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Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

‘A Sacred Weed’ (1918)

Johannes Semper

Translated by Adam Cullen

She paused in the centre of the room. Listened.

Through the open window, she could hear the cascade’s monotonous roar like the muffled bass of a distant organ, accompanied by the *pizzicato* of clinking glasses and peppered cadences of laughter coming from the adjacent room.

Approaching the large mirror with short steps, she observed:

An orange-yellow veil draped over her coal-black hair and from its shadow, her eyes, wide and naïve, appeared timid. It should have been a purple veil that she’d stretch to lift high above her head and wave in the breeze to the rhythm of dance steps.

She recognized in her appearance something reminiscent of Zuloaga’s *Señoritas* whom she’d seen in a recent exhibition.

Sliding her hands along the curve of her hips, she turned to profile. Her stubby button nose dispelled the illusion of a *Señorita*. She disliked it, though the unpleasantness was softened by black curls cascading from her cheeks to the white of her neck.

She leaned in close to the mirror to inspect the pale Nordic eyes rimmed by sets of long, brownish lashes beneath dark, arcing brows.

Gazing into her own eyes at length, she scrutinized them until she felt a little disconcerted before the frozen reality in her reflection.

Bright laughter erupted from the adjacent room again, irritating her.

She heard tipsy cheers.

Sitting down on a chair, she rested her hands in her lap and felt like a discarded object.

Why had she been invited along on this excursion when she only knew a couple of its party? How could she enjoy Imatra when not one of the university students had noticed her withdraw from their company and disappear into another room?

She looked out onto the Finnish landscape. Here were yellow-green dots dabbed with a Japanese brush between the dark-green tops of spring pines; in the distance stood solitary bluish coppices. Children played on the grass. The windless, still nature exuded endless melancholy, listless.

Just as she approached the windowsill to sniff wild violets arranged in a squat vase, the door opened.

Ado stood there for a moment, regarding the young woman at the window with surprise. Then, as if dispelling a slight illusion, he pulled the door shut behind him and came closer.

‘Is the young lady daydreaming?’

‘Why on earth did you invite me here? I’m truly a fifth wheel. You all drink and amuse yourselves, but where is my place in your company?’

The student set his cognac glass on the table, fetched a chair, and sat close to the young woman, starting to agree with her on the sense of the excursion.

Wine was soon brought from the other room when the students there began leaving, growing restless indoors when it was springtime outside. They trickled out: young men in grey and vibrant colors, canes in hand and hats on head, young women in white and yellow – tiny chicks emerging from cracking eggshells.

Oh, that double *kümmel*¹ of spring and wine! It makes the blood rush and the eyes twinkle. The woods ring in response with unfettered bells of wantonness.

So what that some students, chubby and genteel, entirely fail to blend with the pine-trunk decor, formality having soaked into their dress: to them, every tree and bush is a posh lady at a café who blushes when you extend your elbows.

So what that some have brought mounted movements? Others are sprier and more disposed to run and shout, the newly verdant alder branches slapping their faces.

And in the end, not one feels out of place in that landscape. They find joy in the drifting butterflies, white, yellow, and brown, which are playfully pursued; in frogs the colour of pine bark, crawling lazily across the leaves. Long lizards slide silently through last summer's dried grass. The beetles still shine, wearing freshly stitched costumes. A starling's cheerful whistle sprinkles over you from some direction.

The group of students has scattered: some sit atop the hill, some at the base of its slope, others on the riverbank, gazing at the perpetually coaxing cascades.

Alla and Ado are still inside, so wrapped up in their yarn of conversation and coquetry that they know nothing of the others. Nor do they want to know, as the rest of the party has, in fact, encroached as an unnecessary burden.

'To your health and mine!'

And the glasses ring brightly as they meet, making the two laugh. Alla's lips are as red as a fresh wound. But the young man only tastes them in his fantasies. Alla squeezes her eyes shut and murmurs that she is intoxicated by everything, everything. When she opens them again, she leaves her eyelids low. The Nordic mien has disappeared for now: black molten metal sparkles in its place.

Yet, Ado is tormented by the glint of irony that comes through the drooping eyelids. The young woman giggles incessantly, metal-bright, then lights a cigarette, boasting that now, at university, she suddenly feels more grown. Ooh, she can even blow smoke through her nostrils. Ooh, how intelligent she wishes to be someday, much more intelligent than this Ado is right now. Right now, she is still silly and naïve, albeit an adult. Imagine that: a young woman of nineteen already, no longer a schoolgirl. But age is intimidating! When she looks into the mirror, she first checks to see whether the first crow's feet have formed at the corners of her eyes. She massages her face to keep wrinkles from appearing. A girlfriend of hers once said that age is best judged by the neck. Imagine that: the neck, just like horses by their teeth! And she hadn't cared for it in the least. She asks Ado – if his vision is clear – to look and see if there are any creases on her neck.

When the boy leans in to check, she jerks her head back and the cautionary irony reappears in her eyes. And then that laugh again, sharply piercing, coming from the shadows of black curls.

Abruptly turning serious:

'But now imagine me in four years' time! Oh, how dreadful: I'll walk the streets carrying a strap of books under my arm. I'll teach children. Haha, a schoolmarm! Me? The lines that'll no doubt appear on my face then! Perhaps I'll even don spectacles that hang from a black cord and enter the classroom damp, chilled to the bone, and with hollowed cheeks. You know, I feel as if all schoolteachers have hollowed cheeks and damp, unusually cold skin, as if they inhabit a cellar. My black hair will be even frizzier, and I'll look like a total owl, as my boyfriend already says now. Tell me, do I have an owl face? And in just four years' time! It makes chills run down my spine. You know, some nights I dream that I'm an actual owl: ugly, disgusting, screeching like a child being pinched. The ugliness wakes me up and I go to the mirror to stare in horror. I can't fall back asleep afterward.'

That was several times now she'd mentioned some kind of a boyfriend. Who might he be, Ado wished to know.

Oh, he was a very silly, milk-white, flushed-cheeked boy who always loved to send long letters written in green ink. He was fighting in the war now, apparently. He'd invited Alla to join the effort, too: scrap that idea of graduating from university (studying only makes you ugly) and come to work as a nurse instead. She even considered doing so at one point, but when dressed in a nurse's uniform, she found it didn't suit her look one bit – particularly, her unruly hair refused

to stay straight beneath the white kerchief. And how can you have a nurse with messy hair?! So, she abandoned the idea.

The background of the boy who wrote in green ink remained quite obscure to Ado, though the young woman's candour only increased the longer they sat and imbibed.

Finally, they rose and went outside.

The sun poured yellow wine from a blue crystal glass, quenching the springtime surroundings. Lustfully, nature's womb had spread wide and the green trees stiffened.

The Vuoksi spun frothy water over the boulders and chunks of eroded cliff, winding through the pines until its arm wrapped around the craggy landscape's mighty chest in a heaving embrace – *Vallinkoski* manifested.

Frolicking, cavorting, and chasing each other in turns, the student and his young woman ran down to the foot of the hill, where they both suddenly became solemn, sober, and silent in the face of that roaring power.

Everything here seethed, frothed, and rioted. Great threads of black velvet unwound from an invisible spindle and furled together to form a giant mass that smashed into the boulders and bluffs at the riverbend, shot up into the sunlight as a rainbow-riddled pillar of foam, and then wound back together below as white, roiling tears to repeat the same game all over again.

Here, speech was like a whisper from an echoing cave.

Ado gazed at the foamy rainbows and noticed the green bands. They looked not like the glint of sunlight on tears, but an unbroken green thread coming from Imatra above and flowing onward... It was like the green ink on that curious boy's...

Was everything that was casually revealed up there behind the wine glasses true? That Alla and the boy had been together the whole last summer, and the summer before that, day and night in the countryside, somewhere in the woods, somewhere in haylofts, in haystacks? That he was handsome, strong, and bold? That there is nothing lovelier than giving yourself up beside a stream where you just swam, bodies still moist from the invigorating water? And afterward to bask and lounge in the sunshine like little salamanders? Was it all true?

What duality, Ado mused: on the one hand utter naïveté, childishness, innocence, and on the other, a wealth of experience and worldly wisdom? Was it true, or merely a pose of truth? Or something akin to Daphnis and Chloe?

Dusk was already falling when the group of students came to Imatra Bridge.

Although the cascades thrashed and roared in their bed of steep cliffs below, twirling tar-black trunks against submerged stones and turning them into a frothy white flour that attempts in a futile way to rise against the current, the shadows of those on the bridge stretched distinctly and motionlessly across the water, undisturbed by the riotous struggle. Cool air rose from the crashing, entwining currents.

The students took in the scene for many long minutes, as if frozen in place by enchantment. When they finally walked away, Alla remained, tilting over the guardrail.

One of the students called out:

'Look, look, a young woman leaning over life's abyss! If I were an artist, I'd certainly paint that pose!'

Another replied:

'Yes, just that – a pose. The pose would be nice if she weren't aware of it. But she's not so naïve in the least. She thinks we're a photographer's cameras. Let's go!'

Ado only heard fragments through the roar of the cascades.

True, he thought, this young woman isn't naïve. Otherwise she wouldn't appreciate the value of poses. But now, I can tell she senses my gaze upon her.

The pair lingered behind the others again.

They climbed down from the bridge, sat on a large granite boulder and watched the cascades from that vantage. In the evening light, the bridge and those upon it cast a strange shadow

over the dark waters further along, scattering golden flashes across the surface that resembled steel mesh. The bundles of olive-green thread folded as they approached jagged underwater barriers and crashed into them, crumpling into sparkling white wine.

Then, they resembled the tangled arms of thousands of drowning souls, reaching upward and screeching wildly in the throes of death. Even the mightiest log would be a mere stalk if tossed in, pulled straight to the bottom by the thousands of hands. It was a giant den of snakes charging with a roar, at the sight of which one would freeze in extraordinary enchantment.

'I could leap in. Oh, how I wish to cast myself into the water!' Alla exclaimed.

'Do you know what would become of you? Five minutes later, all that'd remain downstream in the placid waters would be an arm or a leg, your skull crushed against the base of the cliff.'

'No, I'd never wish for such an ugly death!'

A young boy appeared, peddling postcards, albums, and pocketknives as mementos.

They bought them all.

Then, the pair rose and strolled downstream along the craggy shore until the cascades ended and spread into smooth, placid waters.

It was a peculiar evening. The sun already hung in the crowns of the pines, descending gently through the reddish branches. The shore of the sky glowed. Waves of warmth undulated in the air like lost flocks of invisible caresses and embraces.

To Ado, the young woman bathed in evening light was like a vision one should not touch: even the slightest brush could dispel Alla's ethereality and transform her into an experienced woman conscious of her every movement. And as many times as he clasped the young woman's hand, so many times did he feel his *own* hand more than hers. Like colliding with a *mask*.

Alla, meanwhile, was captivated by the gorgeous moment into which she wished to dissolve and disappear. She felt a vague nervousness before her companion, a sense of guilt that she wished to drown in the boy's enrapturing gaze, in the beautiful evening that draped lust in every direction, and in the cascades' roar, monotonous, calming, lulling.

They stopped next to a burly pine.

'Let's carve something wonderful into the bark to remember, for eternal memory!'

'Let's do it at the same time, across from each other!'

'Let's!'

'Just a single word, the most beautiful of all!'

Their pocketknives peeled rough bark from the trunk before plunging into the sap-soft cambium.

'*Amor*' appeared on one side, 'Alla' on the other.

The young man tingled with his candour. What was this *amor*, though – 'love' or 'I am loved'?

'So, you love love more than you do people?'

'Yes!' the young woman replied.

'And that means you also love the state of being loved?'

'What's wrong with that? It's so grand!'

Her gauze jacket flapping in the wind, she'd run to the edge of the cliff that protruded furthest into the sea, rising amidst a maze of scattered skerries, and now stretched her arms high above her head like flowers reaching for the sun and sang her dearest song: Grieg's *Jeg elsker dig*...²

Half-awake, she could still hear it. She'd stretched her bare arms above her pillow, through the bars of the headboard and into the sunlight.

The light's weight bore down on her eyelids; they were painful to open. Still, it was sweet and sublime to allow her neck, young breasts, and bare arms to bathe in the rays. It gave her sensual pleasure when the edges of her fingers appeared transparent when held up to the light, or when a tickling ray slid unexpectedly through a hole in her blouse's lace.

