

DON JUAN DE LA  
MANCHA

ROBERT MENASSE

TRANSLATED BY DAVID BRYER

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Don Juan de La Mancha

or

The Education of Desire



# 1

I first came to understand the beauty and wisdom of celibacy when Christa, after rubbing chilli pods between her hands, masturbated me and then expressed the wish that I – to put it in her own words – should fuck her up her arse. There was, she said, a special verb for this in Ancient Greek – for the combination of chillis and anal intercourse, that is. Actually, not for anal intercourse with *chillis*, she said, but with horseradish: “Correction: horseradish” – for this technique at least. She used the Ancient Greek verb, she shrieked it, I shrieked too, and if what I shrieked was a word, then it was more ancient than Ancient Greek. My eyes watered. I don’t think that being in a blazing house would have filled me with a greater feeling of panic.

Celibacy – which at that moment, unfortunately, really did enter my mind – and tripped off my tongue, too – spares you two kinds of experience that are unavoidable with the opposite sex: boredom and pain – that is, panting with hope for a swift passage, so to speak, to the beyond in the arms of a dull woman, or even worse,

with a not so dull woman. Make the best of a bad job, I said, or the best of a big job.

“You and your puns!” said Christa, as I sat in a hip-bath filled with a concoction of sage and camomile.

She left without showering. She was in a hurry, had to give a paper. She was a lecturer in Classics. I sat in the bathtub, freezing and burning. Never again did I want to put myself in her hands, in the hands of a woman. On the other hand, I didn’t know what else I should do – apart from the things I *had* to do.

## 2

It is a mistake to believe when you are hardly having any sex, that this is because you no longer want it. On the contrary, at the very time when I’m finding sex boring, my sex-life has never been so wild.

Two reasons for this: first, I’m no longer lacking in confidence. Why should I lack confidence in a situation I find boring? A lack of confidence is far more detrimental to virility than boredom could be. It is human to lack confidence in bed, but to react unthinkingly to stimulation is to be like an animal. On the other hand, cynicism is human. That’s why in the end when the animal gets out of bed, he reassumes a

human form. Secondly, however, a lack of desire is not sufficient reason for becoming uninterested in sex. On the contrary. There is probably no stimulus as powerful as the one that begins to burn in a man when he has lost his desire and lives in a society that can't even sell a litre of water without charging the product with eroticism. You can lose your desire, it's true, but you can't forget it. Desire is indeed the only thing you *cannot* forget. We hear that Alzheimer's patients, lost completely in a biographical fog, have spontaneous erections. The drive to *feel desire* has already become stronger than the drive to satisfy it. Perhaps satisfaction consists only in being able to feel it. One day I want to feel it so powerfully, so fiercely, that I'll be able to find the meaning it has for everyone else plausible at least.

At this point a digression is necessary. Digressions are always necessary, so first a digression about digressions. Love addicts know that the vast majority of all our everyday dealings have nothing to do with love, come nowhere near it even. The daily round, life in general, comes across therefore as an endless succession of digressions leading them away from love, but which they hope will turn out in the end to be the only circuitous, but passable, routes which will lead them *to* it. That is why love addicts are specialists in digressions, which for them determine their mode of, and attitude to, life.

Those bent on a career wish to progress, those bent on love to digress.

So, the first digression: when I was young, happiness was old. Advertisements featured only old people. You were assured every conceivable form of happiness by greying or white-haired men in the autumn of their years: clean washing, aromatic coffee, jolly alcoholism – “That calls for an Asbach Uralt!” said the granddad on the television, drinking his schnapps and looking the very picture of happiness. How out of reach happiness must have appeared to me then as a child! It would be very many years before happiness would open its doors to *me*. Then when I finally got closer to being able to have a share in happiness, all the happy people exhibiting the happy state in advertisements were thirty years younger. Suddenly it was twenty-year-olds who were delighting in clean washing, young people whose shirts had become soaked in sweat in the fitness centre – and even alcohol now belonged to the lads, the students or apprentice hairdressers, who, after a swig of Bacardi, would immediately and with abandon break into a dance on a palm-fringed beach. How far back in the past must the happiness I missed out on appear to me today! It is an exaggeration to speak of people of my age as a lost generation. But lost in commercials – that can be proved in all objectivity.

