

PASSION, OR THE DEATH OF ALICE

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Part I

Prelude

Io

Never speak ill of the dead – my grandmother used to say, and so it has been accepted indeed; in the past they'd spit right into the mouth of anyone who would speak ill of a dead man so that when they swallow they'd take back their words into their throat.

But now I'm a witness in this case and you're telling me that as my duty I must speak the truth, but the thing is I know such nasty stuff about the young lady that it makes my hair stand on end and I get them stomach cramps, God bless me, but this being my duty and being a citizen, despite the pangs and creepy though it all is, I'll be telling you what you want me to – from the beginning, and about the end, nor will I spare the disgraceful details, though I'm filled with shame, but then again, I'm curious enough to know more than I need to know – one finds out about all kinds of human stuff, unwittingly, and sometimes it's all too human for you to want to find out, because there's no bounds to oddities and when one of them crops up, you pull yourself to the next, and you produce such a tangle that there's no telling where it will all end. Well, I might have seen many an awful thing, but never did I predict such an end, and that morning, God bless me, I was summoning up some thoughts about the young lady while I was trying to unlock the gate, which had begun to stick months before, so every morning I had to shove in the key and turn it this way and that way, and at that very moment I thought I'd better not get in at all, it was a peculiar day, after all, a Holy Good Friday, and on days like that one must tune oneself in for God rather than be incited to evil thoughts and fickle feelings at the expense of the soul, and if I were to be strict and Orthodox by the canon, I shouldn't have worked that day at all, telling the young lady as an excuse that I won't do no cleaning until she has this rusty piece of iron oiled – I'd told her a hundred times and she would just laugh and then she goes like, well, yes, she'll ask someone to pour some oil on it.

That's why I know for sure it was locked – because of those thoughts I remember – and if anyone's gone in, they had a key and if anyone's gone out, they had a key, too, otherwise there's no passing through the gate, nor through the fence because the place is so overgrown with the shrubbery that has spread upways, sideways, even the dogs won't squeeze

in and only with a wing could you lift yourself up, but there's no such thing, and so the key is indispensable... That's why I kept telling her –

... Miss, some day that door won't open and you'll end up stranded in the street...

she laughed and then she goes –

... I'll fly over, Io – as if she had a wing, but she was actually a devil incarnate, though the devil, too, always makes his way through and thus many things could be accounted for, like that morning when I was dithering about whether I should get in or get really mad, or by way of excuse give my soul its religious due, my soul which was quite sincerely preparing for Sunday's Holy Communion and I wasn't supposed to smear it on Good Friday; and so much do I regret now that I approved none of this, I didn't listen to myself, while if I had persuaded myself to stop just for my edification or dignity, I would have been spared the horror that I still feel the creeps of, but it was then that the lock clicked, and as I'd pressed the handle all the way down, the hinge gave a creak, which put an end to my dithering...

And you keep asking me if I'm sure it was locked, as if something could be forgotten or overlooked when you've had a manifest vision of Hell and it has all so impressed itself in your eyes and in your ears that I can swear honest to God till kingdom come – the hinge creaked as I'd pressed real hard, and the door as usual... This can't be forgotten and I can tell you about any object – where it was and where it was moved by the Fury – there's no other name I can call the One who Performeth.

Then I went in and got a drizzle of rain from the shrubbery, and I felt myself mad again, I even muttered something unmentionable because the shrubs have also been a matter of contention, but the young lady was adamant about it and never smiled but, rather, pressed her tiny little lips into a tiny little curve –

... don't you dare touch them, Io!

The shrubbery was, so she said, her curtain; her manner of speaking was always like that, somewhat veiled, and you couldn't quite get what she meant, but the thing is, in winter you had to creep as through a tunnel to reach the house, and if the snow happens to be fresh, you'd have to tiptoe in the silence because at the slightest stir avalanches would come tumbling from above; that morning it was all wet, it had been raining all night, almost, and I remember the leaves, just bursting into life, sprinkling rain right into my neck, but I couldn't afford to complain aloud, just to myself, and I knew the young lady wouldn't prune them branches anyways. So in I go and something troubled me at once; I saw, and it bit me from within, although I didn't make too much of it and just passed it, but the little garden was nice and tidy in itself, it's just that the shrubbery smothers it, the young lady having nothing to do

with the nice part, of course; she wouldn't bother with stuff like that and if it were up to her, she wouldn't even water the roses, though her mother had planted them – a pine tree and a willow tree, all neat and tidy, but she kept her tender hands out of it for fear, she said, her pads should get horny – that's what she called her fingertips – because they are there to sensitively touch the piano keyboard, and the young lady played the piano, so she'd always use that as an excuse not to wash her dishes, piling them up for me, and besides, she was well educated, too, so she'd say she had no time, though she did find time for other things that I'll tell you about; the old gentleman on the first floor is also a musician and he's the one she's learned everything from, his rooms are heavy with books from top to bottom, but he kept scratching the soil with a little mattock, and everything out-of-place would see his shears, except for the shrubs because he had a ban on them, too. So it's not about learnedness, nor is it about them pads on your fingertips, it's about other things, and, mind you, he doesn't even own the garden, it's all the young lady's, he's been renting all his life, and now that all her property has been restored under the new laws...

But what bit me was no accident because this wasn't the first time at all, and God bless me, I keep thinking that there are dark forces that cause various things, and the young lady must have attracted them because I've been cleaning this house for twenty years and I know every nook and cranny here, and I did in Madam's time, when the young lady was still creeping under the table, but I've often been overcome by oddities like this one, which came back to sting me, because in the garden, clean as it was even of the leaves (the day before I'd seen with my own eyes the old gentleman raking up the winter twigs and the dry foliage), there was a hole – no, not that big, but not a mole hole either, and right next to the hole – crumbly soil, freshly-dug, as it were, and your soul cringes as you get a whiff of the grave, though you may miss the smell if it's your first time and you haven't been through it already. You just wonder what's been dug and you ask yourself –

who?

my heart missed a beat at once and I got that ripple in the pit of my stomach, so the reason I passed it by and told myself – a chance thing, no big deal – was to calm me down, otherwise I wouldn't have walked in, and yet here we are, foreboding comes in the form of memory, and if you come to believe in it all ... you'll never know what to choose and what to approach, as the first time nothing befell me and I went into that house quite unprepared.

Then Madam died.

Nor did she just die, there's no avoiding death, she fell apart and shriveled before my very eyes, but no one would trust me back then, and they all thought I was nuts; besides, those

were dangerous times, so I kept quiet about it. If you're gonna think the same, tell me to shut up before I've even started, so I could spare myself that horror on the first falling apart, absolutely unbelievable, for she wasn't old, going on for fifty-five she was, and she used to take proper care of herself with the money from her husband; true, the government had taken away much of their property but still...not that they were filthy rich but they had everything they needed; besides, she'd never done a stroke of work in her life and yet even I got paid well, why else should I be serving them for twenty long years – serving her, that is, and the young lady later. So she would take proper care of herself, she'd have her hair done every week and such a hairdo it was that I still don't get it why she wanted it blue – her hair was all grey and instead of using normal dye, she sprayed it like a fairy, and properly manicured she was, though past her prime, and she would have them friends to chat and gossip with, all of them former upper-class ladies who dropped in for coffee and cognac – in short, she lived her life in clover, and living it as she was, she just fell apart that morning.

