as immediately take her on the sofa, or wherever was closest. They could not wait.

Since their relationship began she had also started wearing black lingerie and she was very beautiful in it. She was not aware of the fact, this gem of a woman, and sometimes it would bring tears to his eyes, give him the sentiment that all this was too good to be true and that she would not be his for long.

If only they had both been unattached, he thought once, it would be so easy. They would cohabit now and probably get married some time before he left, and he would take her back to London.

It was Ulla again who arranged his return trip. Her secretary made the reservations for both of them, as Ulla was also leaving for good for Stockholm. They left on the same airline flight for their first leg of travel, taking leave of each other at the Frankfurt airport to go to their respective gates and destinations.

As soon as he waved goodbye to Ulla, he felt relieved, almost to his own surprise. When his classes were over, he had moved, at her suggestion, to her spacious apartment, as it had seemed the sensible thing to do after all the complaints he had made about his own tiny one. Yet these few weeks with her had been as constricting as marriage. He had been fed up listening to her platitudes. Behind the gloss that the position of “press attaché” gave her, which she unguardedly shed at home, secure at last, she thought, in his undivided attention, she was a simple village girl from a small island in Sweden. She was going back to her parents’ farm for the summer vacation.

Of course Ulla had been young. He was approaching that age, he realized, when the attention of a young woman is irresistible. So many of his friends had acceded to that phase, sometimes making fools of themselves over women much younger than themselves.

And Ulla had been helpful. Ever since he had been a very young man he had come to realize that women were not immune to his charms; that thanks to his looks, he could get a lot of things done. Women would just do those things for him, in fact would even compete with each other to do them.

So he had gotten used to letting women organize his life. That had been the initial basis of his relationship with Geneviève. It had been natural to let Ulla do much of the planning for him.

At the Frankfurt airport, as soon as he was on his own amid the multitudes who passed him by and the luxurious goods on display in the tax-free shops he looked at without seeing, he started missing his Beth. Suddenly a sense of void invaded him. There was nothing he could do to stop it. It would remain with him no matter what he did, and only made itself felt less while he wrote his articles.

He went and bought a postcard to send to her. "My love," he wrote, "my love." Then he looked around but was unable to find a post office to send the card. He was not accustomed to airports after all and panicked that he would miss his flight, so vast the area suddenly seemed to him. He gave up searching, and so the card went with him to the airplane and to London. He would never send it.

She had been such a loving person, full of concern for her man in a way the Western European woman had forgotten long ago. Attentive to his every whim, trying to make him as comfortable as possible, ever the nourisher, she had always made him eat or drink something she had brought or prepared on the spot. She had endeared herself to him once he had gotten to know her as he would never have expected when he was merely desiring her.

Sitting among the crowds waiting to board he wondered what had gone wrong. There had of course never been any discussion between them of a future together. She could not leave her teenaged children, and he knew that Geneviève did not want a divorce. Without any formal education, his wife had exploited to the utmost being a French woman in the U.K., and now owned and ran a public relations company called *Courtoisie*. Yet she was enough of a *petite bourgeoise* to think that she needed the respectability of marriage. She was getting on in years as well and the prospects of a second marriage, which she would otherwise welcome, as she was disappointed in him, would not be that bright for her.

There were people he knew or heard of, or read about, who left their families without any scruples, or guilty consciences, to build new lives. It had been tacitly agreed between Elsbjeta and himself that neither one of them was like these people. Besides, she was too much of a pillar of her society to want to leave, a fact of which he became cognizant only with time. Yet, she did not ask him to extend his contract and stay.

They would talk for long hours. They both wanted to know so much about each other, wished to learn everything there was to know. Now that summer had come, it got dark much later and she did not rush home. Her children were at the age when they were always with friends, and her husband worked very late.