Alla's rented room was that of an ordinary university student: long, narrow, and sparsely furnished. Perfume bottles, powder boxes, manicure tools, and other toiletries stood on her dressing table. Next to them was a little black box that contained an array of amulets and keepsakes: wilted blossoms, love letters, loose ribbons, scraps of paper, a railway ticket.

An abundance of nudity caught the eye: above the bed hung a reproduction of a Styka painting – a young body, a shyly enticing sparkle in her hetaera-like eyes, outstretched arms suspending a dark purple veil over the bursting beauty of her breasts; similar postcards were tacked here and there to the wall, and a whole pile of them showing body art was scattered across the desk. Alla would have acquired Rodin's *The Kiss* if she were wealthier, but she could only sample it in reproduction for now. The whole room could have been a pagan temple of the flesh, sacred and sublime, and she would dub it – the kissing room.

To lie this way in the sunlight, partaking of rum-filled chocolates, occasionally reading from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, pondering absolutely nothing, simply enjoying her state of being, the chrysanthemum in the vase, the bottle of Japanese-scented perfume, yes, even the coffee that the landlady delivered to her nightstand...

She suddenly heard someone crossing the narrow board outside her window below. Who could it be? The milkman? No, his high-booted footsteps fell as heavily as barrels in a milk cellar. The mailman? Yes, these were the nimble steps that always made her heart pound. She knew them all too well.

The landlady brought to her bedside a bluish envelope inscribed in green ink.

She unfolded a long, long letter. It contained everything – from sentimentalism to heroic feats in a trench, bullets whining above like mosquitoes, and shrapnel screeching a Judgement Day cacophony. That rosy-cheeked boy crouching in a potato furrow, squirming in the mud like a fly on flypaper! And now, he was returning from all of that on leave. Oh, tomorrow, already! Tomorrow, here!

Jangling again. Then, a knock on the door.

When Ado approached to greet the young woman, she extended five long, pretty fingers from under the blanket. Then, her dressing as always: Ado's back was turned towards the bed, and he was handed a book.

It was Balmont's collection of poetry.

The young man read several aloud while Alla attended to her toilet. Finally, he paused at a poem titled 'The Mermaid'.³

'Here's one of the finest in the collection. Listen!'

'And you enjoy that!' The boy could sense the young woman's eyes widen behind him.

'Yes, it's a nice poem! And the mermaid herself is very interesting, too!'

'Interesting, interesting! Well, there's a word I'd never have imagined to hear you say! Could there be any other word that's so... Truly, I'd never have expected it from you!'

At first, Ado couldn't understand why the word irritated the young woman so. Then, he realized. Her outspokenness discomfited him.

This tall, slender, dark-eyed young man named Ado penetrated the deepest corners of Alla's heart, occasionally making her truly afraid. Her eyes were peculiar: sometimes a ghastly, enticing, daemonic fire burned within them; other times, they brimmed with an intolerant scorn, injurious, which she wished to banish with all her persuasive feminine means. When she spotted him on the street, an enervating pulse sometimes struck her knees and her gait, her every movement, became disjointed. Not once had Alla walked past the house where Ado lived: she was even aware that the neighbouring apartment was occupied by a young woman who took Latin lessons from a certain university student, for otherwise they wouldn't be seated across from each other at the table at a certain hour, and what other lessons could a young woman be taking from a young man? When they bumped into each other at the theatre or a social gathering, Alla would avoid meeting the young man's gaze. She didn't even look up in conversation, feeling strangely shy and simultaneously the effect that modesty and submission exerted. But then, she would suddenly

shake off every trace of submissiveness, extend her proud, pliant body defiantly, disparagingly, lean haughtily against the back of the sofa, and, narrowing her eyes sarcastically, laugh a spasmodic laugh, sprayed like hail against tin. Occasionally, just as now, she would seize upon a casually uttered word, reevaluate it, and fling it back with taunts and jeers, using it to confuse, as if in revenge.

But when Alla had dressed and Ado turned around, the mood was unlike what it was with his back turned. The young woman treated him to everything within reach, handing him new bottles of perfume and flowers in a vase to sniff, showing him new postcards and the edge of the fresh letter written in green ink.

Yes, now she could look him in the eyes without feeling afraid.

They had a long and lively chat about nothing of consequence, competing with the chirping of sparrows beneath the eaves that came through the open window.

Periodically, growing absentminded and leaping from one topic to another, the young woman would rise and rummage in a drawer or sift through postcards and books.

Then, her movement would freeze into a stance suspended in aspic, as if to allow him to sample the graceful, incidentally adopted poses.

The young woman would trail off at the windowsill, next to the chest, above a flower vase. Searching, searching for something on the bookshelf and then remain sitting there. Even sticking a finger into her mouth.

Perceiving this artistic trait, the young woman's consciousness of the beauty of a gesture, Ado grew excited, for feigning naïveté (and that is what those assumed poses and movements were) was the most dangerous game.

Alla instinctively sensed Ado's nearly imperceptible flicker of emotions, too, and their whole interaction became a tightrope dance: one tiny misstep, a next-to-indecipherably conveyed truth, frank, undisguised, unacted, and everything would collapse.

They often stalked each other like predators; often, a verbal game would begin, and the words could pierce perilously to the core like hot water on a tooth's delicate nerve ending. But then it would all recede and turn as innocent and mundane as walking, eating, sitting.

They soon went out to wander the city's more attractive sites, galleries, and museums together, just as they'd often done. Ado believed they were connected by an appreciation for art: they felt much more intimate when delighted by a violinist or a pianist at a concert.

Even later discussions of the concert they'd attended lifted their good spirits. Both enjoyed Nordic music above all, especially Grieg, Sibelius.

They often spoke of modern dance, which both believed was the finest form of art.

'Oh, I could lose my mind from the elation dance gives me. Duncan, Preobrazhenskaya, Pavlova... Ah, and take the latter! How she controls herself, rises into the air, leaving only the teensiest tip of toenail on the ground, how she sweeps you along, captivates, passes through the heart, through the soul! Oh, it cannot be put into words!'

'When did you see them?'

'Well, I haven't seen any of them personally, of course.' Alla replied. 'But I've read about them in newspapers. And what was written there was something delightful, immediately intoxicating.'

Alla was fascinated by the abstract concept of art, by its point and meaning. What's more, her understanding developed whenever the art explored a human subject, or when the subject, especially their erotic side, was in the art's foreground.

To her, life, beauty, and art were, in fact, the three faces of eroticism.

Women knew no art but erotic art, and even in that, appreciated only the erotic – Ado's presumption became a conviction when they took a stroll through the Hermitage.

First, they stopped before the sculpture of Cupid and Psyche.

'Ah, what fine bodily contours! Like living statues!'

Alla seemed to like the sculpture almost without reservation. They stood before the stonemasonry for several minutes while she inspected the bodies' individual proportions, finding one to have legs that were too thick and the other too short in turn.

There was little in the painting galleries that could compare. Cranach's madonnas lacked eyelashes. And oh, how she adored long, dark eyelashes that cast shadows over the face! No, Cranach didn't know how to paint! Furthermore, those excessively long fingers were rather unnatural.

And these? What kind of blubberballs were they? Rubens's women. And this was meant to be beauty? Even attractive to some? Perhaps even to Ado? Just look at how the women's fingernails widened at the tip; slim fingernails are much more appealing.

Rembrandt's *Danaë*. What a dreadful woman! What thighs! Like tree trunks. That's not attractive, is it?

After working their way through several rooms, they finally came to the Spanish gallery where they wearily sat down on a red sofa. Clumps of visitors stood before the paintings, observing them. It was fascinating to pay attention to their faces, to their expressions of artistic reception. Alla mainly scrutinized the women's clothing, their hairstyles, the fashion of their dresses and shoes, praising the proportions of some bodies and criticizing those of others.

There was truly a *single* criterion, Ado realized, egotistical, by which Alla evaluated persons and artwork, originating from the era of manicures, pedicures, and fashion magazines. He now recalled that even at concerts, Alla enjoyed the violinist himself more than the piece he performed. And she only liked the performance insofar as it lulled her into a state of sweet lustfulness, into a fancy of romance.

Wait, wait, Ado thought, for all that, I do not wish to consider your figure – tall, slender, winding – as an ideal! Oh, I am a hundred times more attracted to healthy women whose trunk-like legs are prepared to carry the sins of the whole world to the gates of hell and whose Rubens-like wrists can lift you, the thin women, ten times, you women with the weight of three *poods*!⁴ Is my ideal perhaps the smiling, ruddy woman with cheeks so chubby they narrow her eyes, that mounded womb from which dozens of thickset clans can sprout, or those locks of hair that fall heavily like ripe fruit? And may her feet be as big as burdock leaves! And why shouldn't she have extremely long fingers, as slender as wax candles? And wide fingernails at their tips, like little lights?

Ado's daemon approached then, too, as timid as a thief and as ironic as Mephisto:

'Look at the fanatic being stabbed in the chest with a bayonet, Alla. I wonder how long his pants are beneath that long coat? It'd be ghastly if he weren't wearing any. The Russian priests are wearing knee-high boots, at least... And that lantern on the ground. It can only be burning fat, naturally, as I suppose they didn't have petroleum back then. I enjoy electrical lights the best, to tell the truth...'

The grey-clothed mummy-servant was already approaching with his little bell, informing them it was time to leave. Time once again to descend the long staircase between two shiny walls painted a frozen vanilla sauce with stripes of pink cream.

As they strolled along the bank of the Neva, Alla brought up the boy on the battlefield anew. But Ado showed no interest. Who knows, however – there could come a day when her walking companion's words swell and notes of jealousy begin to strum the young man's nerves.

There was a tingling in Alla's heart, but she decided then and there: Ado must never meet the officer, nor even find out about his visit.

'I'll be unable to meet you tomorrow and in the coming days,' Alla sighed.

'Why? Are you travelling? Preparing for exams?'

'Yes, I must go away. I received a letter this morning saying my mother is ill.'

Another day, after the lieutenant had rested in Alla's bed from his travels, the couple went out for a stroll.

This rosy-cheeked officer has somehow become a drowsy being who treats me as if he doesn't know me, Alla thought.

The young man used to be tall and straight-backed. His soft shadow of a moustache tickled titillatingly when they kissed, but now, there was a stiff haughtiness in his expression, infatuating at first but turning detestable over time.

It was like a spouse's accustomed sweetness, sensing by their side someone who fulfils all their wishes and desires, no matter what they might be.

And the abject impassiveness with which he rose from bed, stood before the mirror, and yawned! As if Alla were a lifeless item of furniture.

First of all, the young man should find his own apartment. She couldn't allow him to spend the night in hers as she had before, because of exams and so forth.

The lieutenant yielded to that demand casually as well, showing no offense to such treatment.

This infuriated Alla further. She steered the conversation to the Imatra excursion, embellishing every detail of her relationship with Ado, praising his keen understanding, his refined manners, and going so far as to gush about his taste, his dark eyes.

Gradually, the lieutenant started to show an interest in the topic, inquiring about various details. Finally, finally, Alla thought in delight.

She sang endless praises of the student's qualities, ones that people who studied at university had and officers lacked.

It was so delightful to eulogize one man before one and the other before the other, trying to stoke jealousy between them.

While on a stroll with the officer later, Alla suddenly recognized Ado's figure approaching on the opposite side of the avenue. Yes, that was him: grey coat and grey hat.

A searing current coursed through her body. She felt the lieutenant squeeze her wrist. Yes, best to stop and stand before a display window; he wouldn't recognize her so easily from behind.

Fortunately, it was a flower shop.

'Be a doll, go inside and fetch me a red rose. But go down into the cellar, that's where they keep the prettiest. I'll wait here.'

Alla remained at the window when the officer entered the shop.

Ado had already crossed the street.

'You're here, I see. You haven't departed yet?'

'I meant to, but then I received another letter telling me my mother's condition has improved.'

Alla peered through the window pane. The shop was crowded, things could still play out well. But every moment was precious.

'You must excuse me, however. I'm in a hurry. I'll stop by your place tomorrow; we'll have a longer chat.'

'Which way are you headed? Ah, that way. No worry, I'm going in that direction, too.'

It was as if Alla were treading hot coals.

'Fine. But if you wish to be a good boy, then go into this flower shop first and buy me a red, red rose. It'd be a terrible shame if someone else were buying the prettiest right now. But go down into the cellar. There's a very, very large selection there.'

Aha, now was the time to disappear. Both were in the cellar.