It's been ten years since I first went in and saw the hole in the garden, but then I didn't take no notice of it and it didn't speak to me, because I thought the old gentleman (he wasn't old at the time and I suspected something's going on between him and Madam) had been digging to plant a new tree, and then I just turned the key and called from the hallway:

Madam (she'd have me call her that, she never let me use "comrade"), I'm here, is there anything special to do or shall I start sweeping?...

but there was no response, so I took the broom out of the closet, it's downstairs, in the big hallway, and then, before I went upstairs, I looked up – there she was, standing on the tip of the stairs, clutching at the banister and staring somewhere into space, but it was obvious that her somewhere was nowhere, scary enough to give you the creeps, and her blue hair no longer fastened up in a bun but hanging loose like I'd never seen it before, very long hair it was, like a ghost's, so I wanted to wake her up, I rapped with the broom and I go –

...Madam, what's the matter with you –

and just as I'm telling you, she folded down. Fold down she did but not like a man fainting, I've seen that, I've seen them collapse with a thump, while with her – no noise, just a silence in which she emptied herself from within, as if she were made of pieces of rubber glued together and now she'd burst; she folded down and landed on the top stair and I yelled because by all rules she was supposed to roll down the stairs but – no! – she dwindled into a shape that fitted the space next to the banister. Horror came upon me and I couldn't walk upwards, only later did I pull myself together and step by step I got to her, I was thinking of offering help but the moment I touched her I knew something was wrong because I grabbed

her by the hand and it bent – and at a funny place did it bend, not at the elbow, not at the wrist, but right in the middle, and basically it was bending all over –

MADAM HAD NO BONES

I tried her leg, too, – nothing hard there, so her bones had dissolved, and I know of no such disease, I was like one thunderstruck. No living soul in the house, the gentleman, rotten luck, had gone somewhere, the young lady had gone to her classes, and I dashed to the phone to call Emergency, but it was quite a while before I could get through. At last they said they were coming, I was crying already, and back I go to Madam – she's no longer up there; she'd rolled down to the lower stair – so she must have stirred and she's alive, but even creepier I felt and I just stand there staring – a few minutes went by, and, of its own accord, in silence complete to bursting, her body rolled even further down – I dare not stop her – and then again, and again, and again...by the time the doctors came, she'd got down to the hallway, and I keep standing up there and can't believe my eyes, and I rub my ears to hear some noise, but all silence it was.

As if I'd gone deaf, but then I heard the ambulance pulling over and the doctors came in with the stretcher – I hadn't even closed the door, so if they'd taken a bit longer, Madam could have ended up in the garden. They bent over her, touched here and there, listened to her heart and they go:

...she's dead, a stroke...

and I stand stiff and lost for words.

...did you find her here? – they asked me and I'm telling them:

... no, right here.

... where?

... up here.

... why is she down now?

... she rolled down the stairs, step by step and very slowly.

... so she was alive, why didn't you stop her and lay her comfortably.

... no – I tell them – she was rolling down dead as she has no bones.

And the doctor's eyes bulged wide and he asks:

... are you all right, comrade? (That was the word of address at the time). Who are you?

... I clean here – I told him,

and he didn't get it, so I showed him the broom, but then I saw him whispering something to the nurse in the white apron and cap, and she started filling one of them syringes that I absolutely loathe, not that there's anyone who loves being pricked, but my fear is particularly strong because of the rabid cat that bit me when I was a kid, for which they gave me fourteen of them injections in the stomach, and nobody else but Madam's mother jabbed me, she was good at that as her husband was a doctor.

I forgot to tell you I've been living all my life in the little house where I still live; actually, once, before the communists took over, it used to be part of the big house, for the servants, so my mom and dad also worked here, and then I inherited the job, though it was against the norm at the time, so I was doing it among other things; I also worked at a state factory for extra income to buy the house, and I was quite lucky because now, in the new times, they may well have restored it to the young lady... So, I told the doctor –

...no injections, Sir, I'll testify that Madam has her bones; well, you cut them all in hospital, you'll see for yourselves, and I'll stay right here and I must be wide awake, in my right mind, no drowsy face at all, because the young lady's gonna come back, so I'll have to tell her and she may well faint, and then I'll be calling you in again, if she gives me a fright, so no injections, you'd better give me some pills for the girl.

I put it out of their minds all right, they just picked her up and went out with suspicion, but I didn't mean to tell you that, there's something else – when the pandemonium was over and I left (it was now late afternoon as I had problems with the young lady) but in the garden I suddenly stood transfixed – the hole I'd seen in the morning was filled with a pile of earth on top, like a fresh grave – a tiny one, but one couldn't help thinking of it, and there's something else I thought, so I crossed myself and my soul gave a moan –

Madam, Madam, is it because you were headed there that you kept rolling down like that?...

but I shook off this thought because I could've decided there's something wrong with me, so I badly need an injection, and then on second thoughts – I'd been there all day, the gentleman was nowhere to be seen, so did the doctors fill up the hole? This looked like some nonsense. There's these relatives of the young lady's that came in, she called them, but they were dismayed, too... just kept fussing around and helping the girl, for in a moment like that you're thrown into a tizzy, so who would have thought of digging a hole and then filling it up!

That's why the morning you're asking me about, my soul was so troubled – I remembered everything, the whole oddity that I still can't account for, as well as the fact that it all went awry from then on, gigantic chaos broke out when the young lady was left on her

own – everything was upside down, though this might have been the norm to her, but I can't accept such a life, it looks improper to me, and if I had a daughter I'd go to any lengths to contain her, as Madam must've done, well, she was a tough woman indeed and she kept a firm grip on things – there was order in this house and the young lady played the piano, did languages when she was at high school, I'd take a look at her report card now and then, straight A's all the time, then she got admitted to the conservatory where they study higher music, but it was then that she changed and I think it was Madam's fault – she shouldn't have let her do as she likes, and she, instead of playing the piano, got addicted to reading, someone gave her those books, might have been the gentleman from downstairs, but I'm curious, you know, and I always take a peep when I see an open book because I love reading, especially novels with romance in them, and I've often borrowed such books from the library – I read a few lines but I realized these were no ordinary books, the writing in them was strange, and I even asked Madam –

...what's this stuff the girl's reading, Madam,
it looks obscure to me, hope it doesn't harm her –

and she answered like someone in the know –

...it's philosophy, Io...

and I go –

... well, why doesn't the young lady do the piano more, her profession, that is, instead of sticking with them hefty books, they're meant for few because they're weird...

and she smiled, as if she meant I was simple, and then she goes –

...you don't understand, Io...

and I don't understand indeed, but I do know that it's strange and the girl had her little quirks, which she'd better steer clear of, rather than foster them, and as Madam and I were on speaking terms, I took the liberty to tell her one more thing –

...someone who's afraid of something that's nothing mustn't dip into everything, even if they were little back then...

and she looked at me with her eyes bulging as if she didn't understand or didn't remember, though a thing like that couldn't possibly be forgotten, especially by a mother, who lost her mind when the little girl started running around the house – little she was all right – yelling –

...help! it's got me! save me!...

and we kept running after her, asking –

...what is it, sweetie, who's chasing you...

and the little creature hysterically wallowing on the floor, ripping its clothes, its eyes so wide open they'd burst out, and swishing around so swiftly you could hardly see what's an arm, what's a leg, and Madam trying to hold it, but it keeps slipping out because the thing, it said, didn't let go, and then I, simple as I supposedly am, guessed what it's all about and I go:

...Madam, the shadow's got hold of her.

and Madam burst out laughing with tears in her eyes, hysteria got a grip on her, too. I wish it had all ended there but it persisted for quite a while, Madam had to spend some time teaching the kid, persuading it, and we all talked to her:

...human beings have a shadow, sweetie, but the shadow is a nothing, it's not scary and causes no trouble, it's just that when you cover the light and because you're covering it, it falls as a shadow. And the little girl seemed to understand, more and more convinced she was, but until she grew up she kept repeating:

...I don't want a shadow, it scares me...

and I watched her secretly sometimes, up goes one foot trying to step on it or kick it, and in her eyes – tears – there was something wrong with this kid and things like that never disappear without a trace, so one should be wary.