In our time there were no other devices that promised happiness as effectively as advertisements. When it came, the promise to practise consumer abstinence was not our revenge for failing to feature in those advertisements, but instead just the moral fig-leaf covering the austere world of students trying to live on grants.

## 3

I feel physically older than I am. Emotionally, though, I am more immature than I should be at my age. This is nonsense. Says Hannah. On several occasions in the past I would have to have been as old as I am today, and so have points of comparison, if I were to be able to assess my physical and emotional state. The only thing about what I said that *is* true is that you never feel that your age fits you like a tailor-made suit. Never.

## 4

Christa is married. A woman like her could never be seduced by a man like me if she were single and looking for the love of her life. But her life's a bed of roses – and so it's open to Johnny-come-latelys and debt consultants.

She loves her husband, George. When she says that, you can bet your bottom dollar it's true. And they couldn't have it better: no children, two healthy incomes. George works for the industrial advisory body. I don't think he can even take a crap without noting with satisfaction that the turd he produces is bigger than the biggest Chinese turd. Competitive, then. He talks about competition all the time. With China in particular. The great challenge of the new century, he says. George's life expectancy should statistically give him another twenty-seven years, another thirteen years maximum in his job until the scrapheap. No children. But he talks about a century. I am suspicious of self-styled Solomons who think in centuries. It's insupportable. It would be insignificant. We go out to eat – a group of friends. Christa goes to the loo – a minute later I go to the loo. The ladies. The door is ajar. Christa is sitting on the loo pedestal – I stand in front of her – she takes my cock in her mouth. How that sounds. There are no words to describe this nonsense decorously. Just briefly, then. It isn't an act. Just a scene. Three slurps only and I have to pack things away again. It's not a question of the pleasure of doing it but of the pleasure of then knowing *at the table* that we did it. Christa grins. Meanwhile at the table George and the others are talking about competition. Christa goes back – a minute later me. She would never leave George.

## 5

There are many metaphors for the happiness missing in your life. Grapes, for example. We didn't have a lead article today. We've always got plenty of articles that can do as leaders, but Franz didn't think any of them were much cop. So he expanded a short announcement from an agency, which reported that grape pips were particularly potent "trappers of radicals". A new American study had revealed this apparently. So-called "free radicals" – Franz googled this and explained what they were: "Atoms that are missing an electron and that steal this missing part from another atom which needs it" – these radicals lead to premature ageing and so shorten your life expectancy. Since cigarette smoking releases a veritable explosion of free radicals in the system, smokers in particular should eat a lot of grapes, the pips having been shown to be the best antioxidants. The pips! So you shouldn't spit them out but swallow them. Franz illustrated this article with an archive photo of a bikini-clad beauty eating grapes. Unlike Franz, I no longer take journalism seriously. Even when I sometimes believe what we write. I sent my secretary, Traude, to the nearest supermarket to get some grapes, had a cigarette and answered a few emails. The grapes she eventually brought back, and, after washing, put in a bowl on my table, were seedless.

The section of the newspaper for which I'm responsible is called "Life".

## 6

I hardly write anything now. In my section I just point the direction things should go in. But the direction would be clear without any nod from me. I sometimes edit an article. Here I have to be extremely careful, though, for every attempt to change bad German into German that's a little less bad, or a phrase into a sentence, triggers an aggressive reaction from the staff: they think good German is bad journalism. Franz, for example, loves these stupid "declares-sentences". He thinks they're a mark of style. After every word-for-word quotation follows not a "he said" or "she said" but a "declares" plus adjective plus name. "Revlon's new anti-ageing face cream is the first to have a scientifically verifiable effect,' declares Revlon's convinced press agent, Agnes Schönborn." Or "The thermal baths at Obertuschl are setting new standards in health tourism,' declares a euphoric Unterpointner, the director of the baths." I read this and declare myself content. Especially now since I myself have started to write once again.