She hurried onto a tram without looking back, just managing to grab onto the handrail.

Ado spent an entire day waiting for the young woman to visit. She entered his apartment when dusk was already falling.

'First, forgive me for not being outside the flower shop when you returned.'

'No, you must forgive me. I knew that you were in a hurry but there were very many customers in the cellar, and an officer and I nearly came to fisticuffs over a red rose as it was the very last big, burgundy flower left. His moustache was nothing but peach fuzz!'

'Hahaha. And what became of the rose?'

'I gave up in the end. Who knows what coquette's breast it might adorn now!'

The young woman pulled off her black leather gloves to reveal long, white fingers with sparkling, well-manicured nails, and extended them in greeting.

'Then even more so. I promised to explain something to you at greater length. But now, it turns out that was a mere expression.'

'Everything with you is purely an expression. But I do have something to explain to you in turn. I'll visit tomorrow to tell you.'

Ado himself had no idea what it might be. Still, that was how he felt.

'Ah, I believe I can guess!'

'What on earth could you guess? No, no, it's something entirely different!'

'Different? Does that mean it's something unpleasant? Serious? Ha, ha, ha! Me and serious? That'd be quite the jest. But who else is mixed up in it?'

How to reply to that? Ah, let it unfold! Allow a legend to sprout!

'A third!'

He knows now, he knows, Alla thought in alarm.

'And no more? Then it isn't what I think.'

'There are four, though there could well be more. Yet, that's neither here nor there. Tomorrow, I will reveal something strange and unexpected.'

'What could it possibly be? I truly don't know. Oh, but wait. Could it really? And now! Well, that would be quite the shock. My jaw would certainly drop. It'd be quite the joke; no, the tragicomedy. I might laugh myself to death.'

'And you truly believe that?'

'What, what? You can't even guess. What, tell me!'

'I know what you think.'

'It'd be bizarre if you were to know!'

'I'd bet I do. We're thinking the exact same thing.'

The wordplay, mutually provocative, continues along its path.

'I'd bet you're thinking the very same thing that I am thinking right now. Would you like me to say it?'

'Do!'

'But think for a moment. It'd be highly embarrassing for you if I were to speak it now.'

'Yes, you're right. Best not to, then.'

'Well, there you have it. There's no doubt.'

'If you genuinely plan to tell me tomorrow, then I don't know what I'll do. I'd simply laugh you out of the apartment!'

'And you are so bold as to think of me that way!'

The latter was spoken in anger. Alla poured a little comfort into the exchange.

'Strange, isn't it, that you can never know what a person is thinking. I certainly wouldn't know what to do if the serious question that you wish to discuss tomorrow is the same as mine. But you do not know what I am thinking. Right now, you might be thinking and speaking of something else, but tomorrow, you'll say exactly what I am thinking right now.'

'No, rest assured that the thought is identical. Everything you've just said only bolstered my conviction. Only one thing amazes me: how you could have come to such a belief. Have I given you any cause?'

'I don't know, but I thought... Regarding some circumstances... Sometimes...'

As they bid farewell:

'I'll await you tomorrow. You'll speak of the matter then? With me? Could it be so serious and tragic that we don't even extend a hand to each other afterward?'

It was said jokingly, as she was holding out her hand in farewell at the doorstep.

'It's entirely possible that we no longer will. Who knows what else might come', Ado said slowly as the young woman descended the stairs.

He locked the door, returned to his room, and lit an unfiltered cigarette. Then, he stopped in the middle of the space and burst out laughing.

Tomorrow, he would don a long coat, buy a bouquet of white roses from the same flower shop, go there, kneel before that holy virgin, declaim words of romance from the Sacred Heart, and then ask for the goddess's hand to walk their eternal journey through this world's vale of woe.

But then, suddenly:

You! You! You might believe, might dare to think for an instant, might perceive... You, who are full of lies... Is your opinion of yourself so great that you think you wear no mask? I despise you! That's what I came to tell you! I cannot stand you; I abhor you! Do you hear me? I hate your curly Jewish hair, your owl-like face with its stubby little nose like the knob on a teapot, your ugly mouth and stunted chin! I hate your tall, supple body! Your tiny brain, which is as empty and as helpless as a bit of mollusc! I hate your dresses, which wish to be short and youthful but are baggy, unattractive, and old when worn by you! I hate your voice when you drawl the word at the end of a sentence and flirt by way of it! Your taste in art, your aestheticism dictated by pathetic erotic instinct! How you pose naïveté, the shrewdness that you pointlessly veil in youth and ineptitude!

I even hate the powder that you sometimes apply down along your nose! I hate your room, cramped and empty, bookless and soulless! I hate your pose on the armchair, on the sofa, on the bed when you fold your long legs beneath you and act as if you're a little girl! I hate your little feet in your black patent shoes and your beautiful ink-stained fingers! I hate your laugh and your smile, your elation and enthrallment with all that is trivial, which I do not believe in the slightest. I hate your impertinent self-conceit and the childishness that ages you!

I hate you from head to heels!

That's what he declares.

But what would the young woman do? That comedian of life?

Amen, she would say at the conclusion of his tirade, and then start laughing loudly: *bis, bis*, she'd cry through her applause.

Alla found her lieutenant waiting when she arrived home.

She received him coldly, indifferently, though the officer paid it no mind. This irritated Alla even further: ah, so this friendship has corroded so deeply that he has a right to act familiar!

Pouring a mug of hot water from the big samovar, Alla exclaimed:

'You know, I get the impression that you didn't see a single woman out there in the war. You've been a very good boy, sitting alone in a trench and only dreaming of me...'

'What makes you think that?'

'No, no. It could also be that I've grown older and wiser, oh, so wise, and that's the reason it seems that way.'

'Seems what way?'

'That you're foolish! No, don't be upset. But really, spending a couple of years without concerts, without books, without art galleries... It will have an effect. Won't it? You can turn into a proper bear cub out there after a while.'

The lieutenant felt his face redden. But the young woman carried on in the same tone:

'I feel like I've almost grown taller than you. Oh, how fascinated I am with, for instance, philosophy! But that doesn't interest you, does it? I, however? I sometimes sit in my armchair, legs drawn beneath me like a little categorical imperative, reading and thinking, thinking and reading. And suddenly, a whole new world reveals itself to me, totally new, beautiful, and unprecedented!'

I adore the philosophy book I'm reading as much as rum chocolates; I even slide it beneath my pillow at night. There's so much I'd like to discuss with you, much about everything, the *Monadology*⁵, for example, but you wouldn't understand.'

'Enough with your "gonads" logic. A smart woman is truly disgusting. Women should be foolish and pretty. That's all. And to tell you the truth, life on the front isn't at all as bleak as you think. I just don't blather as much in my letters as you do when you write about your refined young men. And if you really want to know the truth, then I'll tell you: a Polish woman and her passion can outdo the most philosophical *betaira* any day.'

'If you think I want to try to hold you down here somehow, then you're mistaken. You can go do cartwheels with your Polish women if you want, for all I care!'

They antagonized each other equally. The mood could not be repaired, at least not for that day.

After Alla bid farewell to him who was once her closest friend, she was overcome by grief and a sense of abandonment. Where had all the earlier days gone, so calm, carefree, happy, and without doubts or insults!

And what was the point of it all?

What compelled Alla to act so carelessly? Would the boy perhaps leave and never return?

The following morning's prelude was likewise in a minor key. Alla had been already lurking around the tram stop near her building for half an hour, waiting nervously for Ado. What would he say? Perhaps their relationship would end as well? Perhaps the very opposite would occur?

She paced back and forth in quick steps, aimless and agitated, a seriousness in her eyes.

Yet as a fair omen, Ado appeared to smile casually. It still didn't help to unravel the knot of solemnity.

So, both were silent.

They were almost timid of each other when they entered Alla's apartment, but then adopted a formal air as if each had arrived on an official visit.

'Please be so kind as to take a seat!'

'Thank you!'

And both had a creeping feeling like they didn't know where to place themselves.

Ado then spotted a dark red rose in a vase on the bookshelf, identical to the one he'd intended to buy the previous day. And just like that, it all became clear. He could barely contain himself.

'Ah-ha! *Now* I figured it out!'

Alla slightly pale and leaned back in the chair, staring intensely and unblinkingly at a point ahead while Ado tried to read anything from her expression.

Having nearly not slept a wink, Alla was more pallid than usual. A cascade of white powder stood out too starkly on her face, drawn along her little capricious nose.

The new manner in which Ado now observed the young woman was strange. She, serious? She, sad? She as herself for once, not only a mask? Not playful, emotional, optimistic?

The timid eyes were still focused on a single point; the long, playful fingers were suddenly still and sombre.

She was like a flower fallen from a vase. Helpless.

Even a smile would have seemed like a frown at that moment.

She seized the pocketknife from the table, the blade they bought in Imatra, and began toying with it. Then, she jabbed its tip into the skin of her hand.

She presses it a quarter inch into the web between her thumb and index finger, not blinking an eye or furrowing a brow. Immediately, she sucks away the blood that seeps from the white skin. And then, she begins peeling the skin away from the edges of the wound, unyielding like willow bark before spring.

As she sat there alone, legs drawn beneath her on the chair, holding the knife, staring intently at the skin she was flaying, she reminded Ado of a miserable derelict, a vagrant without a harbour, one whose emotions flutter in the air as butterflies, failing to find anyone or anything.

Her head sank even lower, and Ado suddenly noticed a glassy bead drop onto the wound – round, large, and transparent.

‘You’ll get blood poisoning that way, my young lady!’

‘So what! It’ll be a lasting memory either way.’

Ado glanced at the black drawer in the dresser: there were memories less permanent than the wound between her thumb and index finger, in any case.

‘But why a lasting memory? What separation are you planning?’

‘You are the one planning it, not I. I can’t imagine what you were thinking yesterday. It can’t be anything else, I suspect. And now...’

Now, I might finally get a little closer to her heart, Ado thought.

‘It could end up being the very opposite, as I see it...’

‘The opposite? Hahaha!’

Alla was suddenly in high spirits. She wrapped a handkerchief around the wound, lifted her damp eyes, and continued laughing as if to find a cause for the dampness in laughter. Irony accompanied the laughing:

‘I *did* tell you yesterday that I’d laugh you out of the room. You didn’t believe me. Oh, if only my boyfriend were here right now, that zealous young officer. He’d challenge you to a duel at once. My boyfriend says he once shot a rooster in a farmyard from a verst⁶ away. I would be your second. I would pity you and require that you both aim from a distance of no less than two versts, as otherwise you’d end up killing each other, and then who would buy me roses from the flower shop? Hahaha! Oh, come now, don’t get so serious again. No, no, I will shoot myself, you can count on that. Or I’ll take poison, as I possess more than enough of that.’

It was spoken so softly and naïvely, as if uttered playfully by a child who ultimately wishes it to be true.

No, there was nothing Ado could say to counter the irony. Even the acerbic part of yesterday’s planned admission would have been bland in this situation. No matter how dearly he wished to retaliate, anything would have been weak. It was impossible for him to strain hard enough to tear away Alla’s mask. At last, he exclaimed:

‘Laugh all you want! Laughter is certainly fine armour. But do you know what I came to tell you? First, that I no longer believe a single word you say. You’re simply pitiful when you pose your childishness before me, you worldly, much experienced, ugly woman! That’s what I came to tell you, and furthermore, that you can now send your boyfriend to every flower shop without fault!’

He rose, dressed, lifted his hat, and left.

Not a single word more.

So now, they were both gone. Both right hand and left were empty. But the Chinese chain⁷ weaves on: the officer would grab the hand of a Polish manor lord’s daughter to waltz, and the university student would seize the arm of a Ukrainian. And then another Polish girl would join the dance, and the Ukrainian would float with a third. And so on and so forth. Forever.

Alla felt alone amidst that dance hall. She had released both hands and exited the circle.

Should she begin looking for new connections? No, no. The Russian student she’d met on the train was too melancholy and worried about mundane things. The group of Estonian students on their excursion was boring. And none of them understood life in the way that Alla wished.

They all scrape away at the soul. Just like these two boys. One sears with a red-hot poker. And the other sears. And sears them both. And then each goes off to his separate corner, heart aching, mind dour. And life is suddenly empty.

Again, the future materialized before her. You study and study and then, a bundle of notebooks beneath your arm, face creased, body frozen, you go and teach children. And you are so ugly, so ugly.