Her husband had been a big shot during the last years of the Communist regime and now he was an even bigger shot, which seemed almost a natural outcome. This, he could not understand and he told her. He realized now that if the Berlin Wall crumbled in 1989, the walls of Communism in her country had fallen much before that. She tried not to answer in clichés, or to retort that there was much that *she* did not understand about the decadent West, which was the countenance most of her countrymen adopted. She tried to remember the manner of discourse she had learned in the West before her marriage. It was not easy. Like memories of her grandfather the Count which she had been unable to voice publicly, she had suppressed much.

From what she related it was evident that being of the *nomenklatura* in the '80s had meant being part of the emergent new group, the "rising capitalists," as she mockingly called them. It had allowed

these people to acquire a good command of English, go on trips abroad, become familiar with ways Western, ease their way into a new lifestyle.

“But,” he tried to reason, “capitalism should mean liberalism, which is not necessarily a good thing, when you think of some of the connotations; yet these people have retained absolute power as Communist leaders.”

“Yes,” she acquiesced, “it is as Communist leaders with absolute powers that some expropriated the funds they had under their control as civil servants and which now serve as capital for their private enterprises.”

She knew such people and she also knew that they would never be prosecuted. She was aware moreover that some of these funds had been or were still being diverted abroad, with the factories or firms they had sustained allowed to rot. Houses were being bought in Miami, or in Knightsbridge, “just in case,” she said. Just in case Communism came back.

He was not convinced. All this was so far beyond ethics that that was not what worried him. “These people should have been considered as being of the *ancien régime*,” he said, “and kicked out. That’s what bothers me. These people ought to be tried as having brought about the demise of socialism. They are being hailed instead as the new rulers. Sooner or later there is bound to be a reaction. There will be a growing malaise. Social unrest is sure to follow.”

She dismissed his suggestions as simplistic Western logic. “You do not know our society,” she said. “There may be reprisals but not in the way you think. It is more in the manner of settling accounts. The people are happy with, even nostalgic for, Communist leaders. They are nostalgic for the steady jobs and steady incomes of the socialist regime. They did not know then what they were missing. In the beginning socialism gave them hope and optimism. Many refused to give up that hope. They are unhappier now that a whole vista has opened for them, giving them a glimpse of what they cannot obtain, and showing them they have been mistaken.”

It was in instances such as this that he would realize how much she cared for her country and considered herself part of it. Had she ever regretted coming back to it years ago to get married? Had she not wished she had stayed out during the Cold War years, as quite a number of her compatriots had done, when she had the possibility to do so? He never asked because he sensed it was a weak point. They had come back, she had once explained, because her father the Ambassador had fallen out of favor with the Party and been called back. What was the reason for his disgrace? What had the lighthearted girl from continental campuses then gone through during the long years of the socialist experience? She never told him and now he would never know.

She showed him family photographs in albums they had come across in the apartment. He saw her looking like a fairy in her wedding dress; and her husband, he had to admit, had been very handsome in his youth. For a long time, it seemed from the photographs, she retained her lightheartedness and optimism. Then came the children. The still images reflected the heavy step she acquired. It was natural of course. The miracle was that she should have retained her figure after four births and still succeeded in doing academic research with four children.

She had protested that she had, after all, gained weight. But it was a fishing-for-compliment kind of protest. She was happy to be coming out of the torpor into which she had sunk, and he was happy that he was bringing it about through his love for her, helping her to come out of her shell.

Despite such moments they never dreamt of a life together. Had she merely been realistic, or had something gone sour? Sometimes, he thought, as he did that day at the Frankfurt airport, that his Beth had judged him and found him wanting. That is what hurt him most. He could not be sure but he had such an impression.

Things had gone sour, of course, because he had kept on seeing Ulla; in fact, kept on living with her. Beth was aware of it, and in time became bitter and jealous. The bitterness and jealousy were solely the result of her profound, limitless love for him, he saw now. How could he not have perceived it then, not appreciated how much she had cared for him? She became diffident, difficult to communicate with. He told himself that he was no longer interested in this new person, not wanting to see that she was only waiting for him to apologize and tell her that he loved her and her only. One day, probably not wishing to talk against Ulla herself, she called the crowd he went around with "*ce petit monde qui n'est qu'un demi-monde*"—this crowd made up of only half-respectable people—and he got angry. It was the parlance of another epoch, one not at all attuned to modern sensibilities, or rather, lack of sensibilities. Yet she had been right. There were too many adventurers and holdovers from the West masquerading as artists, writers, or journalists trailing this group of people to whom he was linked through Ulla. But this had been the Ambassador's daughter speaking and he took umbrage.