And there was one more case but I didn't remind it to Madam because I felt pity for her, the kid was still quite little when she began to scratch herself, yet no common scratching it was, she was rubbing her skin all over, wounds opened up, with blood trickling – her little hands and legs and chest were bleeding, they we were all wondering what's going on, so they took her to them doctors, some disease they thought it was, scabies or something, and the doctors examined her, did all kinds of tests and all of them say:

...she's just fine...

but the kid kept scratching herself, ripping herself open, and your heart sinks watching her, until one day she spilled her guts –

...I don't want to have a skin, she says, it's in the way...

...what do you mean it's in the way, that's a load of rubbish...

Madam talked to her and I see her shaking inside –

...we all have skin, it protects us...

and the kid goes –

...it doesn't protect me, she explains, it stops me touching...

...touching what?...

...everything.

Anyone would have lost their mind, so Madam threatened to tie her hands, then the kid gave it a real good thought and said eventually –

...OK, I won't scratch myself but when I grow up, I'll break out.

That put an end to it and she got tame little by little, normal she was and talking the talk, until the hole in the garden emerged and that thing happened to Madam, and the leaves of grass embraced her, green she went and merged with everything, but I was the only one, it seemed, to notice her settling, subsiding, and vanishing, until I also forgot – there was nothing to remember other than impressions and things imagined, until the morning the story repeated itself.

It repeated itself, and repetition is a terrible thing when it could mean something, for you are brimming over with thoughts, and I kept asking myself:

...does it mean or doesn't it?...

it all started at that moment and the result between one hole and another is chaos of sorts; it all got suddenly blurred with impressions that blended into a jumble because you become aware of all things at once and the result is – between one hole and another –

well, what's that supposed to mean?

That's why I didn't stop myself, curiosity is a great force and it dragged me in, but I didn't rush at all because the foreboding of fear was holding me back and I was quite cautious when opening the gate, as if someone could fall apart at my feet; I even locked it behind me, having drawn a moral from the memory when Madam went rolling dead and alone, headed somewhere, and as soon as I closed up, I heard the piano playing, and I halted in surprise – at eight in the morning the young lady should be sleeping, how come she's risen so early, if left to herself, she'd be lying in bed till noon, having coffee after coffee in the sheets, all wrapped in fumes, that's why I thought it my prime obligation, once I'm upstairs, to bang on her door with my broom's handle, for fear I should hurt my hand, and I shout:

...Miss, the Earth's risen and the Sun's eyes are open – until she wakes up. She'd invented this as a child and it gave her joy from the memory, a dear memory it was, so she said –

...Io, these are magical words, shout them out at full blast, they get right into me and pull me out of my dreams...

they didn't always help, though, so I had to take other measures, too, but her being awake at eight in the morning and at the piano already, that was unheard of.

Well, something's wrong here, I told myself, and the moment I did, I felt the music wasn't coming from upstairs, from the young lady's piano, but from downstairs – from the

gentleman's, and God knows why, this seemed even more improper, and so it was, because I know no other man like that, but I can swear the old gentleman hadn't changed his routine in ten years, not once, not even by a minute: he'd go out at seven in the morning, then come back at one, when I was leaving, he'd always greet me politely, hello Io, goodbye Io, then he'd close himself up in his room, and at five o'clock on the dot, come rain or shine, or tornado or hurricane, I thought, he'd go out for a walk anyway, till half past six when he'd come back and prepare dinner for himself; that was his routine since Madam died, he often traveled before, and as I told you, the day she fell apart he wasn't home and only came back the next day. He walked in and before I told him, he clutched his head, I think he only saw the young lady's eyes, but not a word did he speak, he just closed himself up in his rooms and didn't show up before the ninth day, even the funeral he didn't attend, and let the young lady mourn her alone – it was then that he changed his routine, so one couldn't help thinking there was something going on between him and Madam, though he was almost ten years younger, but it takes all sorts to make a world and there's all kinds of crazy stuff, so I think he wasn't in his right mind. He'd talk with the young lady only, and while making a meal for himself, he'd rap on the ceiling with a rolling pin, if she happened to be home and alone, to call her down to have dinner with him – they lived in each other's pockets, and I never got no idea why the upstairs and the downstairs are getting along just fine, so I was waiting for them to explode some day, wayward as each of them was. They never seemed to listen to each other, and the young lady would make a racket at all times, she'd be playing late into the night, she entertained guests of all sorts – various men, you know, and not once did the gentleman complain, he'd have those tête-à-têtes with her instead, but there was no gratitude on her part, I'm not even sure she respected him enough because there was this occasion when I praised him for his regular life just to give her a clue about hers, and she replied as if making fun of him –

...he's an imitator, too, Io, he believes himself to be Kant, but in fact we're all imitators and we believe ourselves to be something...

that's what she said and I'm not sure it was ridicule because I didn't quite get it, and I know no Kant, not me – is he a good man or a bad man I don't know – all I know is the gentleman loved the young lady, he'd known her since she was a child, after all, and that's why when I made sure he's home that morning, I was surprised and a sense of impropriety emerged, yet at the same time I sighed with some relief – when you're not alone, even if you come up against an oddity, it's easier to bear, and you could ask for advice because the certainty that there's something wrong was still with me and so was the fright that it might

descend upon me any moment. That's why I decided to knock on the gentleman's door and make up a motive for him to come upstairs with me. I couldn't afford to tell him—

...Sir, there's a hole in the garden and this is a bad omen for the house, and because I'm scared, come with me to wake up the young lady and tell her the rhyme where the Earth is rising...

it's a fact that when the learned hear about things like that, they consider you crazy, but I hoped to find another way to talk him into it and drag him along with me because if something did happen, he was home all night, after all, he might know... and once I'd made up my mind, I sat down on the chair in the hallway to wait for the music to stop, not to disturb him and irk him, but also to make up something to say, for him to see the truth of it and follow me. I sat there and reclined comfortably, after the chilly dampness – music and warm, and quiet, too, as if something were swimming around, so I closed my eyes, so cozy did I feel that I completely forgot, and everything that was dangerously swirling in my mind just flew away and I began to imagine beautiful things,

like I'm going to church in the evening and the priest sprinkles me with holy water, the Good Friday service is sort of long-winded and sorrowful, but one day later the wait for the Resurrection is over,

and then I remembered my duties: there wasn't much to do that day, the young lady had painted the eggs, and as for the Easter cookies, she bought them from the shop, so I just had to sweep the floor and cook something for lunch, she was fasting, too, believe it or not. There was one thing I didn't like doing, but there's no way I could give it up, silly and shameful though it was – I'm an adult, after all – well, the young lady's room was full of toys, an inconceivable number, perhaps more than they'll have in a store, fitted in all kinds of spaces – two display cabinets with Barbie dolls, mom dolls and daddies, little kids, at least five lavatories with attached bathrooms, sinks, tubs, washing machines, and there must have been as many as twenty of them bedrooms with large beds, wardrobes and mirrors, doll houses with kitchens and lounges – you don't want the whole list, do you – and all kinds of creatures from the animal kingdom at large – dogs, frogs and lions, you name it; also, musical instruments for two full orchestras, with strings and the ones you blow into, a few pianos, and figurines of musicians in tuxedos as well – all plastic and dressed; an addiction of sorts, and it was that freak who got her hooked on it, that freak is her lover, who made them dolls. He kept bringing in the samples until he cluttered the room with them without caring that I'll have to clean them, and you can't actually imagine how much dust they gather and how hard it is to wipe them all; what's more, the young lady undressed them every two or three months and

had me wash their clothes, which I couldn't stand at all, and to reward me for not refusing to do this stupid thing, she once played such a nasty trick on me that I'll never forget walking into the bedroom and seeing –

the dolls – all undressed for the laundry – and she's lining up their naked bodies – the Barbie girls on the king-size beds, their legs up, with the Kens over them and the kids peeping from behind the chairs – naked as well – nor did she stop there, she'd mated them animals, not by species and genus, but as her whim would have it – I then banged on the door and yell I did:

...Miss, I won't cross this doorstep no more, I can't take your jokes and the sleazy stuff you make me see...

and she... laughing her head off and apologizing yet asking:

what's wrong with them, Io, aren't they beautiful...

what's wrong with them?!...

