

Dramatis Personae

TWO SISTERS, TARBULA and AFRA
JUTA, a servant
KLEF
THE CHIEF TAX COLLECTOR, deceased
THE LAMPLIGHTER
JULIO GAPIT
A DOLL
HANA
TEREZA
OTMAR PRELIH, a shop assistant
THE HUNCHBACK TEOBALD
MRS. PRESTOPIL
KLIKOT, a scrivener
FATHER KVIRIN
KAPS, the bailiff
A HALLUCINATED VOICE
A MALE VOICE
SOMEBODY ELSE
A QUIET WOMAN
A DRUNKEN PAINTER and HIS GIRLFRIEND
AN OLD WOMAN
KONRAD

The Scene

The scene is set in that part of the town of Goga where the town gates must once have stood and where the road leads out of town and into the open.

Old, worn houses crookedly overhang the road. The number of people still residing in these houses must be very few, the majority having given up on life. In one of these rooms, surely, there must be a hanged man somewhere, now sallow and covered in dust. With the passing of time, the objects in this room have accepted him as one of their own. There is a vast, dead building, like a deserted mansion and, across the road, two or three houses full of rooms and fate. The occupants of these rooms do not often go outside; they leave their abodes only for unavoidable business and afterwards eagerly lock themselves up again within their four walls. They are, it would seem, glued there among the mirrors, paintings, and cupboards.

Some of these rooms have no front walls, which provides the audience with an unobstructed view into them.

On the corner of the second floor of the deserted mansion we have HANA, the daughter of the wealthy merchant Vajda. She has just returned from abroad and her arrival has generated much excitement in the town. In an attic room of the house across the road, we have the scrivener, KLIKOT, who can see straight into Hana's room from his window. (Of course he is in love with Hana and sits on the windowsill playing the flute.) In the building next-door to Klikot's, the occupants are crammed into rooms one above the other: GAPIT lives on the ground floor; above him, an OLD WOMAN; and on the third, topmost floor lives the hunchback TEOBALD. Julio Gapit, an official whose room on the ground floor resembles a cellar, is mentally ill and sits behind a table in the company of a rubber DOLL. The old woman on the floor above him sits motionless in her armchair and is, to all appearances, already dead. She probably does not want people to know that she has already died, and so has arranged herself in such a manner as to give the impression of being asleep. The hunchback Teobald is constantly reading and reciting lines: his dream is to be a stage actor – probably because he has a defective spine. The house with the attic where the lovesick scrivener lives has a balcony on the first floor. Two old women, the sisters AFRA and TARBULA, do a lot of

sitting on this balcony. This would be an excellent place for a town watchman whose task was to keep an eye on people coming and going. From this vantage point the two old women can make sure that order is maintained in the town and watch to see that nobody escapes.

The whole scene gives the impression of something grotesque and unreal, like the little houses and figures in a fairground shooting gallery.

Part of Hana's love story is taken from Zola's short story "For a Night of Love," which Zola, in his turn, borrowed from Casanova.

Act One

Evening; in the air, a delicate, quivering melody from a flute. The rooms are stuffed with twilight, the whiteness of hands and faces.

The occupant of the cellar-like room is not at home; there is only the DOLL sitting at the table. It is impossible to tell that she is not a living being, and her motionlessness creates a sense of anxiety. Her raised skirt, her fine lace lingerie – somebody must have abandoned her in the middle of lovemaking. The QUIET WOMAN on the floor above is hunched in an armchair and likewise motionless; both of them, the doll and the woman, provoke a feeling of something grotesque. The HUNCHBACK is bent over a book. TARBULA and AFRA are sitting on the balcony engaged in handiwork; KLIKOT is playing the flute, reclining against the window as if he were broken, his head bowed in humility.

In the well-to-do house across the road, there is no sign of life.

TARBULA: How long has it been since she was last home? Six years? Eight years? . . . Didn't she leave sometime around then?

AFRA: Yes, it was right around the time that Juhec woman murdered her newborn child.

TARBULA: And why didn't she ever come back?

AFRA: Even at the funeral, she just had to get away, had to get away – and off she went, left straight from the cemetery.

From around the corner of the Vajda house JUTA, the servant, appears. Completely absorbed in what she has to do, she is hurrying out of town.

BOTH SISTERS: Juta! Juta!

Juta stops and looks in the direction of the balcony.

TARBULA: Is it true the Baron has been invited, too?

AFRA (*before the other has finished*): Is he going to be there, too?

JUTA: They're all going to be arriving soon and he still hasn't sent them!

THE SISTERS: Who hasn't sent what?