After all, he rationalized to himself, he had never told her he loved her and her only. From the very beginning, verbalizing what they felt had been both too little and too much. They didn't need it. And even after their "quarrel," he continued visiting the apartment at times when he knew she would come to water the plants. Something, perhaps what is simply called love, kept them from totally going their own ways. And of course, they made up. They had too little time remaining.

Yes, he had not actually made her any promise, but his persistence in seeing Ulla had been a moral breach of promise, he recognized that clearly, later, as he wrote his articles.

What had both annoyed and hurt Beth, he realized, was not so much the fact that he went on seeing Ulla herself, was not so much jealousy, but the fact that he had gone on with this crowd, and that he had, in so doing, somehow belittled her way of life. He never intended to do so, it must have been unconscious and automatic.

While Beth spent quiet days with her family, or shut herself up trying to finish her comparative study of Western and Eastern European poets during the Cold War period, instead of asking her to leave everything to be with him, he had been attending parties given in honor of guests who had visited the capital. Sometimes these were celebrities, sometimes only correspondents of major—and minor—Western dailies or news agencies. For him, an unsuccessful author with only one novel published, and no prospects of a career in any other field, making these connections was important, as Ulla put it; they could help him place his unpublished second novel. They could help him make a name for himself in Britain. Moreover, one met all kinds of people at these receptions, sometimes high-placed officials from major Western capitals. Such contacts could help later on.

What mattered at these parties was to be newsworthy. One was only interested in newsworthy people and the only effort worth spending was in an attempt to become newsworthy oneself. Shutting oneself up to write seemed neurotic.

Yes, the glitter of these parties must have gone to his head, made him believe he was superior to Beth and her husband who were not seen at these parties, and made him neglect her. But it was the way

one would neglect one's mother or sister or daughter, not a real neglect, just the kind of conduct arising from taking that person for granted because one felt that person to be so close and the ties with that person to be so secure, so strong.

There had of course never been any explanation of this sort. She had resented his blind attraction for these parties and seen it as a weakness on his part. More than once had she said that he should take advantage of being away from family and friends to write his third novel as she was sure his second would eventually get published. But he did not listen to her.

And so he had lost her, she who had loved him so much and who had perhaps been the love of his life. At the farewell party given for departing faculty, she had let him go, not even sarcastic, with an impenetrable smile that concealed whether she had become totally indifferent or was deeply hurting inside. She had shed tears at her happiest, and now that he was leaving she was acting with a placidity and callousness he had not known her capable of.

How far they had traveled since that day when the hue of the snow had descended on them! No woman was ever again to reach for him with such *élan* and impudicity, not with such a combination.

Amid the luxurious goods on display in the tax-free shops he looked at without seeing, he asked for her forgiveness. Without her he felt orphaned. He remembered that he had never bought her any consequential gift, and wanted to buy something very expensive for her now. He did not because he knew it would have the fate of the postcard. Then boarding time came. On the plane, he cried like a small child, putting on, to hide the fact, those dark cloth eyeshades given on transatlantic flights that Ulla had passed on to him that morning. A little while later, over lunch, he started chatting with the passenger sitting next to him. This was a businessman who had paid a brief visit to the capital and who knew nothing either of the region or the people.

The series was a huge success, leading the way to many other offers and engagements. It even appeared as if his second novel would get published soon. He knew now that behind the success of every man lies the memory of a loved one left behind, haunting him.

He did not send the clippings to her. He could not decide whether she had judged him and found him wanting, or whether she had merely been offended by his conduct. He could not decide whether he had been one of many allowing her to survive the long years of socialism, or whether the candor and the elation had meant he was the first, and that he had wounded her very, very deeply.