I was mad the next day or two and then I came back, for the young lady had cast her spell on me when a child, so I set about wiping again...

That's what I thought as I was sprawled amidst the music and the warm, my eyes half closed, half watching, until I saw something I can't really name, and I stared, my thoughts vanished, something like turned over in my eyes and they darted across the hallway. It's quite large, its name doesn't fit it, it's a whole room and furnished – the door to the gentleman's rooms is right across, and above it there's a little stained-glass window, which still lets the light in, and when the gentleman's home, his hall would be lit day and night, and some light came through into the big hallway; otherwise it was dark, there was light only from the window above the front door, but the dusk pushes in and unless you turn on the lights, which I avoid because I'm very frugal, there's things you see, and there's things you don't, you can stumble because only the glass truly stands out, with the face someone's painted on it, a bit scary, with big eyes, and around it – circles, crosses, triangles and other things like that; but something else also focused the light and summoned the eye on the left wall there was a dresser with many little drawers that the young lady stuffed with odds and ends – hairpins, business cards, needles, glasses, makeup, combs, pens and pencils, lipstick – complete confusion reigned, and when something went missing, the young lady would rummage in there, spill it all on the floor, and then put it all back, never did she bother to tidy them drawers; and the dresser was a good one, with a big mirror, where she'd comb her hair before

going out, though there was the same dresser in her room and a big mirror in the living-room, no shortage of them, but she'd doll herself up in the hallway – so this mirror was very strong and was like shining in the dusk, always intruding upon the eye – that's where I stared and got out of my thoughts, out of the warm and quiet of the music I got, because the mirror wasn't there, or rather, it was and it wasn't – at first I thought it was covered with something, but when I strained my eyes, I found out only the glass was there – a beautiful frame and naked glass in it – that is, what makes the mirror a mirror, I don't know what it's called, had peeled off, or someone had scrubbed it off, which would be hard to do actually, because the dresser was solid and heavy, it had never been moved, and I'm not sure anyone could take the heavy glass out of the frame – the former mirror – and the more I stared the more frightened I got, I saw another falling apart, things were happening here of their own accord, driven by some internal cause, like they were rabid or something, and my heart sank, I got up to take a closer look to make sure my eyes didn't deceive me or that I wasn't bedazzled in a way – no, it was a fact – I went behind to see the traces of the substance that makes the mirror a mirror – nothing, all clear and dust only – then I went back in front and

– Oh, Lord! –

I was scared as hell, never had I taken notice of it – the glass with them circles and crosses above the door was clear and translucent, you should move your eyes and adjust the light like in those special postcards that can move so you can truly see what, if anything, is on them; so I moved, adjusted, moved again until the face revealed itself, just like the scary one in the stained glass with the big eyes, it's watching me and I'm watching it, like it was alive and waiting for me to move, the devil's work no doubt, so I cried:

...Oh, Lord!...

now there was no sense in waiting for the music to stop, I got the fright of my life, and I didn't hear, nor did I think, I just got to the door and started banging, banging, banging...

nothing..

absolute silence.

I listened out – the music gone –

quiet.

And I dare not turn, for how do I know what's watching me from behind and quite senselessly now I keep banging...

and I bang...

and I bang...

Sebastian

...right in my heart she was banging, but I couldn't afford to open – my destiny resounded in the final sound threateningly condensed into silence, stillness and muteness forever, Bach stiffened up in her fingers – your fingers, Alice, my dear child and secret treasure of my days...

I thought I'd never leave my room – I didn't want to hear – until I gradually smoldered to an end in the constant listening of preposterous hope, directed upwards,

to the soft creaking of the ceiling,

to the laughter penetrating the mortar,

to the rhythmical rapping of needle-thin heels, hammering hectic moments into space,

to the irrepressible love moanings, which wandered the house unabashed and spilled over into a scream that stopped in front of my door, on the threshold of my relentless solitude – I only wanted to anticipate the impossible and to fill my anticipation with music, amidst which, closing my eyes, I'd see her fingers – your fingers, Alice, leaning as you are over the fugue, engrossed in the voices, which you listened to with your eyes, asking:

what is Bach?...

because you believed that I knew, because you knew yourself, so we had to confirm that the voices are commensurate – our voices – because we loved Bach, and for him every voice is commensurate with all other voices, Solitary and Commensurate according to the natural rules replicating the Universe:

in its solitariness, Alice, the voice is whatever is engrossed in itself, in its commensurability it is a voice for the other voices...–

...I hate Beethoven and to hell with harmony...

said Alice and smiled because she didn't hate Beethoven, she simply loved Bach.

Io kept banging and heralding doom in her own way – loudly, almost happily, because every noise contains the happiness of inquisitive manifestation, while grief is silent and sorrow lies hidden somewhere between the voices of the fugue, in the silence fusing the voices, a space for concealment and comfort... I couldn't open, concealed as I was in the intervocality, because what I was supposed to see, I knew, I'd read about it, I'd disentangled it in the details of life and the defeat of illusions – doom lies within us, we ravish it and meekly rear it until something thrusts it upon us, like a specter with eyes gazing at us, eyes

transcendent to us, ready to ravish us with force... it has many images but I only sees it as a hole... I envy her because the hole will fill up and a peach tree will grow from it –

Alice as a peach tree, with green branches and fleshy-yellow fruits –

but I am unable to see, I conceive of Alice in the conundrum of language, an assembled word, a sign of my worlds, burning down and somehow arbitrarily returning in the commas of an intrinsically preposterous destiny...

In fact, it was destiny that thrust me into that day, a day huddled amidst the creases of fear, and I was standing in front of the shrubbery, where a bell lay hidden in the branches, a little button on the fence, behind which there was nothing – green and cryptic to abstraction – you keep groping, then you suddenly hear steps, a voice –

...stop ringing, for God's sake, she's sleeping and you must've woken her up.

What were you dreaming about, Alice? In your little nightgown and your thumb in your mouth?