JUTA: Oh, Jontež hasn't sent the flowers!

TARBULA: Look at her, stupid girl! Do you really want to have them wilted on the table?

AFRA: Has he really been invited? Well, well.

TARBULA: But will he come? Will he come?

JUTA: Of course! Why shouldn't he? He already sent word that he was coming. God, I wish it was already over and done with! (*She hurries on.*)

THE SISTERS: Juta, Juta!

JUTA: I can't now. There's no time. (*She disappears.*)

TARBULA (*to her sister*): But surely they can't be thinking of arranging the marriage with him?

AFRA: As if he'd have any interest in middle-class shop-owners!

TARBULA: They're in a terrible hurry!

AFRA: Apparently, for tonight's celebration, they didn't leave out any potential marriage partner.

TARBULA: You know, I find it almost impossible to believe that she's been married and divorced once already if they're creating such a stir and trying to marry her off so quickly.

AFRA: Who knows, who knows! Maybe that's exactly why! We have to get more information out of Juta.

TARBULA: If the girl knows anything at all. You know they're doing their best to cover it up.

In the background, a LIMPING MAN approaches from the market. While still some distance away, he looks warily toward the balcony and is annoyed to see the two old women sitting there. So he tries to sneak past without being spotted.

TARBULA (*sees him at once and attacks*): Oh, Klef, Mr. Klef, where are you off to?

KLEF (*he winces irritably, but then at once pretends to be thoroughly delighted at seeing the sisters*): Oh, oh, ladies! Good evening, dear ladies, good evening! The Baron, the Baron – and even old Sort from Prisanek! He only crawls out of his hole every now and then, but, well, even he couldn't afford to miss this excellent occasion. Vajda was never one to have company; and after his wife's death he didn't even like to look in on the shop, but now all of a sudden his doors are wide open! Well, one can't help but think something when they're in such a hurry!

TARBULA (*the women are trying not to get too excited*): So where are you headed now, Klef? Where are you going?

KLEF (*ignoring the question with a sweet-and-sour face*): And the foreigner, the foreigner! Have you heard about him?

AFRA (*unable to control herself any longer*): Foreigner? What foreigner?

KLEF (*happy that she has taken the bait*): Oh, don't you know? Yes, there's a foreigner – a real live foreigner, with luggage – in front of the Deer Inn. He doesn't even speak our language!

TARBULA: And nobody knows anything about him?

KLEF (*very promptly*): Nobody knows a thing. Of course, people have all sorts of notions. Some think he's a tourist, others are keen on the idea that he's someone Vajda invited to today's celebration. But if you ask me, he's neither the one nor the other. He doesn't have enough luggage to be a tourist – just a single suitcase and an umbrella – and if Vajda invited him, you can bet he wouldn't be staying at an inn.

TARBULA: A tourist? How absurd! This is probably something Bas came up with to make everyone see how cosmopolitan he is!

AFRA: Well, then, who could it be?

KLEF: My bet is it'll turn out to be the same as last time: just a traveling salesman selling sewing machines! Last time everybody got all excited about a foreigner, he turned out to be only some peddler who was enlarging photographs. Ha-ha!

Juta now returns into town.

TARBULA: Juta, Juta! (*Klef's presence makes her try to restrain herself a little, but she can't help herself*) Oh, do tell me, you must tell me: is it true she's already been both married and divorced?

JUTA: Ma-married? Our Miss Hana? Ha-ha-ha! Hee-hee-hee! I'll have to tell her that, I'll just have to tell her. (*She hurries on and disappears around the corner of Vajda's house.*)

TARBULA: She's still such a childish girl! (*She notices Klef trying to use the opportunity to steal away.*) Hey there, Klef! Not so fast. Since when do you have so much time for taking walks? Your children have soiled themselves and your wife is going to ruin her hands on the washing board!

KLEF (*pleadingly, not daring to move on*): But it's so unbearably humid – a man can suffocate staying inside.

TARBULA: Oh, come on, it's not so bad! We've had days worse than this!

KLEF: Heh-heh! Well, a man likes to get some fresh air . . . I mean, a man's got to . . . *(He moves on.)*

TARBULA *(realizing that she will not be able to stop him unless she is more direct)*: Somebody else left town just before you, somebody we all know. Are you aware that this person was sick in church? She vomited. And she is vomiting all the time! Merciful God, she's not even fourteen yet and still she vomits like that! *(Sternly and with emphasis:)* Yes, yes, Mr. Klef, not even fourteen! At the parish office one can learn the precise date of her birth, should one happen to stop by and inquire.