What had Ado said? Ugly? Ugly!

She stepped before the mirror and dove into it.

Messy, frizzy locks curling around her forehead without sheen. Like a mane, stiff and thick. She could make out tiny wrinkles around her reddish, unslept eyes. Three quite discernible dashes crossing her forehead beneath the powder. She noticed something similar on her neck, even more horrid.

She was reminded of the image of Dorian Gray's face. Oh, if only this mirror were able to suck away age and the ugly features that compound with each day, allowing you to live ever young, merry, lighthearted! Yes, lighthearted!

Yet now, you are abandoned, cast into a corner. Like a broken, useless toy. And what's more, you'll soon lose the right to feel young anymore because you'll be an adult, you must be polite, mustn't laugh as much as you'd like, mustn't draw your legs beneath you or arc your back like the Greek dancers on vases...

Wouldn't death, a beautiful death, be far lovelier right now than dragging on an ugly life?

Gently, she opened the small chest of keepsakes on her dresser. It held dried flowers, brief letters bound to memories, a whole diary of the past...

And it held a tiny bottle, always with her, filled with a strange medicine that would lull you to sleep.

But no! She wouldn't relinquish her life so alone, without some wonderful movement, without a grand gesture.

To die proudly, to even perform death – that was a task worth living for!

She rose at once and went out to the street.

The gesture, the gesture!

The audience was greatly impeding: there were too many people. It crowded around display windows, pushed against her, and jostled her from the sidewalk to where coachmen threatened her in turn.

She moved purposefully through the mass, hands thrust into coat pockets, lips compressed tightly like someone with a certain goal. She even felt a certain right to shove others from her way without apology.

For she was the one carrying a dreadful idea inside of her like an explosive. If they were to know it, if they were to know, then they'd seize her. But an idea cannot be seized. No one could read it on her face.

She finally came to St. Isaac's Cathedral.

The higher she ascended along the wide, uneven, cold stairs, the more her faith in her own strength diminished and was replaced by another will, another desire, vague and timid at first, a longing to undergo in her imagination the moment at which she would put substance, even if merely evident, into the gesture of throwing herself down from above.

She was weary by the time she reached the first roof. The surrounding tin landscape had a hallucinatory affect. Still, she paid little attention to her environment, focusing only on the destination. She crossed a narrow board over the tin roofing, entered a small doorway, and climbed even tighter steps.

The dome's vaulting intersected in the dusty gloam beneath the giant roof.

One more little set of vertical steps, basically a ladder, and out through the hatch that opens onto a narrow walkway circling the dome, bordered by iron grating.

Lightheadedness, heart pounding from the climb. Thoughts frozen. Body transformed into a lifeless object no longer able to feel anything.

A northern wind howled around the tower, forcing the young woman to hold her hat against her head. She then removed it and held it.

Alla was totally alone, her chaperone having sheltered below out of the wind.

A peculiar intoxication washed over her, the lustful taste that comes before throwing oneself down. There is probably nothing sweeter than the first blinks when you're hurtling through the air, still conscious.

She peered over the edge of the grating. The tower's golden cupola bulged everywhere, as if expectant. Long lines ran down the giant, shining surface and disappeared somewhere below.

Alla pried at the cast iron bars, but they didn't even flex beneath her delicate fingers. How was she to throw herself down, then? Vault over it? What a silly thing that would be – climbing over a chest-high fence to soar in somersaults. Her dress might even get caught somewhere.

She was devastatingly disappointed. All that time, she'd imagined a lofty, beautiful death from the tower above: standing on the edge of the hatch, the city beneath her, and then the slightest leap, like that of a swimmer from a diving board. You would fly through the air and the people below would stop and stare, mouths agape. And when you finally made it down, all you'd leave on the hard, coarse ground was a bloody mass, the elements of which no one could distinguish.

But now, you face a fence and the dome is wider than it seems: if you were to leap, then you'd land right here on the slope, along which you'd slide like a sledge down a hill, only to collide into the first tin roof. And the wind is blowing so hard that who knows – maybe it'll just pin you to the dome like a splinter.

And yet, it was so grand to feel oneself above the rest, above the city, above life and death. Down below, elves drove tiny horses, matchboxes crawled along tram tracks, people scurried along like ants, each towards their own nest, along the bandage of a street, which looked like the scabrous skin on the covers of a book.

And more than ever before, she was gripped by a desire to return, light-footed, to that beautiful, motley earth, to the stage, to the fertile ground to become a sacred weed, deep-rooted; one that no hand could ever pluck.

‘Püha umbrohi’⁸

Johannes Semper

Seisatas kesk tuba. Kuulatas.

Läbi avat akna kuulis kose ühetoonilist kohinat, kui kauge oreli sumbutet basse, mille sekka teisest toast mängiti klaaside klirina pizzicatot ja naeru pudenevaid kadentse.

Siis ligines väikeste sammudega suurele peeglille ja nägi:

Süsimustile juuksile oli heidet apelsiinkollane loor, mille varjust silmad, suured ja naiivsed, paistid argadena. Lilla oleks pidanud see loor olema, mille ta kõrgelle tõstaks sirutet käsivarsil üle oma pää ja leeves tuules hõljutaks kaasa tantsusammudelle.

Aimas omas kujus olevat midagi Zuloaga hispaanlannadest, keda oli näinud hiljutisel kunstinäitusel.

Lasi käed üle puusade kumeruse ja käanis end profiili. Vähekesi tõmp nina hajutas kujutluse hispaanlannast. See ei meeldinud talle, kuigi seda ebameeldivust mahendid mustad juustehapsed, mis põsilt rõngastetult alla langesid kaela valguseni.

Siis asus aga peeglille õige ligidalle, et vaadata oma kahvatuid põhjamaalase silmi, kergelt bistreerit, pikkade ripsendega tumedate kulmukaarte all.

Vaatles kaua oma silmi, süvenedes neisse, kuni vähekesi hirm hakkas reaalsuse ees, mis peeglis tarretas.

Siis kuulis jälle kõrvaltoast heledaid naere, mis teda närveldid.

Kuulis pooljoobnud eladalaskeid.

Istus toolile, pani käed rüppe ja tundis end asjaks, mis kõrvale pand.

Miks ta oli selle väljasõitkonna hulka kutsut, kellest ainult paari inimest tundis? Mis läheb talle Imatra korda, kui ükski üliõpilasist tähele ei pannud, et ta nende hulgast kõrvaltuppa kadus?

Vaatas välja Soome loodusse. Siin olid Jaapani pintsliga visat kollakasrohelist täpid kevadet mustroheliste männalatvade vahele, taamal sinetid üksikud metsatukad. Murul mängisid lapsed. Vaikne, tuuletu maastik melanhoolitas aina, loiutas.

Kui parajasti aknalauale ligines, et kannikesi nuusuta, mis sinna madalasse vaasi olid korjat, avanes uks.

Ado seisatas vähe, vaadates üllatanult neidu akna all. Siis nagu eemalle peletanud silmist väikse virvenduse, tõmbas ukse kinni ja astus ligemalle.

„Preili unistab?“

„Miks te mind üleüldse ligi kutsusite? Ma olen tõesti siin liigne. Te joote, lõbustate, aga kus ma kõlban teie seltskonda?“

Üliõpilane pani konjaki klaasi lauale, tõi tooli ja istus neiu ligidalle, hakates teda usutlema väljasõidu väärtuses.

Varsti toodi ka teisest toast vein, kuna säälolejad varsti välja läksid, püsimata olla kaua kinnises ruumis, kui väljas kevade. Pudeneti toast: noormehed hallid ja kirjud, kepistet ning kaabustet, neid valged ja kollased – tillukesed kanapojad murduvast munakoorest.

Oh seda kevade ja veinide doppelkümme! Paneb vere põksuma ning silmad hergama. Metsad rõkkavad vastu vallatuse lahti päästet kuljustest.

Mis sellest, et mõni üliõpilane, tüse ja soliid, kuidagi ei oska ühte sulada männatüvedest dekoratsiooniga, viisakuse olles riietesse imbunud: iga puu ning põõsas on talle seltskonna daam kohvilauas, kes punastab kui küünarnukid enesest kaugeile sirutad.

Mis sellest, kui mõni on kaasa toonud ära raamatet liigutused? Selle eest on teised vilkamad ja nobedamad jooksmas ning kilkamas, nii et leppade vastrohetanud raad vastu nägu löövad.

Ja lõpuks ei tunne ükski end ülearuseks selles maastikus. Tuntakse rõõmu hõljuvaist liblikuist, valgeist, kollasist, pruunidest, kellele kelmilt järele jookstakse, konnadest pedajakoore

värvi, kes loiuult üle lehte liiguvad. Kulus libisevad kuulmatult pikad sisalikud. Sitikad on alles läikivais, nagu nõelalt tulnud kostüümides. Kuskilt niisutakse sind üle koldnoka rõõmsa vilega.

Üliõpilaskond on laiali hargunud: muist istub mäe otsas, muist nõlva all, muist on jõe kaldal, vahtides ühtesoodu kaasameelitavasse kärestikku.

Allat Adot on ikka veel toas, keerdunud seda võrd vestlus- ja koketeerimislõngusse, et ei teatagi teistest midagi. Ei tahetagi teada, sest õigupoolest on ülejäänud seltskond asjata koormaks ligi tulnud.

„Meie kahe terviseks!“

Ja klaasid annavad kokku lüües heleda, naerma paneva heli. Alla huuled punetavad kui värsked reig. Aga noormees maitseb neid ainult ilutsedes. Alla pigistab vahel silmad, öeldes joobunud olevat kõigest, kõigest. Kuid silmi lahti tehes jätab ta laud koomalle. Nende vahelt on kadunud selleks korraks põhjamaa kahvatus: sääl särab nüüd must sula metall.

Aga Adot piinab irooniahelk, mis ülestõstet laugudest tulnud. Neid naerab vahetpidamata väikest metallheledat naeru, siis suitsetabki vahel, hoobeldes, et ta nüüd ülikoolis olles korraga tunneb end suuremaks. Oo, läbi ninagi võib ta suitsu lasta. Oi, kui targaks ta veel kord tahab saada, palju targemaks kui seda Ado praegu on. Nüüd on ta veel rumal ja naiivne, kuigi täiskasvanud. Mõeldagu, juba 19-aastane neid, mitte enam mõni kooliplika. Aga hirm tuleb vanuse eest!

Kui vaatab peegli, otsib kõige päält, kas silmi alla veel pole esimesed kanavarbad tulnud. Masseerib nägu, et kortsud ei ilmuks. Ühel päeval öelnud ta naissõber, et vanust võida kõige paremini kaelajoonist tunda. Mõeldagu, kaelajoonist, nii kui hobuseid hambust! Selle eest ei olnud ta aga sugugi hoolitsenud. Vaadaku Ado, kui tal selged silmad, kas ta näeb mõne vaokese ta kaelal.

Kui poiss asub seda vaatama, tõmmatakse pää järsku taha poole, ja silmisse ilmub jälle endine hoiatav iroonia. Siis veel see naer, teravpisteline, mustade kiharate varjust.

Järsku tõsinedes:

„Aga nüüd kujutage mind ette nelja aasta pärast! Oi, kui hirmus: lähen mööda uulitsaid, heftikimp kaenlas. Õpetan lapsi. Haha, koolipreili! Mina? Mis jooned siis küll näkku ilmuvad! Panen ninale vahest näpitsadki musta nõõri otsas, ja astun niiske, külmetanud, nurgelise näoga klassituppa. Teate, koolipreilid näivad mulle kõik olevat kandilise näoga, niisked ja imelikult külma nahaga, nagu ära kellerdunud. Mu mustad juuksed sasinevad veel enam ja ma olen siis täiesti öökull, nagu mu poiss mulle juba nüüd ütleb. Kas ma olen öökulli nägu, öelge? Ja veel nelja aasta pärast! Hirmujudinad jooksevad üle keha. Kuulete, vahel ööseti näen und, kuidas ma olen päris öökull, inetu, kole, kisa tegev, nagu laps keda näpistakse. See inetus ajab mind üles ja ma vaatan siis hirmunult peegli. Magada ei saa ma siis enam.“

Mitu korda oli mainit mingisugusest poisist. Kes see küll on, huvitas Adot.