No, I didn't know who's sleeping, on that occasion I only saw her mother, extremely odd under the green arch, dressed all in black, and most of all that black ribbon which got hooked on a twig and let her hair down –

...excuse me, there's these shrubs, actually, my husband died, you know, and there's no one to prune them, but your ringing is terrible –

and her hair was also black, pitch black, and I can't even remember when it began to go grey, thought it happened very quickly, and I keep wondering why hair so black will go grey, it was unfair like death, and she just held it up with that gesture Alice had learned from her, she had the same hair, like at that moment when the branch gently wove its way into the ribbon, and my thoughts faltered –

...I thought it wouldn't ring, no ring is heard anyway, also, the birds keep singing and it's like you're playing... –

so much did I want to find an excuse, and the birds were singing indeed, with all the dust and noise outside, there were birds in our garden, actually, 'our' would be an overstatement, it's never been mine, nothing is mine, and I don't mean property, but rather my inability to possess, and I didn't possess more of her even years after that moment when I saw her and started fumbling for an excuse, without even suspecting that Alice was sleeping inside, and without knowing how many times I'd be saying:

...“my Alice”...

my Alice, but she was never mine because my inability to possess would come up against the impossibility of surrender, but this future wasn't available and no anticipation

could redeem the voices of the birds, there was only embarrassment, excuses, and a little bit of fear:

...I heard you've got rooms to rent, that's why I'm ringing...

and I really wanted to add 'Madam', but I didn't dare because those times were different, people didn't address each other, they talked impersonally into space, and their words drifted without destination, while she said in plain language:

...come in, Sir...

she said this to me, only to me, and I crossed the threshold. The first one and then the other one. In a room packed with furniture we were served coffee, Io served it, a young Io, so named by Alice. She named everything and her names would always stick – no one seems to remember what Io's name is, it would only appear on her ID, it must be a syllable from her name, like mine was contracted to Ian – Alice was making her world and she wanted it small and all her own, that's why when that man showed up and when she told me about him, the fact she referred to him with his full name filled me with fear – unaccountable – but now I know that was the beginning of the end...

...Alice...

you'd always call yourself Alice, only yourself, and you were terribly mad if someone tried to change your name...

Alice,

who was then sleeping right above us while we were having coffee without a sense of destiny, facing the past because that's where everything was for us, hopelessly absorbed it was...

...Madam, if I move in, you should know, I don't want to harm you, so it's up to you, well, yes, I was banished...for ten years... I'm a musician...actually, I used to be...it's all lost now...I've got a piano, just a piano...you also have one, really?

...stop it, Alice, can't you hear yourself slamming the keys, come down here and my piano will give you that voice...

...leave me alone, it doesn't work at all and I hate Bach, it's your fault...

...no, it's not, because I told you not to play him, you're too young, he's not for you...

...I'll keep slamming anyway because he tortures me, so I'll torture him and I'll hate him...

...this is sacrilege Alice; Bach is the God of music and you're talking like an atheist...

*...I don't know what's an atheist,
the sounds died down and then in the quiet:*

...what's an atheist...

*...it's hard to explain, but it's something like a man who has never seen himself,
imagine that there are no mirrors, they don't exist, and nothing reflects our image, so man
will have no idea what he looks like, he can't see himself and...*

*...Ian, there's something very good about not knowing what you look like, you can
invent yourself and be very beautiful...*

...but I'm talking about the soul, Alice...

...why does the soul need mirrors if it's not to be seen anyway?...

*...you just don't understand, you'd better play and when you learn to play Bach, you'll
understand...*

...still, what's an atheist?...

...someone who can't play Bach...

...so I'm an atheist?...

*...no, you aren't, you're young and you'll learn; someone who can't listen to him is
also an atheist, so you'd better come down here and I'll play to you, I can do that, in a way...*

Two days later, I moved in my suitcase and my piano, and my life began anew. The incredible had happened – a fairy tale that I wanted to ruin by banging frantically on the door and moaning hysterically:

...open the door, Sir...

as if I didn't know that the blood had run out, the hole had filled up, and a peach tree was going to sprout – I know, I know, you don't know and want to learn in fear, but I –

NO! –

I don't want life to come to an end, I want to be able to move in my piano and place it right across from the window, between the bookcase brimming over with her husband's law books, which she wiped with care and stowed away because the shelves were to be filled with musical scores, and the writing desk, with branches and singing birds carved into it, and with five secret little drawers with fine little keys – she handed them to me and said smiling that I had now taken possession; this was the only thing I've always felt to be in possession of – the writing desk and the old typewriter on it; the keys lay in a tiny wrought-iron box – locked – with the key in the pocket of my dressing gown... That's what I don't want to end, and may it be day one forever, when I heard a voice from above:

...Lia, Mom..., she'd told me her name's Amalia and she turned to me:

...it's my daughter Alice, she shortens all names... come here, Alice, and meet...

and I saw Alice, in a little blue dress and little white socks on almost transparent frail feet, so small and dainty that you could only see her eyes and hair, upraised in a ponytail, streaming down to her waist somewhere behind – there was no branch to slip into the bow of her ribbon to scatter her hair like her mother's – curious, she looked at me and held out her hand, which was supposed to melt into my enormous paw if I dared take it:

...what's your name? I'm Alice...

...Sebastian, uncle Sebastian...

...do you live here...

...yes..

...you're Ian then...

Alice concluded and gave me an approving look, and then, without paying attention to Amalia, who was explaining that we use the polite form when addressing strange gentlemen, went over to the piano, which stood across the room, unabsorbed as yet by the comfort between the bookcase and the writing desk, opened it, and jumped with delight three times –

...so you've got a piano and there's one up there, too, we'll be playing through the walls and hearing each other...then she paused to think...I haven't learned to play yet and mom is looking for a tutor–

...you've got one already, if you really want to learn –

and on one side Amalia was watching me with the eyes of a woman, while on the other side was Alice, and it seemed to me that where their eyes met, there was a fragrance... then Io came in. Io always breaks spells, but we had actually summoned her, she'd come to move some chest, as Madam had ordered; I remember this because, amidst the enchantment of the first day, it was something inexplicable and depressing, but I might have recalled it much later, when the knot was unraveled and the threads took off, and then Amalia made a fuss and hastily started ordering that Io and she should grab one side, I – the other one, she promised it wouldn't be heavy, it was quite light, she said, and she kept apologizing for making us move it into her room, as if we hadn't reshuffled everything in the house, and I simple-mindedly asked if it wouldn't be better to empty it, why carry it around full, at which Amalia got embarrassed and somewhat nervously replied we couldn't do that because she had no key – no one opened this chest, but the stuff in it was light...

so we grabbed it, this chest, which looked like a mahogany coffin, with erased golden incrustations, we carried it upwards – I was in front, they followed – while Alice was helping

with her eyes and it wasn't heavy indeed, but the stairs were tall and steep like the stairs in old houses, and I tripped over a stair, staggered and dropped the chest – a clang was heard and I saw Amalia's face go pale and horror seemed to come upon her –

...oh, god –

she said under her breath and I was benumbed, too –

...I'm sorry, Madam, was it anything fragile... –

she was still holding tight, she didn't let go her share of the weight, and pleaded –

...keep carrying, Mr. Sebastian, keep carrying, it's never opened anyway –

and carry I did, but I've remembered her face, I've remembered it all, though it was twenty-five years ago –

it's preposterous –

twenty-five years later, I was banging on the door and wanted to wipe it all out like a stupid fool, that's what I called her, but I was well aware that I was the true madman because I'd open the door in the end, it was hopeless, but would anyone sentenced to death open the door to his cell to let in those who have come to take him away, and couldn't this moment be infinitely postponed by saturating space with memories until they spring to life and devour

it –

nothing has happened and nothing will ever happen!

I will always walk into the kitchen in the morning and place the large coffee-pot, I'll open the window to usher in the voice of the birds and every day I'll experience the incredible feeling that there is a world that could lie hidden behind the thick branches of some shrubs, a world that could preserve itself in its own essence without manifesting itself, without existing for any other sake but its own, because outside the muddy water of destinies was running, destinies stripped and crumbled, sent marching somewhere, while here, behind the shrubs, Alice was playing her first fugue and asking –

... did Anna Magdalena write it?