The limping man is sweating profusely, his mouth wide open, as he retreats backwards. He starts crossing himself with big gestures, then with a sudden jump he runs, limping, back into town as though the devil were after him. The old women laugh gleefully as he leaves; they are so meticulous about keeping the town in order.

TARBULA: The old drying rack, going out and seducing children in the woods!

AFRA: Did you see how she sneaked away earlier?

TARBULA: Why does he need to do it, damn it all, when he has everything at home!

AFRA: Imagine all the commotion when everyone in town finds out!

TARBULA: Oh, it's been so long since anything happened!

AFRA: Let's deliberately not say anything for a while about how we saw them follow each other out of town every day. Let's keep people guessing a couple more days about why the girl is vomiting. Maybe the child herself doesn't know why!

TARBULA: Could be, that very well could be!

The CHIEF TAX COLLECTOR, who died a few days earlier, appears on the street. Bare-headed, he's wearing a dapper frock coat and white stockings – the same clothes in which he would have been laid out on the bier. His behavior is very confused. Despite being dead, he apparently still wants to take his daily walk, as has been his habit of many years. The sisters exchange glances at his appearance, but they are so used to seeing him in the street at this hour that they are not overly surprised.

TARBULA (*indignantly*): But Mr. Chief Tax Collector . . . surely you're dead!

AFRA: And . . . and we buried you!

The CHIEF TAX COLLECTOR, startled, stands still like a schoolboy who has been caught red-handed. He looks up at the women, with eyes asking helplessly for forgiveness, and then stumbles back toward town.

TARBULA: Even now he doesn't intend giving up his walks!

AFRA: How can a man be so forgetful?!

THE CHIEF TAX COLLECTOR (*who has changed his mind and returned*): Excuse me . . . excuse me! Mrs. Guštin? – Would either of you happen to know a Mrs. Guštin? . . . She's my wife – do you know her? I was at home and searched all over, but the poor thing is nowhere to be found. She isn't anywhere. I'm sorry, dear ladies, to be such a bother – but is this the way to Tisovec Hill? I've walked there before – everyday I used to walk up there – but I don't seem to know anything now, it's all so strange – Jesus-and-Mary, Jesus-and-Mary, something must be done, the poor thing must not be left all alone like that! My wife, you know – there's no getting around it – she was never in the best of health – no, she was always rather frail – she . . . – (*He hesitates, and then slowly makes a circle on his forehead; then he nods his head excitedly and again makes a circle. He whispers.*) She hasn't had much to say lately; she just stopped talking. Actually, I've had to do everything at home on my own – had to do the cooking. – Oh, I don't mind if people make fun of me for it,

I don't mind that. – It got so bad for her twelve years ago – she stopped talking altogether; I never heard another word out of her mouth since. But . . . otherwise she was very sweet – on Sundays we'd go for a walk, and she'd always follow behind me so meekly. People never noticed anything; they only knew she was somewhat quiet and didn't care much for company. But you know what the problem was? She didn't understand anything anymore! She didn't know anything anymore! I'd put a pencil in her hands, and she'd look at me so trustingly and, without a word, ask me with her eyes what it was – she'd put the pencil in her mouth, stick it in her hair – she didn't even know how to use a spoon – in fact, she had to be fed. But as I said, she was a faithful companion to me, and we had a pleasant life together. (*During the course of this speech, he had started to regain his composure a little, but now he becomes confused again, shifts his weight back and forth, and forgets that he is talking to somebody.*) Jesus-and-Mary, Jesus-and-Mary! (*Flapping his arms, he runs off in the direction where he came from.*) Jesus-and-Mary, Jesus-and-Mary, Jesus-and-Mary!

TARBULA: You see, it's true, he did do all the cooking himself. All that's well is well, but . . . ! People always said she terrorized him, but that just let himself go . . . !

AFRA: Now I understand! Now I understand! – Once I was spying on them on Tisovec Hill – he was showing her something and was so excited. I moved a little closer. “This is a flower,” he was saying. “It's the kind of thing that springs up from the ground all by itself and then opens into this white thing here, and we call this white thing a blossom. So do you know what a flower is now?” He saw me and got all confused, then grabbed his wife and left. I thought and thought about it, but at the time, I couldn't quite figure it all out. But now I understand: she lost her memory so he had to explain everything to her from scratch.

TARBULA: It's getting too dark to see anything now. (*She puts down her work.*)

The LAMPLIGHTER hurries along the road, lighting the street lamps.

AFRA: It gets dark so quickly these days.

TARBULA: When did the bells ring the Ave Maria? We missed the Ave Maria.