Ah, see olla üks väga naljakas, piimavalge, rõõsk poiss, kes alati pikki kirju armastab saata roheline tindiga. Nüüd olla ta sõjas. Allat kutsuda ta ka sõtta: visaku ta mõte maha ülikooli lõpeta, õppimine teha ainult inetuks, ja tulgu parem halastajaks õeks. Kord olnudki mõte nii teha, kuid õeks ehtides leidnud, et ülikond sugugi ei sobi, iseäranis ta sasis juuksed ei olla kuidagi siledalt pääsinud valge päärati all. Aga kuidas oleks siis öde sasis juustega?! Nii jätnud ta selle mõtte katki.

Adole jäi aga see poisi lugu, kes roheline tindiga kirjutab, kaunis tumedaks, kuigi neiu avameelsus suurenes, mida kauem nad istusid ning jõid.

Viimaks tõusid nad ja läksid välja.

Päike kallas kollast veini sinisest kristallklaasist ning jootis sellega kevadist loodust. Iharuses oli maaüsk end lahti löönud ning rohelised puud enesest püsti ajanud.

Vuoksa keerutas vahuseid vesi üle kivide, kaljutükkide ning läbi pedastikkude, kuni ta oma käsivarre ümber kaljumaa tugeva rinna mässis lõõtsuvas kallistuses – Vallinkoseks.

Vallatteltes, mängides ja teine teist taga ajades oli üliõpilane oma neiuaga mäelt siia alla jõudnud, kus nad mõlemad järsku selle müriseva jõu ees said tõsiseks, kaineks ning vaikivaks.

Kõik kees siin, mässas ja vahutas. Suured mustad siidieied argusid nägemata koonlast ja mässisid end hiiglamassideks, mis enne käänakut tehes järsku vastu kaljusid ja kive pörkasid,

päikses üles löid vikerkaaritava vahusamba ja siis uuesti eespool kokku rullusid keevate valgete pisaratena, et sama mängu korrata.

Rääkimine oli siin kui sosin kumedast koopast.

Ado vaatas vahu vikerkaari ja nägi säääl rohelisi vööte. Talle näis koguni, et need mitte pisarate vastuhelgid ei olnud, vaid üks pidev roheline niit, tulev ülevalt Imatra poolt ja valgub edasi. . . See oli kui roheline tint selle naljaka poisi . . .

Oli see siis kõik õige, mis säääl üleval, veini klaaside juures oli välja lobiset: et see poiss ja Alla terve mineva ja ülemineva suve koos maal veetnud, päevad ööd läbi kuskil metsis, kuskil heinaküünides, heinasaadudes? Et see poiss oli ilus, tugev ja julge? Et ei ole midagi kaunimat, kui anduda kuskil oja ligidal, kus äsja supeid, kehad alles niisked karastavast veest? Et pärast siis päikse paistel küpseda ja loiduda nagu väiksed salamandrid? Oli see kõik õige?

Milline kahepoolsus, mõtles Ado: ühel pool äärmine naiivsus, lapsikus, süütus ja teisel pool kogemusrikkus ja elutarkus? Kumb on poos ja kumb tõde? Või on see midagi Daphnis ja Chloe laadilist?

Oli juba õhtu tulemas, kui väljasõitkond jõudis Imatra sillale.

Hoolimata sellest, et all kaljurankade voodis kosk viskles ja mürises, keerutes tõrvmusti lonte vastu veealuseid kive valgeks vahujahuks, mis asjata vastu voolu tahtsid tõusta, pikenid sillal olijate varjud väga selgelt ja liikumata üle vee, eksitamata selle mässulisest rabelemisest. Põimlevaist, peksvaist voogudest tuli jahedat õhku.

Vaadeti kaua nagu paigale manatult seda pilti. Kui aga teised ära läksid, jäi Alla veel sinna, kumardes üle käsipuu.

Üks üliõpilastest hüüdis:

„Vaadake, vaadake, noor plika kumardab üle elu sügavuste. Oleksin ma kunstnik, küll ma maaliksin seda poosi!“

Teine lausus:

„Jah, just poosi. See poos oleks ju hää, kui ta ise seda ei tunneks. Aga ta pole sugugi naiivne. Ta arvab, et meie oleme fotografi aparaadid. Lähme!“

Ado kuulis sellest ainult mõne katke kose mühinas.

Tõsi, mõtles ta, see plika ei ole naiivne. Muidu ei hindaks ta pooside väärtust. Nüüd aga tunnen, et ta minu pilku enesel tunneb.

Nad jäid jälle teistest maha, kahekesi.

Läksid sillalt alla. Istusid suurele graniitkivile ja vaatasid koske siit. Sild inimestega viskas õhtu päikeses imeliku varjukatte taamalle mustale voolule, mille teraskangalisle toime valgus pildus kuldläikeid. Liginedes kurdusid üksikud tumerohelised niidivihud ja murenid valgeks vahtveiniks, põrgates vastu teravaid veealuseid tõkkeid.

Siis oli see kui tuhande uppuja käestik, surmahirmus üles poole ringutav ja metsikult kisav. Kõige suurem palk oleks sinna visatuna õlekõrs, mida uppujad kohe tuhandete kätega põhja vajutavad. See oli kui hiigla madude kari, mürinal edasi sööstev, mida nähes tardud iseäralisse võlutulga.

„Tahaks sinna hüpata, ah tahaks vette viskuda!“ hüüdis Alla.

„Teate, mis teist saaks? Minutit viis hiljem oleks säääl all, tasavees, teist veel mõni käsi või jalg, kuna päälloo puruneb vastu kaljuseina.“

„Ei, niisugust inetut surma ma ei tahaks iialgi!“

Kuskilt sigines nende juure väike poiss, pakkus sünnikäigu mälestuseks müüa piltpostkaarte, albumid, tillukesi pussnuge.

Võtsid omale kõike kaasa.

Siis tõusid ja kõndisid piki kaljulist randa perivett, kuni kosk täitus ja laius siledaks tasaveeks.

Imelik oli see õhtu. Päike rippus juba pedajate ladvul ja vajus aegapidi punaste okste vahele. Taevarand õhetas. Õhus ujus soojuselaineid, mis olid kui eksinud parved nägemata paitusi ning kallistusi.

Ado vaatas neidu õhtuvalguses nagu nägemust, millesse aga ei tohtinud puutuda: väheimast riivamisest oleks nagu kadunud ta eeterlikkus: Alla oleks saanud siis selleks kogenud naiseks, kes teadev on igast liigutusest. Ja nii mitu korda, kui ta ka neiu käest kinni haaras, iga kord tundis ta oma kätt rohkem kui tema. Põrkas nagu mingi maskest vastu.

Alla aga oli vallat ilusast momendist, millesse tahtus ära kaduda ja sulada. Temal oli mingi ebamäärane kartus oma kaasaskäija ees, mingi süüdlustunne, mida nüüd tahtis kaota poisi vaimustet pilku, ilusasse õhtusse, mis iharust igale poole looritas ning kose mühinasse, ühetoonilisse, rahustavasse, suigutavasse.

Ühe jämeda männa juures jäid nad seisma.

„Kirjutame siia midagi õige ilusat mälestuseks, igaveseks mälestuseks!“

„Kirjutame ühel ajal, teine teisel pool!“

„Olgu!“

„Üheainsa sõna, selle, mis kõige ilusam!“

Noad koorisid tüvelt krobeline korra ning laskusid siis vaikpehmesse mähka.

„Amor“ ilmus ühele poole, „Alla“ teisele.

Noormees tundis kipitust omast avameelsusest. Mis oli see amor siis, kas „armastus“ või „mind armastakse?“

„Teie armastate siis armastust enam kui inimesi?“

„Jah!“ vastas neid.

„Ja siis armastate ka seda, et teid armastakse?“

„Mis selles siis halba on, see on ju nii ilus!“

Õhukese gaasülikonna hillerdes briisis oli ta siia jooksnud, kõige kaugemale vette ulatavale kaljule laialipillat karide rägastikus ja nüüd sirutas ta käsivarred kõrgelle nagu lilled päikse poole ning laulis oma armsamat laulu: Griegi „Jeg elsker dig“ . . .

Laulu kuulis ta veel poolärkvel. Oli paljad käsivarred üle padja sirutanud, läbi süngi võrede päikese paistesse.

Valguse raskus rusus silmalauge: neid oli valus lahti teha. Kuid siiski ihar ja magus oli lasta kiirtes supelda kaela, noori rindu ning paljaid käsivarsi. See oli aisteline nauding, kui vastu valget sõrmeääred näisid läbipaistvad, või kui mõni kõditav kiir ootamata läbi puged särge pitsiaugust.

Alla tuba oli harilik üliõpilase üürituba: kitsas, pikk, vähe möbleerit. Kummutil peegli all olid lõhnaõli pudelid, puudrikarbid, küüntepuhastuse riistad ja muud toalettasjad, ning nende ligidal must väike kastike, milles asent olid leidnud igasugused amuletid ja mälestusmärgid: närbinud õied, kallimad kirjad, mõni paelake, paberitükike, raudtee sõidu pilet.

Iseäranis torkas toas silma alastuse rohkus: voodi kohal rippus reproduktsioon Stycka maalist – noor keha, hetäärilise silmis häbelikult avatlev läige, kuna sirgunud käed parajasti tumelilla loori olid hõljutamas üle rindade pakitseva ihu; siin sääl seinal mõni samalaadiline postkaart ja laual laiali terve kuhi kaarte kehadege. Oleks Alla rikkam olnud, oleks omale muretsenud Rodini „Suudluse“, mida nüüd ainult jälgenduses maitses. Terve tuba oleks pidanud olema paganlik ihutempel, püha ja ülev, ning ta ristiks selle toa – suudlustoaks.

Nii lamada päikse paistes, süüa schokolaadi rummiga, vahete vahel lugeda „Dorian Gray näopilti“, mitte millegi üle mõelda, ainult rõõmu tunda omast olemisest, krüsantheemist vaasis, lõhnapudelist Jaapani aroomiga, jah, isegi kohvist, mida perenaine voodi ääre lauale toob. . .

Korrage kuulis, et keegi kõnnib akna all mööda kitsast lauda. Kes see võiks olla? Piimamees? Ei, selle säärsapalised asted oleksid rasked nagu tõrred piimakeldris. Postiljon? Jah, need on selle nobedad asted, mis südame alati panevad põksuma. Neid tunneb seda liig hästi.

Perenaine ulatas süngi sinkja ümbriku roheline tindiga.

Avas pika, pika kirja. Selles oli kõike – sentimentaalsusest vägitegudeni laskekraavis, mille kohal kuulid vinguvad kui sääsed ja shrapnellid teevad viimse päeva kisa. Kuidas see punapõsk küll kartulivaos põõnab, küll mudas sipleb nagu kärbes liimipaberil! Ja siis tuleb ta säält puhkusele. Oo, homme juba! Homme siin!

Kõlisteti uuesti. Siis koputati uksele.

Kui Ado neidu läks teretama, andis see vaiba ääre alt viis pikka ilusat sõrme. Siis sündis riide panek nagu ikka: Ado selg käändi voodi poole ja poisile anti raamat kätte.

See oli Balmonti luuletuskogu.

Kuni Alla end toaleteeris, luges noormees hulga luuletusi ette. Viimaks jäi peatama ühe „Näkingeid“ nimelise juures.

„See on üks ilusamaist selles kogus. Kuulake!“

„Ja see teile meeldib!“ Poiss tundis, kuidas neid selja taga suured silmad tegi.

„Jah, tore luuletus! Ja see näkingeid on ka ise väga huvitav!“

„Huvitav, huvitav! Noh nüüd saite sõna, mida ma teilt ei uskunud! Kas võib veel sõna olla, mis nii . . . Tõesti, seda ma ei uskunud teist!“

Eialgu ei saanud Ado aru, miks see sõna neidu nii närveldas. Siis aga mõistis. Et see nii teravalt oli lausut, pani poisi piinlema.