At the same time, Amalia and I were creating the secret code of our feelings, that incredible intercom that we used to communicate across the floors, sometimes with only one chord which decomposed into space and resounded slowly, letter by letter –

...today is a drab day and boredom will settle on earth – B minor was spreading all over the keyboard and I had to cut it short –

... come over here! – that was Beethoven, Opus 31, with that bizarre appeal fitted into the major, we used it to summon each other, and Chopin dismissed it with the tiny form, the simple prelude that questioned and apologized; later, when I began to explore the different

modal scales, the code got much subtler and there came a moment when we hardly needed any words – Amalia would play her theme to me, a cantus firmus which penetrated my blood and engaged all my senses, and I would then build up my contrapuntal melodies – I was supposed to have painstakingly found the right modal scale because if I didn't manage to distinguish between major and minor pentatonics, I could get it all wrong, go up and the door wouldn't open – the insufficiency of the five tones had two dimensions – the dissatisfaction enclosed within the minor, which admitted of no penetration, and then my melody had to correlate from afar, it had to carefully and flexibly make up its structure by the rules, so as to leave the underlying cantus firmus free in all the tension of its inner anxiety; yet the insufficiency could also be of the open variety, it could be seeking comfort, and the major-bound pentatonics could be an appeal –

...I need you, come and let me touch your hand – and sometimes the most fabulous thing would happen: I'd hear the melody in the Phrygian mode, so feminine and arousing, and then my heart would pound in the temples, I'd sit at the piano, never using the Dorian mode – that proud proclamation of boisterous masculinity – but would respond with the excitement of tenderness in the lowly Lydian mode, submissively... –

...I want you, Amalia, I expect you, whenever you like, I want you every waking second... –

and Amalia would come down to me, into my room, into my bed, into my skin...

One day, when she grew up, Alice suddenly grasped the code, she uncovered our language and got into the game one morning when I woke up and upon rising heard a compelling plea, Rachmaninoff was breaking into space and wanted something, a motif from *The Overcoat* intruded with an almost interrogative zeal, downright arrogance it was, and I ran up in my pajamas because I couldn't identify the plea, but it was compelling, so without knocking I –

...what is it, darling – and I paused, there was Alice wearing a sly smile, her eyes sparkling with joy –

...don't break the rules, Ian, go down to your room and respond with your piano, guess what I told you and do it, I want it desperately –

...what do you want, Alice? –

...you know the language, don't you...you and mom play with such ease, so now you'll have to find out without words, run down and ask in music!

That's how it all began, or more precisely, that's how it continued until she died and then Alice banned the game, even when I called her down for dinner, she made me use the

rolling pin. We played separately, each of us to their own self, we'd actually listen to each other and keep unraveling each other's meanings, but the dialogue was banned, we buried the game –

did that peach tree rise?

I won't open the door to Io and I will relentlessly remember, I will solidify the past until I stop the flow of time, no, I'll reverse it just a bit, yet far back enough to make that night stop and be no more... but it's impossible, time should have been stopped much earlier, stopped and condemned, with the code of destruction rearranged – it's too late now: the soldiers on guard are asleep, the army's dismantled, the fireflies vanished a long time ago, and when she was little, Alice would stick them on her forehead and glow...

I was probably going mad – Io kept banging right into my head while in my ears it felt like singing...

I'll speak the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth and I won't ask like Pilate
– what is Truth? –

I'll pretend that I know and that you know the Logos – I swear!

And amidst the Logos I'll open to you, Io. But to do that I need to go a long way from the armchair to the door and across the little hallway to the second door... stop banging or you'll break my stained glass, and destruction is already complete anyway...

The truth is I knew what's happened –

Alice has been killed, she's lying up there, two feet away from the piano and two more feet from the mirror –

(does it reflect her or has this problem been solved at least?)

her hair is loose unless someone has tidied it, to make come to life those always spilling curly locks on her forehead, black like Amalia's and rippling out like hers, the blood has run out, a lot of blood, because that was the design that I suspected, then became aware of, and finally waited for in the torpid terror of inaction, but I'll never see it – no-one could make me go up there and see for myself because I don't want to see, I want to believe or doubt at least, I won't look at the blood that soaked into the carpet, and then trickling along the parquet, tried to reach me, but I stopped it, with force and great pains I stopped it, because no one wants to watch, to watch –

I won't be part of this...

I'll open the door, Io, but you'll go there on your own, if I can walk all this distance which seems infinite.

I know that you can kill by action or inaction, for both are but forms of the same despair that gradually embraced Alice, and the truth is that if you call a murder suicide, the reality wouldn't be too distorted, only the form is different and I know for sure that she didn't resist, on the contrary, it was all done in submissive silence and blissful resignation, so one couldn't really tell if the last moan was one of love or death, it's just that the Great Erotic Act reached its final focal point, at which it poured out forever in spasms of blood which made the house tremble – I heard or felt that because I also trembled and I know that the sheets on the piano got scattered all over the floor, the score of that fugue in D minor which Alice kept playing all night until the door unlocked and he walked in –

Bach lies stiff in her fingers – there were sheets around her when you entered, weren't there?

I didn't see them but I know, I heard them falling and I moved no more, crushed under the burden of the unwillingness to understand, see, and hear, I was transfixed and when he knocked on my door, because, of course, he couldn't wait to share it, not a single muscle twitched in my body, I stood petrified, and he wasn't banging like Io, he was quietly seeking repentance, but I had the same need, so I just whispered within myself –

...Joseph, we'll meet when they fetter your body and my soul.

That's what happened that night, painted in the broad strokes of isolation, without the details that I'd rather keep to myself because the detail is something pretty uncertain, like the blending ghostly threads of the despair that kept weaving its way into the horizontal plane and then flowed out into the vertical plane of our existence – Alice's existence and mine – and into Joseph's steps, which were dying away –

I couldn't have opened that door, Joseph – my big wooden cross with the Crucified over the piano, so high up that I can hardly reach it, was enshrouded in cobweb and I pulled an invisible thread, which tugged at the invisible, and the Savior's hands began to unravel, then his legs lay bare and I couldn't move, dumbfounded by the image, subject to my hand, which kept roaming the air, suddenly caught up in the scope of the immeasurable – despair breeds details and I'm not sure what was meaningful and a sign on that night, and what was arbitrary, so I needed to understand –

if the preposterous dimension of the logos had occurred, or fissured being had erupted into an erotic spasm,

if life had died or death had simply sprung to life, yet I remember the detail – I heard three repeats of the second voice of the fugue, then she sang the first one and banged on the keys, it hadn't come out right and there was insufficiency about the sound, so she started anew, quietly listened through the whole piece, and all of a sudden aggregated it all, clasped it into chords, and the interwoven voices wriggled into decomposing dissonances, but I knew this stage, I'd been through it, or more precisely, read about it, and I was perplexed because everything got mixed up – I no longer knew what used to be, what is, and what will inevitably be, I even groped for the manuscript, among the sheets, which I picked one by one while she was writing, to keep them safe from her scatterbrained life – I kept rummaging but I found something else, which sidetracked me – here it is – the manuscript that all of you will have read, and don't you find that there's nothing more to say, everything has been recorded, only the ending is left to your imagination and to destiny.

She started working on it a year ago and I vividly recall that evening when instead of the piano I heard the chattering of a typewriter, at first I thought she was filling out a form because it was at the time when the government had begun restoring property and she'd already seen an attorney, but some time went by and the chattering persisted, then I asked myself and headed upstairs, she must have heard my steps because she stopped, and when I opened the door, there was this strange smile on her lips –

...you know, Ian, I've taken up writing something, I don't really know what's going to come out of it, but it's proving quite strange, some erotic power of language has overwhelmed me, because, do you understand, nothing's clear any more, my ideas are all jumbled up and thus I hope to learn...