AFRA: Yes, we missed it. *(She gets up.)*

TARBULA: The air is so stifling. As if something was going to happen tonight.

They go inside. The door remains open (this apartment is one that does have a front wall, making it impossible to see the interior freely); a light comes on in the room. During the action that follows, one can see now and then, through the door, the figures of the two sisters moving in the room.

Klikot, who had stopped playing the flute soon after the women started talking, leans against the window like a stone; the darkness has forced the hunchback to leave his book. In general, they all give an impression of unnaturalness; only occasionally does a hidden mechanism bring them to life, but otherwise they are arranged in their respective rooms like lifeless puppets.

GAPIT appears on the street. He carries a heavy briefcase under his arm. He moves quickly, as if fleeing from something, but then suddenly stops and, slowly and cautiously, turns around. He wants to start running, but does not dare. Standing in front of his building, he just as slowly unlocks the door and then, when he feels he is safely inside, quickly turns the key to lock it again and darts into his room. He locks the door to his room in the same careful way, and then, just as he is, with his hat on his head and his briefcase under his arm, he drops limp into a chair. He lets out a sigh of relief.

Beads of sweat glisten on his forehead.

He calms down, and with a blissful smile across his face, mutters: Gizela, Gizela!

He stands up, puts down his briefcase and takes out a coil of rope. He examines the door like an expert. He takes a steel rod out of a drawer and tests the door once more to see if it is securely locked. Then, he

bars the door with the rod and begins to tie the rope meticulously from the door handle to the window, to the bed, etc., all to ensure that whoever is after him cannot get through the door. (The windows are already barred.) When he finishes the job, he rubs his hands in secret anticipation of the joy to come, and then opens the briefcase again. He removes a package and two bottles of wine. He opens a bottle, places a glass in front of the doll and in front himself, and pours the wine. He then picks up the mysterious package and proudly pulls out some elegant women's underwear; he first holds the lingerie up to Gizela's body to check its size, then dresses the doll in it. As he dresses her, it becomes very obvious that Gizela is not in fact a living creature. Her lingerie, however, is extremely tasteful and utterly flawless. The eccentric lover may have had to go hungry to be able to afford such a gift; perhaps he has spent long months standing in front of the shop windows joyfully anticipating this moment of dressing the doll in the apparel he has chosen. When he has finished, he places the doll back behind the table, arranges her in the pose of a fine lady and sits opposite her. He makes a toast, drinks and gazes at her blissfully.

HANA appears in the corner room on the first floor of the mansion, pulling TEREZA by the hand in after her. Light.

TEREZA (*slightly reproachful*): Can't you spend even a minute by yourself? You can see how crazy it is downstairs!

HANA: Yes, but I only want you to tell me if my dress looks all right on me.

TEREZA: All right, then, hurry up and put it on!

HANA (*gathers up the pieces of her dress in order to change*): Well just go, then, go! There's no rush! You housekeepers are so horribly spoiled. You think you're always needed everywhere.

TEREZA: You could see for yourself: they wanted to dance on the carpet in the drawing room. There's just so much to think about – we're not used to having such parties in the house!

HANA (*pulls Tereza to herself on the sofa*): It doesn't matter. Sit with me a while. We haven't talked at all!

TEREZA: Are you . . . scared of something?

HANA (*in a strange muffled laugh*): Scared? Ha-ha! Who should I be scared of?

TEREZA: I don't know, I don't know, but I feel like you're afraid of something.

HANA: Oh, come on now! (*Suddenly, staring at her desperately because she is silent*): Talk, for God's sake! Say something!

TEREZA (*the words don't come easily to her*): Do you know that when you arrived yesterday, I nearly made the mistake of giving you a child's spoon for lunch. You've suddenly turned into such a lady! Edvarda is nearly as tall as you – she got married a month and a half ago.

HANA (*strangely anxious – from time to time one clearly sees her stare at the door*): Yes, yes, Papa wrote me all about it. I'd never have guessed she'd be standing in front of the altar so soon!

TEREZA: True, I didn't expect it either. Do you know – (*she can't help laughing*) – do you know, people are saying that you yourself have already been married and – yes – even divorced!

HANA (*with genuine delight*): Oh Goga, Goga, you beautiful town! A person hates all the boredom and gets sick from all the dusty rooms, but when you are leaving Goga, you must not look back too much – or you'll get of the carriage and remain here forever.

TEREZA (*laughing*): Juta gave me a hard time.

HANA: No, no, you won't see that happen to me. We're not all made for it, some of us aren't at all.

TEREZA: Oh, my dear God, what are you saying! Who is, then?