See pikk, kõhn ja tumesilmaline noormees Ado tungis iseäraliselt Alla hinge kurudesse, nii et ta vahel tõsiselt pani kartma. Imelikud olid ta silmad: vahest põles neis võigas, avatlev, däämonlik tuli, vahest paistis neis väljakannatamata põlgus, haavav, mida tahab eemalle tõrjuda kõigi naiseliste avatlusabinõudega. Kui mõnikord seda poissi uulitsal silmas, käis põlvist läbi nõrgestav tuksatus ning käik, liiked said seotuks. Mitte kord ei olnud Alla mööda käinud sellest majast, kus Ado elas: teadis isegi, et kõrval korteris elab noor neid, kes ühelt üliõpilaselt ladina keele tunde võtab, sest ega nad muidu ei istuks määrat tunni ajal teine teisel pool lauda, ja mis tunde muud võiks üks neiu noormehelt võtta. Vahest teatris, seltskonnas kokku puutudes põgenes Alla noormehe pilke. Vestlusel ei löönud silmigi üles, tundes imelikku argust ja ühtlasi seda, kuidas säärase tagasihoid, allaheit mõjub. Aga säälsamas raputas enesest väheimagi aldumuse, välja sirutes oma uhke, nõtkke keha trotsivalt, etteheitvalt, kõrgilt nõjates kuhugi sohva leenile, ja alumisi lauge ironiseerivalt üles tõstes naeris katkenut naeru, pildudes kui raheteri vastu plekki. Vahel haaras, nagu nüüd, kinni mõnest kogemata poetet sõnast, et siis seda, ümber hinnates, pilke ja teravusega tagasi visata ning sellega meeli segada otsekui kättemaksuks.

Aga kui Alla oli enese riide pannud, Ado end ümber pöörnud, sai meeleolu teisemaks kui selja taga. Neid kostitas poissi kõigega, mis tal oli käepärast, andis talle nuusuta uusi lõhnaõlised, lilli vaasis, või näitas talle uusi postkaarte või äärekest värskest kirjast roheline tindiga.

Jah, ta võib nüüd otsagi vaadata, ilma et kartust tunneks.

Nad vestlid kaua ja elavalt tühjast tähjast võidu varblaste sädistusega räästa all, läbi avat akna.

Aga vahel, saades hajameelseks, hüpatas ühelt ainelt teisele, tõusis neid ja otsis midagi sahtlist, soris kaarte ning raamatuid.

Siis hangusid need liigutused mingi tarretusasendiks, nagu selleks, et neid kogemata kujunenud, gratsiööse poose saadaks maitsta.

Nii unustas neid enese aknalauale, kummuti ääre, üle lillevaasi. Otsib, otsib midagi raamaturiulilt ja jääb nii istuma. Sõrmegi pistab suhu.

Tajudes seda artistlikku joont, shesti ilu teadvust neiu juures, erutus Ado, sest mängida naiivsust – seda olid need võet asendid ja liiked – oli hädaohtlikuim mäng.

Ka Alla taipas seda vaevalt-vaevalt tuntavat tunnetevirvet Ado juures instiktüivselt ja nüüd oli kogu olemine kui tants nõõril: väikene väärtus, vaevalt tunda ant tõeelu, otsekohene, varjamatu, mängimatu, ja kõik on kokku varisenud.

Tihti hiilisid nad teine teist, otsekui kiskjad loomad, tihti algas sõnade mäng, vahel nii hädaohtlikult üdini tungiv, kui kuum vesi õrna hamba närvini. Siis aga taandus kõik, saades süütuks ja igapäevaseks, nagu käimine, söömine, istumine.

Varsti läksid nad välja, et üheskoos hulkuda linna ilusamail kohil, kunstinäitusil, muuseumides, nagu seda sagedasti olid teinud. Ado arvas, et mõlemaid kuidagi ühte seob kunsti austus: tundsid end teine teisele palju ligemal olevat, kui mõnel kontserdil vaimustusi mõnest viiulimängijast või klaverikunstnikust.

Pärastised harutusedki läbielati kontserdist tõstid neid hähe tuiju. Mõlemalle meeldis kõige enam põhjamaa muusika, eriti Grieg, Sibelius.

Tihti kõnelid nad plastilisest tantsust, mis nende arust ülem kunst oli.

„Oo, ma võin hulluks minna joovastusest, mis mulle tants annab. Nii Duncan, Preobrashenskaja, Pavlova . . . Ah see viimane, näituseks! Kuidas ta enese ära võidab, üles õhku tõuseb, maa päälle jättes ainult suure varba tibatillukese küüne, kuidas ta kaasa viib, vaimustab, südamest, hingest läbi käib! Oi, seda ei saa sõnadega öelda!“

„Millal teie neid nägite?“

„Ei,“ vastas Alla, „ise ma küll pole veel neist ühtki näinud. Aga ajalehist olen nende üle lugenud. Ja see oli midagi imeilusat, mis sääl kirjuteti; see pani mind kohe joovastusse.“

Abstrakt kujutelm kunstist, selle mõte ja mõiste vaimustas Allat. Päälegi, see arusaamine kunstist sügenes alati siis, kui kunstis oli tegemist inimesega, või kui kunsti eeks oli inimene, iseäranis tema erootiline külg.

Elu, ilu, kunst oli talle, tõtt öelda, erootika kolm palge.

Naine ei tunne muud kunsti, kui erootilist, ja selleski ainult erootikat, see oletus muutus Ados veendumuseks, kui nad nüüd jalutuskäigu tegid läbi Ermitaashi.

Siin seisatid kõige päält Amor ja Psyche kogukuju ees.

„Ah, kui ilusad kehavormid! Kujud nagu elus!“

Skulptuur näis Allale meeldivat, peaaegu väljavõtteta. Seisatid kaua raidkujude ees, kuna Alla üksikute kehade proportsioone mõõtis, mõnel leides liig paksud jalad olevat, teisel jälle liig lühikesed.

Maalidesaalides selle vastu oli vähe, mida vaadata. Cranachi madonnadel puudusid ripsmed. Ja oi, kuidas talle meeldivad pikad mustad ripsmed, mis varju heidaksid näole! Ei, Cranach ei oska maalida! Päälegi, üsna ebalooslikud need liig pikad sõrmed.

Ja need? Mis rasvavõllid need olgu? Rubensi naised. Ja see olla ilus? See võida kellelegi meeldida? Vahest ehk Adolegi? Vaadaku, kuidas sääl nende naiste sõrmeküüned eespoolt laiemaks lähevad, kuna ju kitsad küüned on palju kaunimad.

Rembrandti Danae. Milline hirmus naine! Mis puusad! Kui pakud. Ega see ei meeldi ju?

Läbi käinud suur hulk saale, tulid lõpuks Hispaania saali, kus väsinult istusid punasel sohvale. Piltide ees jäi seisma ja vaatlema hulk inimesi. Oli huvitav tähele panna nende nägusid, nende kunsti vastuvõtte avaldusi. Alla vaatles enamasti huvitetult riietat naisi, nende frisuure, kleidimoodi ning kingi, kiites ühede kehavolüümi, arvustes teiste omi.

See oli täiesti üks kriteerium, Ado leidis, et egoistlikki, millega Alla hindas inimesi ja kunstitöid, pärit maniküüride, pediküüride ning moelehte ajajärgust. Nüüd tuletas Ado meele, et kontsertideski oli Allale enam meeldinud viiulikunstnik ise kui see, mis ta ette kandis. Ja ettekantavast ainult see, mis suigutas magusasse iharusse, unistusse armastusest.

Oodake, oodake, mõtles Ado, just kiuste ei taha ma ideaaliks lugeda teie keha, pikka, ahtakest, looklevat! Oo, sada korda enam meeldivad mulle terved naised, kelle pakkjalad on valmis kogu maailma pattu kandma põrgu väravateni ja kelle rubenslikud käsivarred võivad teid, kõhnu naisi, kümme üles tõsta, teid, kolmepuudalisi! Vahest on minu ideaal just too naerata, punane rasvapõsk, mis näos silmad ahendab, see kumer üsk, millest võivad idaneda kümned kõvalihakselised suguharud, või need juustevihud, mis rasketena alla langevad kui valminud viljad? Ja olgu labajalg suur kui takjaleht! Ja miks ei või sõrmed olla ülipikad ning ülipeened kui vahaküünlad? Ja küüned laiad, kui tulukesed nende otsas?

Adole ligines siis ka elu däämon, arg nagu varas ja irooniline kui Mefisto:

„Vaadake, Alla, seda usumäratsejat, kellele puss rindu torgatakse. Ei tea, kas ta pika mantli all ka pükse peaks olema? Oleks kole, kui tal neid ei oleks. Vene pappidel on vähemalt pika säärega saapad . . . Ja too latern, maas põlev; ega selles küll muu ei põle, kui loomarasv, sest petrooleumi siis vist ei olnud. Aga õigust öelda, mulle meeldivad elektrilambid kõige paremini . . .“

Juba tuli halli riidet muumiast-teener kellukesega märku andma, et oleks aeg lahkuda. Tuleb siis uuesti alla minna mööda pikka treppi kahe läikiva seina vahelt, mille värv on kui hangunud vaniljekaste roosamannaliste vöötidega.

Kui nad mööda Neeva kallast kõndisid, tuletas Alla jälle midagi meele sellest poisist, kes sõjaväljal. Kuid Adot see ei huvitanud. Aga kes küll teab, võib ju ka kord aeg tulla, kui kõrvalkäija sõnad suureks paisuvad ja noormehe närvidel hakkavad klimberdama armukadeduse noote.

Alla südames pakitses midagi, kuid siis otsustas: Ado ei tohi igatahes ohvitseriga kokku puutuda, ega teadagi tema siiatulekust.

„Homme ega ligemal päivil ma teiega kokku ei saa,“ lausus Alla kurvalt.

„Miks? Sõidate ära? Valmistate eksamite vastu?“

„Jah, mul tuleb ära sõita. Sain hommiku kirja, et ema haige on.“

Kui leitenant teisel päeval oma reisiväsimuse Alla voodis oli välja puhanud, läksid mõlemad välja jalutama.

Miskipärast on sellest punapõskesest ohvitserist saanud unine olevus, kes mind kohtleb, nagu ei tea kes ma oleksin, mõtles Alla.

Pikk ja sirge oli see poiss, pehmed vurrudemed kõditid ergutavalt suudlustes, kuid nüüd paistis näost mingi tardunud üleolek, esialgu küll vallutav, pärast aga vastikuksminev.

See oli kui abielulase panetanud magusus oma kõrval tunda seda, kes sinu himudelle ja soovidelle vastu tuleb, olgu need millised tahes.

Ja mis blaseerumusega oli ta voodist tõustes peegli ette läinud, sääl haigutanud! Nagu oleks Alla elutu mööbel.

Kõige päält, otsigu noormees omale ise korter, nüüd ei saa ta, kui ennemini, teda oma juures ööd lasta olla, sest eksamid ja nõnda edasi.

Leitenant oli ka sellele kerge järele andma, ilma et oleks võõrastust tundnud sarnase kohtlemise vastu.

See õrgutas veel enam Allat. Juhtis jutu Imatra reisi poole, suurendes kõike Ado ja enda vahekorras, kiites selle peent arusaamist, rafineeritust, vaimustusega koguni jutustes selle maitsest, selle tumedaist silmist.

Vähehaaval hakkas leitenant ka asja vastu huvitust tundma, üht ja teist pärima. Ometi, ometi, mõtles rõõmuga Alla.

Ja ikka rohkem hakkas ta omadusi kiitma, mis üliõpilasel olla ning mis ohvitseril puududa.

Nii hää oli ühe ees ühte, teise ees teist ülist ja katsuda üht meest teise vastu üles kiivata.

Hiljem ohvitseriga uulitsal jalutes nägi Alla järsku eemal, teisel pool prospekti, Ado kuju. Jah see ta oli: hall palit ja hall kaabu.

Kuum viirg jooksis läbi keha. Tundis käsivarrel leitenandi käe pigistust. Jah, kõige parem, mõne kaupluse akna juure seisma jääda, ega siis seljast nii kergesti ära ei tunne.

Õnneks oli see lillekauplus.

„Mine, ole hää, siia sisse ja too mulle üks punane roos. Aga mine alla keldri, sääl on ilusamad. Ma ootan seni.“

Kui ohvitser kauplusse läks, jäi Alla akna juure seisma.

Ado oli aga juba üle prospekti tulnud.

„Noh, siin, ega polegi ära sõitnud?“

„Pidin sõitma, aga sain uue kirja, et ema paraneb juba.“

Alla lõi silmad läbi aknaruudu. Sees oli palju inimesi, nii võis veel kõik hästi minna. Aga iga silmapilk oli kallis.

„Aga nüüd vabandate mind, ma ruttan. Homme astun teie poole, kõneleme pikemalt.“

„Kuhu poole? Ah sinna, pole viga, ma lähen ka sinna poole.“

Alla oli kui tulisel sütel.