I did understand and long afterwards I hoped, for she didn't want to learn, but to save herself, and perhaps she'd found the only way out, but later, the more the pages the more scared I got – no salvation could I see, nor a way out, Being pressed her relentlessly and pulled her towards itself – a foreboding of death filled me and months later, when I was reading the desperate confession, I'd whisper within myself –

...stop it, Alice! –

pointless and perhaps even mean, for not only wasn't I trying to stop her, but I was waiting to experience her body in the logos, to embrace her from within, like Joseph – her lover and abetted murderer – someone had to put an end to the impossible, and in the logos I was perhaps the one to do so. I played the game of distinctions within the A that marked Alice, but to me it also marked her mother, there was a lot of common ground, details that she didn't suspect, couldn't suspect, while I passionately inspected the words under a magnifying

glass and experienced Alice-Amalia in memory and in longing, in a past beyond repair and a present beyond reach, which was becoming mine through Joseph –

he is ‘he’ and ‘you’ there, which means I –

thus I used the universality of the unnamed – that’s what truth is about. Even that night when the fugue sounded so familiar with its triple repetition and the sense of déjà lu, which actually means déjà vécu, thrust me into the dissonance of preposterously interwoven voices, even then, when I already expected the steps, and I’d known long since that I’d inevitably hear them, even then I immersed myself in my unquenchable thirst, and I didn’t mean to save her, I meant to love her, opening the pages of the flesh and getting sucked into her...

... there are no white bed sheets here, just some colorful rug –

...what do you need sheets for, you can’t expect sheets in a kitchen –

...I’ll go upstairs and get some –

...that’s stupid, these old houses creak and squeak, you’ll wake up everyone, see how incredibly quiet it is –

... no water, either –

... there is some but it’s cold, and we don’t need anything, do we?

He probably had a point yet she needed the sheets, their whiteness mostly, which sets off the body sharply and visibly, this helped her see it there all the time, so that she could fancy and foster the illusion – it, the body, wants, it desires – not I because that would be an excess. She knew that men know what they want – not from her, that was of no consequence – but from themselves, their bodies were so distinct and clear-cut, with almost no question about them, and that’s why they didn’t disturb, no mystery in them appealed to her, they were so convinced of their physical existence that they aroused her genuine admiration and envy, while she needed the white sheets to keep an eye on her body, not for her own sake, she didn’t want anything, but for their sake, for the sake of the game and its rules, according to which she simply had no right to disappear...

...right now he’ll touch me – A. thought – and I’ll find out yet again that I have a skin...

At that point the clock struck and I heard the door unlocking –

the one who had touched her forever was coming in to release her –

that’s what I thought and you could well accuse me of complicity because I didn’t do much – on the contrary – I shied away from this thought, kept it at bay and began to marvel at her giving him a key, she’d never given one to anybody because her house epitomized her inviolable independence, and this made me think again – this is certainly no accident, she

must have given it to him with intent, with a horrible purpose in mind... I felt chaos taking over my soul and something rose in my entrails, the nausea of knowledge came upon me, and I cannot live like that, so I returned to language, its structure is clear, or quite simply, there is structure in it, and then I reached towards music, too – I took out Stravinsky's most inappropriate LP record, *The Soldier's Tale*, which was meant to assault me with its irony, to ridicule me with the pantomime of sounds and to completely detach me –

 this is not I, I am no more, and the world –

 does it exist? –

 of course not, and it's all a linguistic invention in which we, the most invented signs, reside...

 This is the truth if I choose not to ask myself –

 what is Truth.

 What else do you want to know? Is it what has been described as truth? Which one of the many – this one or that one, for is there a truth beyond language, but perhaps you want to know if it's true – I don't know, I recognize quite a few things, like when I was reading before the door unlocked and before I heard the squeaking steps, bearing the cross of their own destiny – it was five years after Amalia fell apart from within, as Io has testified already, I am certain about the timing because she wanted to go on a trip with some friends but it coincided with her mother's death anniversary, so Alice was embarrassed, I should have stopped her maybe, and then no one would ever have touched her, but I was the one who persuaded her to go, saying:

 ...Amalia wouldn't mind, I'll cook dinner myself, I'll arrange all the figurines and I'll greet her when she comes.

 This is also truth – truth in its sublime manifestation as mystery, which made one of Alice's life and mine, for we didn't quite understand it and never appreciated our little cabal – was it good or evil – we accepted as a destiny and as a doom that incident on the fourteenth day after Amalia's death, when we walked into her room for the first time, to tidy her things and part with whatever bore her imprint and was no longer needed. We folded her garments in silence – her dresses rippled down before my eyes to let me immerse myself in the whiteness of her body, in the hair clips and pins, which her hair would eject in the excitement of arousal, in the lingerie, which my hand had smoothly explored, penetrating into the most intimate oases.

 That's what I saw, but what did Alice see?

Then we opened the writing desk, but we had sworn not to read a line, neither the maiden letters, nor the diaries, which sheltered the scent and the dusk of hidden thoughts, we laid everything into cardboard boxes and we carried up to the attic the secrets that death did not make ours – and thus we erased everything, Amalia was evaporating and only her bed declined, as it were, to let go of the form of her body, for Alice lay down on the edge and said –

...this is where I'll sleep from now on, –

but she couldn't fully ease herself into it, for these were not her curves and an alien presence embraced her –

...she'll get used and she'll accept me – she said, once aware of the problem, and thus we finished, we were done, yet not quite, because the full stop spilled over into three dots...

...we forgot about the chest – Alice suggested, but we hadn't really forgotten, it's just that we never talked about it, and it was perhaps secretly ensconced in our thoughts, this coffin that no one took any notice of while Amalia lived –

... we'd better not open it, Alice, Amalia used to say no one should open it, the key was lost somewhere, hidden or thrown out, even she didn't know what's in it, or at least she pretended not to know...

Actually, that was all rubbish, for Amalia had never told me anything like that, we all passed it like a plain piece of furniture that simply couldn't be disposed of, and I got scared, for I suddenly remembered carrying it upstairs on the first day, and I remembered stumbling, and I remembered Amalia's face altering and turning pale...

Why should we be the ones to take the risk of knowing?

... give it up, Alice –

and she laughed back at me –

...come on, Ian, why this mysticism now?! I can't believe *you* are talking! –

and she headed to the closet to pick up the claw hammer, and I stayed in front of the coffin, unable to decide if Pandora's box whetted our curiosity or Noah's Ark aroused our mythical instincts, and I smiled inside, for I expected mouse-eaten sacred scrolls and an antiquated set of sequins to spring out of nothingness, while Alice had already placed the hammer where two claws were hooked together, married by the flow of time.

It wouldn't open.

Of course it wouldn't.

It kept stubbornly resisting, but we now pressed and pushed together, we fitted the sharp end and pried so hard, without knowing why and with our doubts left behind, that it eventually bent and gave in, trickles of sweat were running down our temples, and a lock of hair stuck on Alice's forehead – it creaked, sang a hoarse tune, and slowly opened, overcoming the last resistance of the rust...

At first we didn't understand – there were a number of things in there, different in size and shape, wrapped in dusty, yellow-with-age cotton – Alice reached forward and picked one of the pieces, the cotton dissolved in her hands and she sighed –

...oh, God, how beautiful it is!