HANA: No, no, Reza, some of us are definitely not made for it. But I do have a boyfriend, I can tell you that. And he's so handsome! I love him because he's so sweet and never gets upset with me. Frank, Frank! – It's a good thing he doesn't know how much I love him; I'm sure he'd leave me if he knew.

TEREZA: And this one says she's never getting married? Before you know it, you'll be standing in front of the altar. I know how it was with my own two girls: I was so sure they'd . . .

HANA (*strangely defiant*): No, Tereza, never! Never!

TEREZA: And may I ask why not?

HANA: Because . . . because . . . it never lasts!

TEREZA: That's only too true in most cases. But sometimes it does, sometimes. If you're both reasonable and know how to make sacrifices . . . But, Hana, what about children? Don't you want children?

HANA: Oh! But . . .

TEREZA: Well, see there? I knew it.

HANA: But . . . (*Then suddenly*): Reza, tell me – one day, Reza, you must tell me – didn't you find it disgusting?

TEREZA (*shocked*): Disgusting? What should I find disgusting?

HANA: Reza, I lied to you. My boyfriend . . . The reason I love him isn't because he's never gets upset with me. That's not it; that's not why I love him. It's because he . . . he . . . never forces me to do it, never demands that I give in to him. I find all that . . . the bed . . . so unspeakably disgusting!

TEREZA (*understanding her*): I see, I see – well, you too, then, you too! You're not the only one who feels like that, you know. You might not believe me, now that you've told me how you feel, but do you know, I felt the same way. My

marriage was nothing but hell and tears! And disgust! My man wasn't like your fine fellow – he tormented me, he tormented me so much I could hardly stand it. That's what all women say, he said; that's how women are; they put up a show and deny the pleasure, just so they can play the martyr. To his very grave that man did not take me at my word – and God, what I've had to put up with! Do you know what my life's task has been after all those bitter years? I made it the goal of my life to protect my daughters from the horrors of marriage!

HANA (*astonished*): Protect them from . . . ? Reza, some rooms can be so frightening!

TEREZA: Yes, some rooms are awful.

HANA (*staring at the door*): Did somebody . . . did I just hear somebody?

TEREZA (*herself at once feels her earlier fear, which she had somewhat recovered from during the conversation*): Hana, I have to go back downstairs! It will take you a while to change. So ring me when you're ready. (*She starts to leave.*)

HANA (*shocked that Tereza might leave her alone*): No, don't! – (*Suddenly in tears*) – Nobody loves me!

TEREZA (*perplexed*): Hana, Hana . . . you . . . you are frightened of something!

HANA (*trying to hide her emotions, she smiles, but the tears are streaming down*): No, I'm not really . . . I'm not afraid of anything . . . Oh Reza, please stay! One hears so many horrible things. (*She quickly turns the conversation to the old woman's two daughters to keep her from leaving.*) But your own girls got married, even so?

TEREZA: Yes, obviously I didn't achieve my life's goal, but those two aren't necessarily the same as me – dear God, not at all! People even say it's an illness, a peculiarity. And so far my girls both still have happy faces.

HANA (*something is bothering her*): I was so moved by what you were saying. . . . I have this friend . . . she would get sick whenever someone touched her. One time in dance class somebody held her too tightly and she had to stop dancing; she ran outside and threw up.

TEREZA *nods*.

HANA: The reason she was like this was because – and it's not something one should mention – no, it shouldn't be mentioned – but it was because when she was a child, not even thirteen years old, somebody raped her!

TEREZA *is so shocked she is speechless*.

HANA: Oh, some rooms really are awful, and in a totally different way, totally different! . . . She told me about it many times, and each time she'd recall every detail – how the bell in the local church was ringing for some reason – it was pounding mercilessly through the window; how he pressed her into the sofa and did his evil to her.

TEREZA: Oh, God have mercy, God have mercy!

HANA: And do you know who the man was? My friend is well-off, from a prosperous family – she lives somewhere above Oldershafen . . . (*Now whispering as she glances toward the door, as if afraid somebody might be eavesdropping.*) It was a servant – the coachman – a common hireling, if you will! He sneaked into her room and . . . did it.

TEREZA (*appalled*): But what . . . what, for love of God, did they do to him afterwards? Was he thrown into prison?

HANA (*looks at her in embarrassment, guiltily – then, silent a moment, smooths out a wrinkle in her skirt*): No, nothing. Nothing happened. My God, the child couldn't tell anybody about it – she didn't dare!

TEREZA: She didn't dare? But this . . . this . . . must be told! It has to be told!