Write, Nathan! said Hannah, that is, Dr Singer, my therapist. Write everything down! An account of the journey that's brought you to this point where you don't feel any desire. We can work with that.

An autobiography?

No. A reportage. You can do that. Imagine you have to write a reportage of the Schengen border crossing, a life on the border. Nothing doing. Life on the edge of no-man's-land. Well-organized but under threat somehow. Because what is foreign to you is so close. Soldiers with night-vision equipment are on patrol with dogs as keen as mustard, trained to sniff out foreigners wanting to make the crossing. And now replace Schengen with desire. Such an account I'd like to read, Nathan!

All that began early on – but I really don't want to have to work through my childhood. I want to get to grips with the age I am!

We're not working in the classically Freudian manner, Nathan. But every story does have a beginning, a middle and an end. Did I mention childhood? No. And after the end comes the way out.

So I have to find an end?

The border you're standing in front of. How did you get there? What is life like on the border?

Funnily enough, I trusted Dr Singer. I thought she suited me. Because I regarded her as a charlatan. Because

the psychoanalytical concepts she used reminded me of New York cocktail parties. And because she was fat and overbearing. She was like my mother. What's more, she was the embodiment of a Jewish mamma. Hannah looked like a mamma, talked like one, but, in total contrast to a mamma, she didn't try to instil feelings of guilt in me but tried on the contrary to take such feelings from me. I told her about my affairs like a boy confessing to his mother something he'd been up to.

I feel bad, Hannah. I'm a married man. Happily married! Why am I so unhappy when I really am happily married? Why do I do it?

Our job is not to rescue your marriage but to reconstruct your libido. You know what you've got with your wife. But it's only with others that you can look for what you haven't got. That's a matter of logic, not morals!

I had doubts, too, about her competence, of course. Looking the way she did, there was no chance of transference – in the sense that I would fall in love with her.

## 7

I would never join a club, I told Hannah. Unless – the one exception – there were a club for free radicals.

Please, Nathan! Do stop this punning of yours!

## 8

Why am I incapable of pleasure? My father was always a model of self-indulgence. Whenever faced with the choice between pleasure and correctness, he never dithered for a second. Not that he took bribes, it was just that he liked taking – whatever life had to offer. He didn't see it in such narrow terms because he abhorred narrowness. He so enjoyed the high society which, as a society reporter, he had to write about that, like the celebrities, he no longer had a private life but had instead a private delight in all the possibilities which life offers those who are in the public eye. He took a sincere interest in the privileges of the happy few, that is, he *partook* of the best champagnes, of the finest cuisine and of the starlets gagging for full stardom. He invited his family, insofar as he could still remember their names – me, therefore – to free holidays in the vacation to luxury hotels belonging to a former world ski-champion or an ageing supermodel, allowed himself to be paid court to by those salivating for the impact of publicity, and basked in their fame. In all my holidays as a schoolboy, unlike my classmates, I never once went to Jesolo, the popular seaside resort near Venice, but I knew the Hotel de Paris in Monte Carlo like the back of my hand.

Why pay out good money for some worthless *pensione* in Jesolo when we can have the royal suite at the Hotel de Paris for free? said Father. What do you mean it's no fun here? I sometimes think you're emotionally disturbed!

He knew how to enjoy himself. And meanwhile I had to be "a good boy", which meant sit quietly somewhere until he "was through with his work" – that is, with socializing. And if he wasn't actually writing about it – about the hotel and its illustrious guests – then the hosts saw it as an investment in the future. And they were right to do so. Father was loyal. In the sense that he could be relied on if high society needed something from him, for at the end of the day he needed them, too. For him the embodiment of humanity was a millionaire whose egotism took the form of generosity towards Father. Such a nice man, a gentleman, said Father – strange how the gutter press have it in for him at the moment, as if he were some monster! It was simply a question of envy, in Father's view, and of politics. He had a horror of politics. Like everything it was mere window-dressing as far as he was concerned, but less fun. He never read the political section, even of the paper he wrote for. He voted for the party whose political campaigners promised not to raise taxes, in fact to leave everything as it was. And he honestly and sincerely did all he could to improve the image of his "gentlemen". Except when a

gentlemen became the target of the paper's Law section, at which point he said nothing and was "personally disappointed".