It was incredible indeed, a porcelain figurine, almost ten centimeters high, representing some king in a red cloak, framed with golden filigree, with three glittering stones on his crown, diamonds perhaps; I peered in amazement, they proved genuine pearls indeed –

...Alice, this is a treasure, a true miracle!

We didn't yet know who the king was and why he was there, so Alice laid him aside and began unwrapping the other ones – a fisherman came up with a girdle and a fishing net, made of fine silver threads, then a coffin with a dead man, wrapped in white linen, another fisherman, different, though, with a different face, then a hunchbacked and crippled figure popped up – enraptured, Alice kept unfolding the treasure, her fingers stroked the dainty figurines and put them aside ever more swiftly in the impatience of reaching the next one, until suddenly, under the disintegrating cotton she made herself seen –

The Virgin with the infant in her hands, lips glued to her breast –

and then the whole picture came back together, we grasped it and our eyes met, full of elation – neither with grief, nor with the anticipation of sorrow – and I picked up again the king in the red cloak and golden filigree, the king who now had a name –

...Herod the Great –

Alice whispered and laid Simon and Andrew next to each other, while Lazarus waited for us to unwrap the Savior...

I think this revelation went on for hours: we lined up the figurines and we found out they appeared in different guises: Peter as Simon, then Peter as Peter, the fishermen as fishermen, then as apostles, the Virgin as a Madonna, but then as the Pieta, and when Mary Magdalene emerged, we both trembled with ecstasy, and Alice couldn't resist, broke the silence and asked me –

.. tell me, Ian, why was it all hidden? Didn't my mom tell you?

I didn't know. I really didn't know and we simply had to go on, because we hit the bottom, and there lay a hand-woven, moth-eaten cover, which apparently concealed something larger, Alice pulled the cover and two large figures lay underneath, wrapped in linen, tucked up like Lazarus... she picked one of them, I picked the other one, and we took up warily unfolding the cotton – each of us engulfed in their own revelations – Alice pressed Jesus in her hands, while I dizzily gazed at the Seducer...

...these are masterpieces, Alice, where did they come from and who made them? –

but she did not respond and I looked at her to see her eyes drifting towards the corner, and I had difficulty following their confounded trajectory, which seemed to return to the irises, and I did see her – Amalia – sitting there, small, diminished, and dainty like the figurines, which, uncovered after the long darkness of their exile, absorbed and repelled the light in a myriad hues –

...Amalia –

I whispered and Alice nodded, and then as if suddenly aware of something, picked some cotton from the wardrobe and set about slowly and carefully, almost without looking away from Amalia, laying the figurines back into the chest, as if she were reading the Gospel backwards, and when she laid the three Wise Men, a ruby star, and Herod the Great on top, Amalia faded, smiled at us for the last time, and vanished...

At this we closed the chest and never opened it again until the anniversary came, we then carried all the figurines downstairs, to the dining-room, dusted them off and restored their original sheen, lined them up in the order of irrevocable destiny, and when we sat at the table, ready for comfort and contemplation, Amalia came and seated herself next to us, very tiny in the image of her death, but we could see her, we talked about her and to her, for we knew that she is all-understanding in her shroud of silence, which detached her from us and inscribed her in the splendor of the porcelain figurines.

We performed this every year on the Date, but then I persuaded her to leave, without being aware with whom and to what I was steering her, actually I was certain nothing could happen to her, she was so far away from the world, so tragically cut off from it, that no matter what, it would glance off her and pass without leaving an impression – Alice was the most sinless sinner, in fact she didn't know what sin is and she couldn't possibly know because she simply had no body – that's why I loved to read these lines – she was aware of this, she knew it or came to know it at some point.

But that night, when I was sitting alone in front of the burning candle, gazing at Amalia's ghostly silhouette, which came and went, swinging with the anxious crackling of the

flame, burdened with the insights of her life in the beyond, insights that I had no clue of, stuck as I was in the time of the seemingly eternal “now”,

that night Alice was touched and a crack to the abyss opened up, an unexpected query and a persistent plea fleshed her out, suggesting the anticipation of a body and of that Great Erotic Act, which must have been lingering in the air, unsuspected and unthinkable, yet instilling in one’s sight, hearing and touch the germ of destruction and the meaning of mortality, the magic of the victim in that inevitability which death transforms into freedom...

What’s the point of speaking, now that everything has been transformed into Logos, which also means Truth?

Secretly and silently the thing was budding on that night –

in the flame of the candle as an insight – for me, –

in the glow of the gas lamp, containing the blaze in the smoked glass – for her, –

in the past, which looked like an apparition now –

and in the bodies, which got casually intertwined...

She writes he embraced her, as it usually happened and like everybody else, even a bit more clumsily he did it, with surprising insecurity, and then that weird feeling cut her to the quick, it stayed with her and began working slowly, carving out a new essence – a sense of helplessness overwhelmed her, yet not that familiar helplessness of hers, which added the hardness of substance to her, so that she could see herself reflected, created and experienced in the shape of her skin, which detached her but also contained her within the indispensable shell – this time helplessness wafted from the other side, from a similarly unreflecting surface, which did not exist in itself, but only in the re-confirmation of its existence in the other, in her, in what was supposed to carve its own image-enjoyment, before working on his...

When she came back from that place, Alice told me:

...you know, I met a man who literally killed me –

that’s exactly what she said –

– killed me –

and then she corrected herself –

...I mean he uncovered me.

Back then I didn’t make out what she meant, I was busy pruning the roses and I only asked –

...what’s this man’s name?

... Joseph – said Alice and the sound of it astonished me more than the rest of her words, for this did mean something...

...What is it? – I asked again just to make sure and she came back:

... Joseph...you know, his business is... he makes toys, he designs them, actually – and she found this quite amusing. A month or two later I met him and I just couldn't accept him – he was much older than her and I was jealous because he was younger than me, after all, he looked like someone sedate and stodgy, in other words, I waited for him to disappear, and for quite a while believed he was one of the many stories in Alice's history, but time passed, inexorably burgeoning rather than running, and here we are – she disappeared instead of him, maybe because he never was, while she was real, evanescent like the truth that lies beyond the question

– what is Truth –

elusive, which is why she lay all gashed that night, two feet from the piano, two more from the mirror, with her hair tidied –

... he had tidied her hair, right? –

he'd tidy everything, he'd reduce everything to the familiar, and that's why he killed her – Alice was living and whatever is dead poses no risk.

That's why I didn't kill her. Alice had a deep mistrust of death, so I wasn't sure this would solve the problem, one had to be absolutely godless to be confident that when raising a hand to kill, it won't end up in emptiness, which is inviolable, in existence itself, which is invariable...

... is this the reason why I didn't kill her?

Our love for her was equally intense, our desire to see her dead was equally intense, and when we got what we wanted, he came asking for forgiveness, he scratched on my door like a dog chased out into the cold of the dark, and I kept silent, mesmerized by the scraping sound of the record player's needle, which kept digging into the groove, and I frantically tried to finish unraveling the Savior's legs, for I'd picked up the thread the spider had knitted, and I thought it was time for me to have a clean slate with Him. That's why I didn't open the door, for we both kept whispering –

...Alice, my love, –

but he knew already, while I didn't want to know what's under that shell and what's the color of blood, and whether the mirror did absorb the enjoyment of the image and the image in its final enjoyment... I'm not asking, I'm asking myself, rather, and I know that the answer is within me, as it was within Joseph, but he wanted to touch, and like Thomas, he needed a wound, while I –

NO, I DON'T!

because within me is Alice,
my wound,
and I know how she's bleeding,
I know the color of her blood
and I know how her own reflections devour her...
...I'll open, Io, but you'll go on your own...
...I'll open right now...