HANA (*as if she had just been rebuked*): She would have told . . . yes, she would have . . . but . . . you see . . . (*She is in agony; she is behaving, generally, as if it concerned her personally.*) One finds it difficult to understand if one hasn't experienced it oneself. Maybe . . . maybe – (*She looks at Tereza pleadingly, wanting her to understand what she is saying.*) His eyes were so swollen, and it was so revolting, that it should not have been true, it simply *could not* be true! And . . . and – she had a foolish hope – an insane hope, one might say – that one day she'd wake up and it really would not be true any more, the awful thing would be gone from her memory. You see, if she had told someone – if other people knew – well, then . . . then there'd be no more chance of her waking up one morning . . . Then it would be true for the rest of her life!

TEREZA: Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!

HANA (*a sigh escapes from her*): You're right, it would have been much better if she had told her parents straightaway. You're absolutely right! The villain was encouraged by her silence and came back.

TEREZA: He came back?

HANA (*in a fragile voice*): Four times!

TEREZA: No, no, no! The girl should have said something! It was foolish, most foolish, of her not to confess the whole thing. She could have told her father – or no, mothers understand these things better; her mother would have understood everything and would have protected her from it happening again.

HANA (*despairingly*): Yes, yes, her mother would have understood.

TEREZA: And . . . well, how did she get rid of him in the end?

HANA: Well, this is it – this is it, you see – she didn't get rid of him at all. However, she did go away to a foreign country – she begged her father to let her go – but one day she will

have to go home, she will have to return and face him again . . .

TEREZA: Oh dear God! Oh dear God! (*Realizing they have been talking too long, she gets up.*) Hana, I really must go now!

HANA (*hastily grabbing her dress*): But I'll be ready in a moment.

TEREZA (*stops her*): You can't just throw your clothes on any old way. Don't be so childish – you have take care about how you dress yourself; you can't imagine how much the Master is looking forward to seeing you all dressed up. The reason he's giving this party is because he's so overjoyed he doesn't know who to show you to first. I don't know what he'd do if someone were to ask for your hand.

HANA: Will you really come if I ring for you?

TEREZA: Oh, you poor confused child! Of course, of course, I'll come right away. You know you're home now – (*shakes her as if to wake her into consciousness*) you're home now, Hana! What could possibly happen to you?

HANA: I really am acting strange, aren't I?

TEREZA *nods at her amiably and leaves.*

Hana sits there with a vacant gaze, then with determination gets up and walks around the room. She gathers up her clothes slowly and casually, as if trying to convince herself that she is not afraid of anything. But soon her gestures become more anxious; she starts dropping things, and again, keeps looking at the door. She pulls her dress off, puts on her dressing gown, and nimbly does her makeup in front of the mirror. Suddenly – she simply cannot keep it up – all her strength deserts her, and – her eyes focused on the door – she walks backwards toward the wall, pressing herself against it as if nailed to it. She waits there with desperate eyes. There is no sign of anything and she hears no sound, but she knows with absolute certainty that somebody will come, somebody will appear any second.

Unbearable moments of waiting follow.

PRELIH, *the shop assistant, appears. Without knocking, he slowly slips into the room and smiles self-consciously. He is an older man and shabbily dressed. Hana is motionless, crucified against the wall, though maybe now a little less tense because he is already here, because now it has started and the unbearable moments of waiting are over. Prelih stands by the door, smiles, and shifts his weight from foot to foot. Then he stops and just stands there again self-consciously and smiles.*

PRELIH (*when the silence finally becomes too unbearable for him*): I bow to you, Miss Hana! I bow to you!

Silence.

PRELIH: Dear God, after all, we're friends . . . I mean . . . (*He waits for her to say something.*) I'm sorry, but what else can I do? You've been avoiding me. You've been home for two days now and still we haven't said a word to each other. (*Again he waits and, without the least show of manners, pulls up a chair and sits down. He waves his hand casually.*) What can you do? A woman never forgets her first man!

HANA (*wanting to object, but all the blood drains from her face, and she flails her arms helplessly in the air; her tongue will not obey her and only forms meaningless sounds*): No . . . no . . . (*A piercing scream, a genuine scream! She is frightened by her own scream*): That's not true! That must not be true!

PRELIH (*at first a little taken aback, but then he shrugs his shoulders indifferently*): That's what people say.

HANA *only winces as if his words had hurt her.*

PRELIH (*seeing that his appearance has made a greater impression on her than he had expected, becomes gruff and starts giving her orders*): Come closer!

HANA *lifts her feet from the floor as if cataleptic, and approaches him, her arms stretched out in front of her in hopeless defense.*

PRELIH: And greet me properly. Good evening!