The first time... is that an age thing, Hannah, my constantly thinking of "first times" recently? It happened in the Easter holidays. I was twelve. Father had taken me with him to Kitzbühel, as he'd been invited to a celebrity wedding there. It was the third evening, the last I was to have with my father for some time. Like the wedding party we were staying at Hotel Tennerhof. Five stars! said Father.

The night sky has more. I just wanted to dissolve and become mere dust in the atmosphere. But I was as heavy as lead. I had got my favourite meal, a Wiener Schnitzel, though I wasn't allowed to sit at my father's table in the dining room but was served my five-star schnitzel in a small side room, the so-called "Stüberl" or mini-parlour. After this I sat in the hotel lounge and read the novel Father had given me for the holidays, *Oliver Twist*, in an edition illustrated and abridged for young people. Like everything in my childhood, even the novels I received were pared down to size. I looked up continually, felt overwhelmed by the casual way in which gentlemen and ladies moved, expressed their high spirits and sometimes cast curious looks at me: who might that child be, sitting and reading there in the hotel lounge at ten o'clock at

night. I was frightened of moving. No false moves! I wanted to go to my father, no, I wanted my father. On at least one of these three evenings, the last, I wanted him to pay some attention to me, I wanted to talk to him as a “grown-up”, as he required me to be when he made me sit alone in the “Stüberl” or in the hotel lounge. I set off in search of him, clasping my book across my chest. I found Father in the hotel bar, which was packed and humming with the noise of festivity. He was standing by the bar, glass in hand, and talking with a woman. He said something and the woman laughed. He was a very good-looking man, better-looking than the famous men he wrote about. I summoned up all my courage and went up to him. Papa!

He was irritated.

I’ve things to do still! he said. Can’t you see?

The woman smiled down at me. She had incredibly long eyelashes. I was impressed. I didn’t know then that eyelashes could be stuck on. A woman with eyelashes like that is something special, I thought. I felt almost ashamed for having disturbed Father.

You’re such a grown-up boy now, he said, you can go off to bed by yourself, if you’re tired!

The example he gave me, however, was a different one. He *was* grown-up and never wanted to go to bed by himself.

The woman smiled at me. Not in a maternal way. Why should she. After all she wasn't my mother. I was such a grown-up boy now. I ran off, knowing I'd made my father feel awkward. Because I wasn't as self-assured and clever as he was. Because I had blushed. And was sweating. I ran to my room. Went to bed.

I quarrelled with my father. I admired him even more. I'll never come up to scratch, I thought. That night was the first time that my thoughts revolved round and rubbed up against a woman. I thought of a particular woman, a real one: of her, the woman at my father's side. Her small firm breasts like the bellies of birds that had fallen out of the nest. Her long eyelashes like black butterflies. A grim sort of paradise. And I strangled the serpent.

## 9

You're very perky today, Nathan! said Hannah. In love?

No, I said. On Saturday our leader is "Love by internet". I tried out the portal, "eHarmony", and answered 436 questions about my personality – only to discover that among the nine million members there was no one who matched mine. And not just in my city or my country, but in the whole world.

## 10

My father was an impatient man. He couldn't bear waiting. He shoved ahead and if anyone objected, he said it wasn't good manners to get so worked up.

I didn't get much attention from my father, not much more than a chronically sick person gets from their doctor, in whose waiting room you spend most of your time patiently waiting for a man who has *no* time.