„Hää küll. Aga kui tahate pai poiss olla, minge enne siia lillekauplusse ja ostke mulle üks punane, punane roos. Ah, kahju, see kõige ilusam on just praegu ära ostet. Aga minge alla keldri, säääl on õige, õige suur väljavalik.“

Soo, nüüd oli paras aeg ära kaduda. Mõlemad on nüüd keldris.

Ruttas tagasi vaatamata tramvaile, sai kuidagi veel käepidemest kinni haarata.

Teisel päeval ootas Ado kogu päeva neidu oma poole. Juba hämardudes astus see üle ukse.

„Andke kõige päält andeks, et mind enam lillekaupluse juurest ei leidnud.“

„Ei, teie peate mind vabandama. Teadsin et teil rutt on, aga all oli väga palju inimesi ja ühe ohvitseriga läksime ühe punase roosi pärast peaaegu kiskuma, sest üksainus suur tumepunane oli veel järele jäänud. Niisugune piimahabel!“

„Hahaha. Ja kuhu see roos jäi?“

„Lõpuks andsin järele, Kes teab, millise kokoti rinnal see võib nüüd olla!“

„Neid tõmbas mustad nahkkindad käest, vabastes säält pikad, valged sõrmed peente läikivate küüntega ja sirutas need teretuseks. Siis veel. Lubasin teile midagi pikemalt seleta. Aga nüüd tuleb välja, et see oli lihtne fraas.“

„Teil on ju kõik puha fraas. Aga omakorda on mul teile midagi seleta. Selleks teen visiidi teile homme.“

Mis see pidi olema, sellest ei teadnud Ado isegi midagi. Aga nii tundus.

„Ah, ma aiman midagi!“

„Mida siis õieti aimate? Ei, ei, see on hoopis midagi muud!“

„Muud? On see siis midagi paha? Tõsist? Ha-ha-ha! Mina ja tõsist? See oleks alles naljakas. Aga kes sellesse veel on segat?“

Mis selle pääle vastata? Aga las hargub! Las võrsub legend!

„Veel üks kolmas!“

Nüüd ta teab, teab, ehmatas Alla.

„Ja rohkem mitte? Siis ei ole see, mis mina arvan.“

„On neli, aga võib ju enam olla. Aga see ei puutu asjasse. Homme räägin aga teile midagi ootamatut ja imelikku.“

„Mis see küll võiks olla? Ei tea tõesti mitte. Ah, siiski. Kas see võiks tõesti olla. Ja just nüüd! Noh, see oleks alles pöörane. Ajaksin suu tõesti ammuli. See oleks alles nali, ei tragikomöödia. Võiksin enese surnuks naerda.“

„Ja tõesti, teie arvate seda?“

„Mida, mida? Teie ei või seda arvata. Mida, öelge!“

„Tean mis arvate.“

„Noh, see oleks imelik, kui te seda teaksite!“

„Võin pää anda, et tean. Me mõtleme ühte ja sedasama.“

Sõnademäng, vastastikku provotseeriv, läheb sama rada edasi.

„Võiksin pää anda, et sedasama mõtlite, mis minagi nüüd mõtlin. Tahate, ütlen!“

„Öelge!“

„Aga mõelge, see oleks teile väga piinlik, kui seda praegu ütleksin.“

„Jah, õige. Ärge parem öelge.“

„Näete ongi nii. Ei mingi kahtlust.“

„Kui te homme seda tõesti mõtlete teha, ma ei tea siis mis teha. Naeraksin teid lihtsalt välja!“

„Ja teie võtate julguse tõesti minust nii mõelda!“

See oli juba vihaga öeldud. Alla kallas vähe rahustust sekka:

„Eks ole imelik, et iial seda teada ei saa, mis kumbki mõtles. Ma ei teaks tõesti, mis teha, kui see tõsine küsimus, mis homme tahate puuduta, seesama oleks. Aga teie ei tea, mis mina mõtlin. Praegu võite te hoopis muud mõelda ja sellest kõnelda, aga homme räägite just seda, mis mina nüüd mõtlen.“

„Ei, võite kindel olla, et see mõte just sarnane on. Kõik mis olete kõnelenud, kindlustas mind ainult ses veendumuses. Hämmastab ainult üks asi, kuidas võisite niisugusele arvamisele tulla. Olen ma selleks kuidagi põhjust annud?“

„Ei tea, aga ma arvasin . . . Mõnest asjaolust . . . Teinekord . . .“

Jumalagajätul:

„Homme ootan teid. Selle küsimuse räägite siis, mulle? On see vahest nii tõsine ja traagiline, et me pärast seda kättki ei anna?“

See oli lausut naljatoonil, kuna käsi lävel jumalagajätkuks sirgus.

„Võib ka olla, et pärast seda kätt ei anna. Kes teab, mis veel võib tulla,“ lausus Ado pikkamisi, järele trepist alla astujalle.

Siis keeras välise ukse lukku, tuli tuppa ja pani paberossi suitsema. Jäi siis seisma kesk tuba ja pahvatas naerma.

Homme läheb ta tõepoolest sinna, paneb enne pika kuue selga, ostab samast lillekauplusest kimbu valgeid roose ja selle püha neitsi ette põlvili langedes hüüab armusõnu, mis pärit kõige paremast südame käsiraamatust, ja palub siis selle jumalanna kätt igaveseks teekonnaks läbi selle maailma hädaoru.

Ja siis korraga:

– Teie! Teie! Teie võisite uskuda, võisite silmapilgukski juleta seda mõelda, seda aimata. . . Teie, kes täis valet . . . On siis teie enesearvamine nii suur, et arvate, nagu poleks teil mingi maski ees? Vihkan teid! Seda tuln teile ütlemale! Ma ei salli teid, põlgan teid! Kas kuulete? Vihkan teie kõveraid juudi juukseid, teie öökulli nägu väikese tõmbi ninaga nagu teekannu tibi, inetu suu ja nöbi lõuaga! Vihkan teie pikka vedurjat keha! Teie väikest pääaju, mis on tühi ja aitamatu nagu tükk molluski! Vihkan teie kleite, mis tahavad olla veel lühikesed ning noored, kuid on teie seljas lohakad, inetud ja vanad! Vihkan teie häält, kui te lause lõpul sõnu pikaks venitate ja selle iseäraldusega koketeerite! Teie kunstimaitset, teie estetismi, mida teile ette dikteerib teie väiklane erootiline instinkt! Teie naiivsuse poseerimist, teie elutarkust, millele asjata nooruse ja oskamattuse näokatte ette tõmbate!

Vihkan puudritki, mida vahel pikuti nina olete tõmmanud! Vihkan teie tubagi, kitsast ja tühja, raamatuteta ja vaimuta! Vihkan teie poose leentoolis, sohval või sängis, kui omad pikad jalad enese alla kogute ja siis arvate, et väike tütarlaps olete! Vihkan teie väikseid jalgu mustis lakkkingis ja teie ilusaid sõrmi, mis tindiga määrit! Vihkan teie nalja ja naeru, teie elevel olekut ja vaimustust tühjast-tühjast, millesse ma sugugi ei usu. Vihkan teie ninatarka iseteadvust ja lapsikust, mis teid vanastab!

Vihkan teid pääläest jalatallani! –

Nii lausub ta sääli.

Aga mis teeks plika? See elu komödiand?

Aamen, ütleks ta selle tiraadi lõppu ja hakkaks siis naerma suure häälega: bis, bis, karjuks ta käteplagina vahel.

Koju jõudes leidis Alla oma leitenandi eest.

Võttis tema vastu külmalt, ükskõiksel, kuigi ohvitser sellest midagi välja ei teinud. See äritas. Allat veel enam: siis nii sügavale on sõprus sööbinud, et õigus on familjäärne olla!

Suurest teemasinast teevett klaasi valades, hüüdis Alla:

„Tead, mulle näib, et sa sääli sõjas sugugi naisi pole näinud. Oled olnud päris pai poiss, oma ette laskekraavis istunud ja ainult minust unistanud . . .“

„Kuidas sa nii võid arvata?“

„Ei, ei, võib olla, see tuleb ka sellest, et ma hakkan juba suureks saama, targaks, oi, kui targaks, ja sellepärast näibki see nii olevat.“

„Mis näib nii olevat?“

„Et sa rumal oled! Ei, ära nüüd pahaseks saa. Aga tõesti, paar aastat elada ilma kontsertideta, raamatuteta, kunstinäitusteta . . . See mõjub ikka ka. Eks? Sää! võib lõpuks päris karupojaks muutuda.“

Leitenant tundis, kuidas puna näkku tõusis. Aga neid jatkas endisel toonil:

„Tunnen, et olen sinust nagu pikemaks kasvanud. Oo, kuidas mind, näituseks, filosoofia huvitab! Aga ega see sind ei huvita? Aga mina? Istun vahel leentoolis, jalad oma alla tõmmat, nagu mõni väike kategooriline imperatiiv, loen ja mõtlen, mõtlen ja loen. Ja korraga avab end uus ilm, täiesti uus, ilus ja enneolemata! Ma armastan siis loetavat filosoofilist raamatut nii kui mõnda schokolaadi rummiga, panen ööseks selle raamatu koguni padja alla. Räägiksin sulle palju, palju kõigest, monadoloogias näituseks, aga sa ei mõistaks mind.“

„Jäta oma munade loogika. Tark naine on ikka vastik. Naine peab rumal olema ja ilus. See on kõik. Ja kui ma sulle õige ütlen, siis ei ole frondil see elu sugugi mitte nii kõle, nagu arvad. Ma ei lobise sulle kirjades aga nii palju, kui sina oma rafineerit noormehist oma kirjades oled kirjutanud. Ja kui sa õige teada tahad saada, siis ütlen sulle, et mõni Poola naine oma kirega kõige filosoofilisemad hetäärid üle lööb.“

„Sa eksid, kui arvad, et mina sind kuidagi tahan kinni hoida. Võid minu pärast oma Poola naistega hundiratast lüüa, kui soovid.“

Nii äritid nad teine teist vastastikku. Vähemalt tänaseks ei võidud enam meeleolu paranda.

Kui Alla oma senise parema sõbra oli ära saatnud, haaras teda kurbus, mahajäetus. Kuhu olid jäänud endised ajad, rahulikud, muretumad, õnnelikud, mil ei olnud kahtlusi ega etteheiteid!

Ja milleks see kõik?

Mis sundis Allat nii hoolimatta olema? Võib olla sõidab see poiss veel ära, ilma et tagasi tuleks?

Järgmise hommiku präluudium oli samuti minoorne.

Juba pool tundi käis Alla tramvai peatuspaiga kohal oma maja ligidal, oodates ärevuses Adot. Mis ütleb see? Vahest lõpeb temagagi vahekord? Vahest aga ümberpöördukt?

Käis edastagasi, väikseil sammel, närvilisil ja sihituil, tõsidus silmis.

Aga hääks ennustuseks tundus Ado kerge naeratus. Siiski sellest ei mõikanud, et lahti aruta tõsiduse keerdsõlme.

Ja nii vaikisid mõlemad.

Tuppa astudes peaaegu kartsid teine teist, siis aga said ofitsiaalseks, nagu oleks kumbki tulnud kellelegi tegema mõnda ametlikku visiiti.

„Olge hää, võtke istent!“

„Täna!“

Ja kummaldi sügenes tunne, et ei teadnud kuhu end ära panna.

Järsku nägi Ado raamatu riivli pääl vaasis suure tumepunase roosi, just samasuguse, kui ta eile oli tahtnud osta. Ja nüüd oli tal järsku kõik selge. Vaevalt suutis end vaol hoida:

„Ah nii! Nüüd alles saan asjast aru!“

Alla kahvatas veidi ja tooli leenile nõjates, vahtis kogu aeg teravalt ühte punkti oma ette, kuna Ado tema näolt tahtis midagi välja lugeda.

Õo peaaegu magamata, Alla oli nüüd kahvatum harilikust. Liig äredalt eraldus valge puudri juga, mis veet pikuti ta pisikest kapriisi nina.

See oli imelikult uus pilt, millena Ado nüüd neidu nägi. Tema tõsine? Tema kurb? Tema kord ta ise, aga mitte ainult mask? Mitte mänglev, pateetiline, optimistlik?

Arad silmad fikseerisid ikka veel ühte kohta, pikad mängivad sõrmed olid jäänud korraga vait ja raskemeelseks.

Oli kui vaasist välja langenud lill. Abitu.