HANA (*opens her mouth, but cannot at first pronounce the words, then*): Evening!

PRELIH: Do you still love me?

HANA *instead of answering falls to her knees and presses her face to his legs.*

PRELIH (*intoxicated with desire, his voice hoarsens*): Are your hands still as sweet as ever? – You used to have such sweet little hands!

Hana lifts her trembling hands, she raises them to his lips like a chalice. Prelih devours them hungrily; with eager, slippery fingers, he seizes her body, kissing her, as she hangs limp in his arms like a lifeless thing. More and more wildly he possesses her, and then with a low growl picks her up with the intention of carrying her to the bed . . .

But before this terrible thing can happen, Hana suddenly finds her strength: she breaks free of his embrace and runs to the servant's bell. But Prelih catches her and grabs her by the arm.

HANA: No, no, no! – Not this! Never again! – Don't you dare! – Don't you dare! – I'll scream – I'll ring for the maid! – Tereza!

PRELIH: A woman never forgets her first man!

HANA: Not true, not true! – My father – I'll tell him first thing tomorrow! – I'll let him enjoy today; he was so looking forward to it. – Today he mustn't find out!

PRELIH (*taking her again in his arms so he can carry her to the bed*): So then be mine today – one more time. Tomorrow I don't care if the whole world goes to hell!

He pushes her toward the bed. Her only hope is the servant's bell, and at last she reaches it and rings. Only now does Prelih see that in his passion he had foolishly not realized what she was doing and now he has no chance. He lets go of her.

PRELIH: Well, then, later today – one last time! (*In a whisper, but firmly and with a piercing gaze*): When I leave the dance downstairs, you pretend to be sick. You leave right after I do and come up here to this room. I'll be waiting for you. See to it that nobody disturbs us.

As soon as he has spoken these last words, TEREZA appears at the door. Prelih's presence upsets her.

PRELIH (*at once becoming a servant again, bows to Hana in a slyly obliging manner, his lips bearing the eternal smile from the shop*): Good evening, Miss Hana. (*To Tereza*): I happened to hear in town that a surprise is being planned for Miss Hana – a serenade, you might say, for a local girl who's come back home. I came to tell our noble young lady so she might be prepared for it.

TEREZA (*who does not like this man being here*): Well, you better be off now. You can see Miss Hana's in a hurry. She has to get dressed.

PRELIH, *bowing, slinks away.*

TEREZA (*when he is gone*): What was this man doing here? I don't know why, but I've never liked seeing him in this house.

HANA: He's terribly pushy. He came to tell me about some sort of serenade.

TEREZA: He doesn't actually do anything wrong, but more than once I've suggested to the Master that the man should be fired.

HANA: He was probably trying to ingratiate himself by telling me this news of his.

TEREZA: As if such things should be announced! Why can't he let a person have a surprise?

HANA: The only way I knew to get rid of him was to ring for you.

TEREZA: Yes, I see you're not dressed yet. But hurry up now, Hana, it'll soon be time! Quite a number of guests are here already. The Baron is here – you should just see him! He arrived in a carriage with two horses! (*Laughing.*) He's got a flower in his buttonhole as big as a sunflower and – you wouldn't believe it! – he has to be drunk. I've often heard it said that he's never sober, but to come to a party in such a state! So hurry up, Hana dear, and then ring for me. Did you sew on the flower so it won't fall off while you are dancing? Your father is so happy. I haven't seen him in such a good mood since the death. (*Exits.*)

Only now can Hana breathe a sigh of relief. She holds her face in her hands and walks around the room aimlessly. Then she sits in front of the mirror and starts putting her makeup on.

In the house across the street, the hunchback TEOBALD begins to stir and turns on a light. He paces up and down the room a few times, then sits back down and picks up his book. After a moment he puts it down again, stands in the middle of the room, and starts to recite a passage from Ibsen's Ghosts.¹

THE HUNCHBACK: “Rest assured, you can take their word for it. Many of them are leading experts.” (*Clasping his head.*) “Oh, to think that this beautiful, great life of freedom . . . should be so sullied!” (*Dissatisfied, he starts again.*) “Oh, to think that this beautiful, great life of freedom . . . should be so sullied!” – No, that's not it! That's not it! (*Discouraged, he sits back down. But a moment later he stands up again and goes on.*) “You're right, Mother. It's doing me no good. You see, it's this damn fatigue! I'll just have a short walk before lunch. Forgive me, Pastor, I know you can't see my point of view, but I couldn't help saying it one more time.” (*Still not completely satisfied, he sits down with a sigh. He starts calling to the housekeeper behind the door.*) Mrs. Prestopil, Mrs. Prestopil!