Your role model, or the situations into which your role model brings you, can have a permanent effect on you. My father was a model of how to enjoy life, and I had to wait while he did. In this way, and from him above all, I learnt about waiting.

At some point, I thought or hoped – or I think I thought then – at some point I'll be next. The door will open and it will be my turn.

“Sit yourself down and wait for me there. You can sit in the front row. I'll be right back. I won't be long!”

Yes, Papa.

“Stay there till I get back. First row! Great, eh? You won't go anywhere till I'm back, will you? You'll see – it's fun. They're rehearsing a cabaret here!”

Yes. What's a caba—?

A cellar. It was a hot afternoon under a glaring light. I had broken out in a sweat from running after my father.

Here in the cellar it was dark and my sweat grew cold. A man was standing in the spotlight making jokes I didn't understand, but there were some people there who laughed repeatedly. Then there were others who spoke, and then there was some singing. Sometimes the man wasn't happy and the others had to repeat what they had said. They were all so terribly jolly. But I didn't understand why. I only understood the man who was always unhappy and wanted the others to repeat their amusing goings-on. He shouted. He stormed. Then he spoke to a fat man on the stage, who was obviously rather stupid. But that seemed to satisfy him. Suddenly the three women were standing directly in front of me between the first row and the stage. They paid no attention to the child sitting there who could no longer see the stage but just their buttocks. At eye level. Their legs. The women were wearing narrow black tricot and fishnet stockings. They stood in front of me and waited. The man said something and they all laughed. After all, father had said it would be fun. But I didn't understand the joke. The women were standing in front of me, waiting and whispering amongst themselves. I stared at their buttocks, their stockinged legs. I thought – nothing. I was still too young to connect arousal with a thought. That was just the seed of a thought that later began to germinate and finally to burgeon.

Father came back. And now there were four women in fishnet stockings.

Come on, we're off, he said. He didn't ask me if I had found it funny.

At last! What took you so long? I said to Christa. I'd been waiting for her for over an hour in the bar of the Hotel "Zur Spinne", where we had arranged to meet.

I did a quick bit of shopping, she said. Bought some fishnet stockings. Something you've always wanted. Look!

I nodded. I'd drunk too much while waiting.

## 11

My father had a friend who went by the name of Silver – he called him The Mine. Moritz Silver had been an Austrian tennis champion in his youth. That was as far as his talent took him. Not to be sniffed at, though. After this he earned a fortune as an importer of Dunlop tennis balls. He was the first in Austria to have the yellow tennis balls. Before then there had only been the white Slazenger ones, which were heavier and therefore now rejected by ambitious amateur players worried about getting tennis elbow. Were they really heavier? It said so in the paper. Father?

Either way the yellow balls were more chic. It was here again that I came into conflict with ye olde ways of the world. My view was that tennis balls had to be white, just like the players' shirts. That's the way it's always been. The sport in white. But the triumphant advance of the yellow balls was unstoppable and it was the oldies who were in the vanguard. Those much younger accepted what they got. For them the yellow balls were simply there from the start and normal. Then there was me. Alone in opposition. I wanted the world to stay for a while the way I'd got to know it. Fathers alone should move aside at some point, soon. But apart from that the world should remain as I knew it. How was I to assume control in this world if everything was continually changing?

Digression. Countless people the world over concern themselves with all aspects of childhood. They write books, they analyse, they provide therapy. But to this day not a single one recognizes the underlying problem, that childhood is a cul-de-sac. The child learns to be a child and nothing more. Conservatively, it learns to be a good child, or progressively, a free spirit, a child off the leash. But a child. Suddenly it's grown-up. Biologically. But in its head? A child. Emotionally? A hermaphrodite. The whole of childhood is a training in how to be a perfect child, at the end of which you are released from

this training and should, as a fully trained child, no longer be one. That would be like, after years of football training, getting your licence for bobsleighting. So down the run you go. I'm scared! Why? You're grown-up now, aren't you?

I distrust all those who cannot imagine they were once children. So I distrust nearly everyone. Most of all those with beards. Beards are monkey masks on children's faces.