Naergi oleks nüüd tundunud kõverdusena.

Nüüd haaras ta laualt noa, lmatralt tood pussnoa ja hakkas sellega mängima. Siis torkis selle otsaga oma käenahka.

Pistab veerandtollil võrra pöidla ja nimetissõrme vahele ihhu, silmi pilgutamata ning kulme kortsutamata. Valgest nahast immitseva vere imeb kohe ära. Ja siis hakkab haava ümbert nahka koorima, mis on kinni, nagu pajukoor enne kevadet.

Kui ta sääli nii istus oma ette, vaikiv, jalad üles toolile tõmmat, käes nuga, vaadates ainult nülitavat kohta, siis tuli ta Adole ette nagu igavesti kodutu, hulkaja, kellel ei ole sadamat, kelle tunded õhus lendlevad liblikutena, leidmata kedagi-midagi.

Pää oli veel madalamale vajunud, ja Ado nägi äkki, et haavale langes helm, ümargune, suur ja läbipaistev.

„Nii saate veel verekihvitus, mu preili!“

„Mis sellest! See jääb nii kui nii igaveseks mälestuseks.“

Ado lõi pilgu mustale sahtlile kummutil: need sääli olid igatahes vähem kestvad mälestused, kui see arm nimetissõrme ja pöidla vahel.

„Aga miks siis igaveseks mälestuseks? Mis lahkuminekut te valmistate siis?“

„Seda valmistate teie, mitte mina. Ega tea, mis eile mõtlite. Midagi muud see igatahes olla ei või. Nüüd veel . . .“

Nüüd võib siiski, hingele vähe ligemalle tulla, mõtles Ado.

„Minu arvates võiks asi just ümberpöörduvalt kujuneda . . .“

„Ümberpöörduvalt? Hahaha!“

Alla sai korraga rõõmsaks. Mähkis taskurätiku haava ümber, tõstis niisked silmad üles ja naeris edasi nagu seks, et silmi niiskusele naerus põhjendust leida. Naeruga ühes tuli iroonia:

„Aga ma ütlin ju teile eile, et ma siis teid välja naeran. Teie ei uskunud. Ah, oleks mu poiss praegu siin, see tragi ohvitser, see kutsuks teid otsekohe kahevõitluselle. Mu poiss ütleb, et ta kord versta kauguselt talu hoovist kuke maha lasknud. Mina tuleksin teile sekundandiks. Ma halastaksin teie peäle ja nõuaksin, et peate teine teist sihtima mitte vähem kui kahe versta tagant, sest muidu laseksite lõpuks teine teise maha ja kes mul siis veel lillekauplusest roose ostab. Hahaha! Nonoh, ärge saage jälle nii tõsiseks. Ei, ei, mina ise lasen enese maha, olge selles kindel. Või võtaksin mürki, sest seda on mul küllalt tagavaras.“

See oli nii pehme ja naiivse tooniga lausut, nagu oleks seda teinud laps mängides, kellele kõik see lõppude lõpuks tõsi tahab olla.

Ei, sellele irooniale ei oskaks Ado midagi omalt poolt vastu seada. Eilne sapinegi osa plaanitatavast tunnustusest oleks praegu lahja. Nii palju kui ka noormees midagi omalt poolt tahtis salvata, kõik oli nõrk. Ta ei saanud kuidagi end seda võrd pinguta, et Allalt maski eest kiskuda. Viimaks hüüdis ometi:

„Naerge nii palju kui tahate! Naer on ju ikka hää kaitsesoomus. Aga teate, mida ma tulin teie juure ütlema? Kõige peält seda, et ma enam ei usu ühegi teie sõnasse. Teie olete lihtsalt hale, kui oma lapsikust minu ees poseerite, teie elutark, palju kogenud, inetu naine! Seda tahtsin teile öelda ja veel, et nüüd võite oma poisi ilma eksimata igasse lillepoodi saata!“

Tõusis, riietas end, tõstis kübarat ja läks.

Ei ühtki sõna rohkem.

Nüüd olid nad siis mõlemad läinud. Nii parem kui pahem käsi oli tühi. Aga Hiina kett põimub edasi: ohvitser haarab valsiks Poola mõisniku tütre kae, ning üliõpilane hakkab mõne väikevenelase käsivarrest kinni. Ja siis tuleb mõni teine poolakat tantsitama, ning väikevenelane hõljub kolmandaga. Nii edasi. Lõpmatuseni.

Alla tundis enese kesk seda tantsusaali üksi olevat. Mõlemad käed oli ta vabaks lasknud ja tantsuringist välja astunud.

Või hakata uusi lüüsid vaatama? Ei, ei. See Vene üliõpilane, kellega rongis tuttavaks saanud, on liig ilmamureline ja õnnetu. See salkkond Eesti üliõpilasi, kes ta ümber hulkunud, on igav. Ja ükski ei saa elust nii aru, kuidas Alla tahab.

Kõik nad urgitsevad hinge kallal. Nagu nüüdki need poisid. Üks kõrvetab tulise oraga. Ja teine kõrvetab. Ning kõrvetad ise kõiki. Ja siis läheb igaüks ise nurka, hing haige, meel pahane. Ja elu on korraga tühi.

Jälle kangastus tulevik silmi ette. Õpid ja õpid, ning siis lähed, heftikimp kaenlas, kortsunud näoga ja külmenud kehaga, lapsi õpetama. Ja oled ise nii inetu, nii inetu.

Mis Ado oli öelnud? Inetu? Inetu!

Asus peegli ette ja sukeldas sellesse.

Sasis ja keerdu lõõnud juustekiharad ringlid ümber otsaesise ilma läiketa. Nagu jõhvid, karedad ja jämedad. Silmade magamata ja punaste ümber oli märgata väikseid kortse. Otsaesist põigitid puudri alt kolm õige aredat joont. Kaelalgi märkas midagi sellesarnast, mis veel kõige hirmsam.

Meele tuli Dorian Gray näopilt. Oo, kui see peegel oleks võimas endasse imema vanuse, inetused, mis päev päevalt juure tulevad, ja kui ise edasi elaksid alati noorena, lustilisena, kergehingelisena, jah, kergehingelisena!

Agas nüüd oled maha jäet, nurka visat. Nagu tarbetu, katkilööd mängukann. Ja päälegi tulemas veel, et sul pole enam õigust tunduda noor, sest oled täiskasvanud, pead olema viisakas, ei saa naerda kui palju tahad, ei saa jalgu oma alla tõmmata ega selga looka painuta nagu Greeka tantsijannad vaasidel . . .

Kas ei oleks surm, ilus surm praegu kaunim, kui inetu elu edasivedamine?

Ettevaatlikult avas kummutil oma väikese mälestuslaeka. Siin olid kuivanud lilled, mälestustega seot kirjakesed, terve mineviku päevaraamat . . .

Ja siin oli pudelike, alati kaasas olev, imeliku magama uinutava rohuga.

Agas ei! Nii enda ette, ilma toreda liigutusega, uhke shestita ta oma elu käest ei anna.

Uhkelt surra, näidelda isegi surma, see on ülesanne, väärt et elada!

Tõusis kähku ja läks välja, uulitsaile.

See shest, see shest!

Palju takistas teda publikum: seda oli liig palju. See rühmus vaateakende all, tuli vastu ning kõrvaldas ta jalgteelt, kust voorimehed oma puhku minema ähvardid.

Liikus selles massis iseteadvalt, käed palitu taskus, huuled kokku pigistat, nagu see, kel oma kindel eesmärk. Tundis enesel teatava õigusegi olevat inimesi teelt kõrvale tõugata ilma vabandamata.

Sest tema oli see, kes enesega hirmust mõtet kaasas kannab, nagu lõhkepommi. Kui nad seda teaks, kui nad teaks, nad püüaksid ta kinni. Agas mõte on kinni püüdmata. Seda ei osanud keegi ta näolt üles lugeda.

Jõudis viimaks Isaaki kiriku juure.

Mida kõrgemale ta tõusis mööda kõverduvaid, laiu, külmi treppe, seda enam kadus usk enese jõusse, mille asemelle agas teine tahe tuli, teine soov, esialgu küll ebamäärasena ja häbelikuna, iha kujutlustes läbi elada momenti, mil ta saab sisu panna, kas või ainult aimatava, ülevalt alla viskumise shesti.

Kui esimesele katuselle jõudis, oli ta juba väsinud. Plekist maastik ümberringi mõjus viirastavalt. Kuid palju ta siin ümber ei vaadanud, et agas jõuda sihile. Astus siis mööda kitsast lauda üle katuse pleki, väikesest uksest sisse, et kitsamaid treppe käia.

Kupli tugipalgid ristlid hiigla katuse all tolmus hahkjatena.

Veel väike püsttrepp, peaaegu redel ja siis oled luugist väljas, mis end avab kitsalle torni ümberkäigu platsile, raudvõre sees.

Pää oli uimane, süda kloppis ülesronimisest. Mõtted ei töötanud. Keha oli muutunud mingi elutuks asjaks, mis enam midagi ei tunne.

Põhja tuul puhus valjusti ümber torni, nii et neil tuli kübarat pääs kinni hoida. Pärast aga võttis selle pääst ja hoidis käes.

Ta oli täiesti üks, sest saatja oli alla jäänud tuule varju.

Iseäralik joobumus valdas teda, allaviske ihar eelmaitse. Ei ole vist midagi magusamat, kui esimesed silmapilgud, kui läbi õhu lendad, alles veel meelemõistusel.

Vaatas üle võre ääre alla. Torni kullat kuppel paisus igal pool ette, nagu oleks ta raskejalgne. Mööda säravat hiiglakere jooksid pikad vöödid ja kadusid kuhugi alla.

Alla kangutas rõo varbu. Raudpulgad aga ei nõtkunudki õrnade sõrmede all. Kuidas siis end alla visata? Üle hüpata? Milline rumal liigutus see oleks, üle rinnakõrguse aia ronida, et siis veel uperpalli lennata. Võib veel kleiti pidi kuhugi rippuma jääda.

Oli täiesti pettunud. Kogu aeg oli kujutlenud kõrget ja ilusat surma ülevalt tornist: seisad kuskil luugi äärel, all on linn ja siis teed väikese hüppe, nagu supleja, kes lauvalt vette hüppab. Lendaksid läbi õhu ja inimesed jääksid all vahtima, suud ammuli. Ja kui sa ükskord alla saaksid, ei oleks kõvadel, krobelisil kivil muud kui verine mass, millest keegi midagi aru ei saaks.

Aga nüüd on sul aiad ees, kuppel on laiem aimatavast: alla hüpates kukud siiasamasse, katuselle, mida mööda alla libised nagu kelguga mööda mäge, et siis vastu esimest plekkkatust lennata. Ja kes teab, puhub tuul veel nii kõvasti, et jääd pilpana kupli külge.

Oli siiski nii hää tunda ennast üle teiste, üle linna, üle elu ja surma. Uulitsal ajasid päkapikumehed väikseid hobuseid, tikukarbid liikusid mööda tramvai rööpaid, inimesed siblisid sipelgatena igaüks oma pesa poole, mööda uulitsa plaastert, mis nägi välja kui krobeline nahk raamatu päradel.

Ja teda valdas äkki suurem kui iial enne lust tagasi alla minna kerge sammu sinna ilusalle, kirjule maale, näitelavale, taimelavale pühaks umbrohuks, mida sügavajuurelist, ükski käsi iial ei suuda välja kitkuda.

¹ A sweet herbal liqueur made with caraway seeds, cumin, and fennel.

² Edvard Grieg's 1865 song with the lyrics of H. C. Andersen (1833). The title means 'I love you' in Danish.

³ Konstantin Balmont's 'Rusalka', written in 1902, published in 1903 in the collection *Budem kak solntse* [Let Us Be Like the Sun].

⁴ An archaic unit of Russian measurement equal to 16.38 kg (3 *poods* = 49.14 kg).

⁵ A work of later philosophy by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), published in 1714.

⁶ A Russian Imperial unit of measurement equal to 1066.78 metres.

⁷ *Hiina kett* [Chinese Chain], the title of Semper's full collection, is inspired by the typically decadent exoticism, that is a tendency to associate the othered 'East' with uncivilized, savage sexual desires. The word 'chain' hints to intimate connections which are based on betrayal and the urge to incessantly change partners.

⁸ Johannes Semper, 'Püha umbrohi', in *Hiina kett* (Odamees, 1918), pp. 7–36.