Silver. He talked non-stop. His name is not Gold, you see, said Father. He was nobody's fool. He was raking in a fortune, which to his mind attested to the fact that he understood and held sway in the world. He had a son the same age as me. On the Saturdays I was with Father I was allowed to play with Silver Junior. Today you can play with Gregor again, said my father, when he picked me up. But it was only the fathers who played. Cards. The Silvers had an English nanny who kept a watchful eye over the children. The nanny's watchful eye was on a private tennis coach who mechanically served up yellow balls to the spoilt, knock-kneed son of the entrepreneur, and I was allowed to gather up these balls. Then take a shower. I was soaked through – Gregor not in the least. As if rooted to the spot he had stood there hitting the balls the coach had thrown him in all directions. I had run back and forth to gather them up.

When he got his first pubic hair and I hadn't yet, he contemptuously called me "baby". He found it perfectly natural that all the privileges he had also gave him the privilege of early puberty.

After showering we were brought back to our respective fathers by Miss Summerled. They finished their game of cards.

I felt humiliated because of the pubic hair and in general, but at the same time I began to feel sorry for the Silvers. It was a feeling as strong as the fear of death. It had to do with death, too. Playing cards on Saturday was the only regular pleasure Silver treated himself to. Apart from that he did nothing but rake in the money, pile up the money. In this way he grew older, ill, moribund – at some point he would be dead. Then everything will go to Gregor and he will pile it up even more or lose it. But what will remain of the lives of these people? Not even a tennis ball named after them. The tennis balls already had names, Slazenger or Dunlop. I was seized by an enormous apprehension. Life is complete and fulfilled, I thought, only if it also results in an afterlife. Even extremely wealthy analysts and masters of the world like Silver hadn't thought about this. They lived, as it were, in a money printing press where the money was theirs but where on the notes other people were portrayed. I wanted to be the one portrayed on a banknote rather

than the one whose pockets were overflowing with money.

My father gave a laugh. He had won. He always won. He was able to make a note of the cards that had been played, like party guests who had left: he always knew roughly who were still there; he knew who would be the first to become very important. He enjoyed extracting booty from the Mine. Silver wrote out a cheque. Suddenly I loved my father. For him playing cards on Saturday wasn't the only pleasure, but simply the pleasure he enjoyed on Saturday. All he ever wanted was just his pleasure. And he appeared to be able to enjoy it, too. He was always contented after all. Except when alone with me. Suddenly I understood that that couldn't be a pleasure for a man like him. With me, with my fretting, with my melancholy, there could be no licking of the honey pot. But just then I had learnt at school about the Ancient Greeks. Now I experienced Father's addiction to pleasure with all its lack of interest in life's trials and tribulations as a modern variant of stoicism: in this way you could calmly put up with life until death. And the man to whom I owed my life knew, unlike the Silvers, that in the end it was all about leaving something permanent behind you. Not in the family. What family? But in the world. On that afternoon I had assumed responsibility for the afterlife.

The fear of death faded. But this didn't make me feel any more light-hearted.

## 12

Do you know what's strange, Hannah? I ask myself sometimes whether what I tell you or write down for you interests anyone. I mean I *pay* you, but would it interest anyone else? Why do I wish it to be interesting? Isn't that the petty bourgeois syndrome, believing that everything – what you are, how you are and why – is somehow exemplary? That that is “how things rightly are” and therefore quite typical, even when things go pear-shaped?

What interests me, said Hannah, is whether you also have a mother. Or did your father wank you into existence all by himself onto a card table?

## 13

My father is of no importance whatsoever. In the sense that he never interfered in my life. At the most it was because of his absence that he was important. At eighteen, twelve years after my father had moved

out, I left home and my mother, and moved into a small one-bedroom flat that was so cheap that my father was prepared to pay the rent. It was a basement flat in Marxergasse in the third district and was soon called simply “Marxer Keller” by family and friends. When Father saw this flat – he went with me there for the signing of the contract – he said: “Yes, this is the best.” Meaning: he agreed that you certainly wouldn’t find a better flat for the price he was prepared to pay. Afterwards the two of us sat down at the Formica-topped kitchen table with a little window above my father’s head, through which I could now and again see the calves or trousered legs of passers-by, and Father took a bottle of cheap bubbly out of his briefcase, which he opened so that he could celebrate my independence with me man to man. We drank the lukewarm stuff from two coffee mugs with “I” and “You” written on the sides, which the previous tenant had left behind. Father was “I”. He said he hoped I would be happy but that every person could only be happy after his own fashion. For that reason he would never interfere in my life. There were nevertheless three rules he wanted me to take with me on my road, rules which, with respect to a happy life, were perhaps universal. I could take these to heart, I could throw them to the winds, but he wanted me to have heard them from him just once.

He looked at his watch. I had the impression he was already regretting he had just announced three rules, as he was once more in a hurry. I didn't need his rules and I no longer wanted his money. It was so ludicrous. Let him go if he had something better on than gargling warm fizz with his son on a day which for his son was historic. He must have picked up what I was thinking for in a flash he pulled his cuff over his watch, flicked some invisible flecks of dust from the sleeve of his jacket with two, three movements of his hand and said: So, that's clear then – I'll never pester you with advice or instructions!

During the rest of the conversation he never looked at his watch again. And yet he kept on looking past me very oddly.

The first rule: you can be happy only with the first or the last woman. Do you understand?

No, I said.

You will at some point. Second rule: (no mistake: he was in a hurry) if you take a girl back home with you – he looked about him sceptically – and spend the night with her, never make her breakfast. Otherwise, if you stay with her, you'll be making it for the rest of your life. OK?

Yes, I said and thought: I'll always make breakfast. Very lovingly. For anyone who loves me.

Third rule: if two people love each other, then they'll love each other even in a Stone Age cave. OK?

Yes, I said. That was really easy to understand: if a girl can't stomach it here, then she won't be able to stomach it with you – so don't ever come to me asking for more money for a better flat. That's what he meant.

He looked past me again and then got up.

Are the walls damp? he asked, pressing the flat of his hand against the wall, from which flakes of paint, if not plaster in fact, immediately came away and dropped down. No, he said, it obviously just needs heating properly in here – then it'll be top notch!

Only when Father had left did I notice that on the wall which had been behind my back during our conversation there hung a kitchen clock.

This flat is damp, said my mother, who came for an inspection two hours later. How could you rent such a damp hole of a place? How could your father allow it?

No, I said stubbornly, you just have to heat the place properly.

Mother brought crockery and cutlery, bed linen, even the rocking chair that we'd fought over at home. Home? Marxer Keller was my home now! Anyway we'd always fought over it for as long as I lived with Mother.

You like it so much, she said.

She cleaned out the kitchen cupboard, stored the crockery away, made up the bed, bought some staple groceries at the nearest supermarket, chattering away non-stop: Everything's getting so expensive, I don't how you're going to manage by yourself. Or: Such a damp hole of a place! You'll get rheumatism!

Father wanted me to be happy. But Mother always had to spoil everything for me.

I spent the next day mainly heating and rocking.

Then I met Helga.

## 14

Helga was an old-fashioned girl. I liked that. Only later was it to become a problem. At first it was an advantage. I didn't have to act in a laid-back, casual sort of way, and I didn't have to be incessantly witty just so as to avoid any embarrassing silences. There was security in our both being so insecure, and silence always passed for romantic attunement. Young lovers and old married couples were silent. Everything was as it should be. Lovesickness had us reeling like Bambi, and we lived in state of animated fervour – like the Lady and the Tramp.

I had gone up to speak to her after a lecture. She had red hair and, like many redheads, very white skin. I wasn't so taken with that: she'd never be able to go into the sun. She had sad eyes and a frankly glassy stare. I didn't like that either: I wanted to learn how to be easy-going. But my thought was: she won't humiliate me.

Digression. At that time, after a humiliating experience, I hadn't approached another girl for over a year nearly. It was in my last year at school that my mother began to worry about me because I would sit in the rocking chair every evening and didn't want to go out like other kids of my age. Haven't you got a girlfriend? she asked. No, I said. How come? she said. Listen! This evening the rocking chair belongs to me. I'm going to watch the new Farkas cabaret programme and you're going to a disco. A boy of your age sitting around at home all the time – it's not normal.

Max – this was a school friend of mine – can never go to a disco, I said. His parents won't let him go out, so he's at real loggerheads with them.

At least he wants to. And you can! Until midnight. Then I depend on you to be back home.

She slipped me a banknote.

But where am I supposed to go? I said. I don't know any discos!

Young people are all heading for this Voom Voom place at the moment, she said, picked up the telephone book, looked up the address and told to me how to get there.

Yes, I said, Max has told me about the Voom Voom.

I thought he wasn't allowed to go.

He goes there secretly. He tells them at home that he's studying Maths at a friend's and spends the night there.

I don't want you lying to me. So off you go to the Voom Voom now. And woe betide you if you tell me any lies.

On the way to the disco I thought that Mother was probably right. I really ought to learn finally – what? Experience with the opposite sex. I really did think that – like a business decision. You could say, a professional one. As if, like Father, I had to write an article about the most popular dance-hall in town. And enjoy a dash of erotic or sexual pleasure at the same time.

I couldn't get my bearings in the Voom Voom. A dark, alien world with flashing lights. The teeth of those who were laughing appeared blue. But few were laughing. The atmosphere that reigned was like that down in a mine. There was hard work to be done. My one constant thought was: What am I doing here? Then I remembered. The opposite sex. I then saw a girl who aroused my interest. What then passed for beautiful, I

too found beautiful: shoulder-length hair with a middle parting, a miniskirt. The large buckle of her belt flashed repeatedly in the disco lights. She gave the impression of being bored. Plainly contemptuous of what was going on all around. The message conveyed was that her feelings were deeper, that she knew more than all the others leaping about and contorting themselves. I realized only later that it was the thing then to give the impression of being contemptuous, bored and above it all. The order of the day was to go to a place in order to demonstrate that you didn't need to be there. A shit of an era it was. What sort of fears were they that skulked behind this exhibition of cold jadedness? I didn't see the fears of others, felt only my own.

But now I saw only her, the girl with the flashing belt buckle. I went over to her in order to start a chat. When I was standing in front of her and she was looking at me surprised, it struck me that I hadn't thought about what I should say. The music was very loud. So at first I was able to indicate by means of gestures that it was impossible to say anything in this noise. But it was no good. I had to say something. The loud music. Dance-hall. Of course. I said: Would you like to dance with me? I shouted this.

She looked me up and down and then back up again, with only her eyes moving, and then said: No.

Since that moment it's been clear to me that the soul does not have a seat. It's a pinball. It hits you in the knees, clicks against your testicles, pushes into your diaphragm, bulls-eyes into your heart, lurches through your throat, bounces off your brain, then falls into a hole.

Apart from the cost of getting in, I hadn't spent anything. I had enough money for a taxi.

Anyway, Helga was a virgin. She said she needed a little more time. At this she looked so sad, as if the decision to go to bed with me depended unfortunately not on her but on some higher power. Which was probably true. After all you often hear or read that the decision to go to bed with someone isn't necessarily determined by what you yourself want. That was alright by me. I myself had no experience anyway. My plan was to enrol on some kind of crash course during this time that Helga still needed, so that for my very first time and with my first girlfriend I wouldn't be completely clueless and so possibly not come up to expectations. I held myself in readiness. That didn't lead to anything at all. I thought of approaching the girls I liked the look of in the lectures and seminars. But I just wanted a first experience and not a second Helga. I plotted going to a brothel. But I didn't dare. I had been envious of a friend of mine because of his girlfriend, with whom he now broke up. I comforted