¹ The passages from Henrik Ibsen's 1881 play *Ghosts*, both here and in Act Two, have been translated from the Slovene text of Slavko Grum's play. Grum himself did not translate the Ibsen passages directly from the original Norwegian, but most likely relied on an existing German translation of the play. (*Translators' note.*)

MRS. PRESTOPIL (*she lives on the other side the wall, so her room is not seen*): What is it, Mr. Teobald?

THE HUNCHBACK: Mrs. Prestopil, is it really true? Did that actor really have the same sickness I have?

MRS. PRESTOPIL: Yes, it's true, Mr. Teobald. He had a bad back, too.

THE HUNCHBACK: What was his name?

MRS. PRESTOPIL: His name? Now that I'm sure I won't remember. (*She appears at the door.*) Tintiretti, Pitiretti, something like that. All those Italian names sound alike.

TEOBALD *nods but says nothing.*

MRS. PRESTOPIL (*while Teobald is silent*): I still have to make the dough for the bread. (*Exits.*)

THE HUNCHBACK (*tries to read, but he is still thinking about that actor*): When did you see him, Mrs. Prestopil?

MRS. PRESTOPIL (*from behind the wall*): When? Oh, a long time ago. It was in Trieste when I was a cook there. The acting was incredibly splendid, with everything lit up. His performance was the best – he was methodical. He was supposed to be some sort of a monster or evil spirit. Whenever he appeared, people always seized their chests a lot and broke into tears.

THE HUNCHBACK (*at once completely discouraged*): Mrs. Prestopil, that actor's hump was fake. It was made out of paper.

MRS. PRESTOPIL (*his objection astounds her, probably because she has never considered the possibility. Still, she wants to do something nice for the hunchback*): Oh no, not at all – I asked the doorman. (*Now at the door again, she speaks with conscientious enthusiasm as she tries to convince him.*) When I was leaving after the play – you know, how they stand by the door and bow to you; that's the only reason why they're there, to wish

you good night – I asked one of them. And he said it was genuine – the actor had it since birth.

THE HUNCHBACK *(he does not believe her and says nothing; and then, putting all his life's sorrow in these words):* And have I had it since birth, too?

MRS. PRESTOPIL: No, your back started oozing a long time ago, and you've had it ever since.

THE HUNCHBACK: But what did my mother do to me? Did she abandon me? – Oh God, oh God, oh God! *(Rocks back and forth.)*

MRS. PRESTOPIL: Are you angry at her? You mustn't be, you mustn't be, Teobald. Only God knows what possessed her. It's not our lot to judge.

THE HUNCHBACK: I curse her, I curse her! – And . . . No, I'd give anything to know the poor woman! I'd cradle her in my arms!

MRS. PRESTOPIL: God only knows why life turned out bad for her. It turns out bad for everybody one way or another.

THE HUNCHBACK: For everybody? *(He raises his head, wondering, then lowers it again in affirmation.)* Yes, everybody. A person studies, is talented, people are impressed by him, but when it's time to make a start in life . . . *(Lowering his voice.)* Do you ever get frightened in the dead of night, as I do, thinking that everybody has run off and left you by yourself? That you'll look out the window in the morning and nobody will be there?

MRS. PRESTOPIL: Oh, my poor boy, my poor boy! *(She makes the sign of the cross over him.)* Wait just a little while longer. I only have to make the dough for the bread and then I'll come back right away and we can rehearse. *(Leaves with a sigh.)*

THE HUNCHBACK *stares straight ahead for a moment, then starts reading again.*

Down in his "cellar," GAPIT suddenly jumps up and listens intently at the door. His whole body starts shaking.

GAPIT (*shouting*): The swine, the swine! (*He hugs the doll and sits there trembling and confused, cautiously looking all around him.*)

The scrivener KLIKOT, who all this time has been motionless by the window, now crosses the room and switches on a light. He gets two boxes from somewhere and puts them on the table beside him – one on the right, the other, on the left. Then, with great delight, he prepares a sheet of writing paper.

KLIKOT (*writing a love letter; he first pronounces the words out loud, listening to how they sound*): "Dear Miss Hana!" No. "Dear Hana!" No – nothing – nothing at all. "In the attic room across the street lives a man who loves you." (*As he starts writing, a grotesquely large moon rises in visible motion across the sky; it stops by his window like a giant lantern. He crosses out what he has written and starts over.*)

"Here I sit. I sit in a room among the cupboards, mirrors, and paintings; darkness hangs at the window and I love you. There are many rooms in our town. Everywhere there are walls, tables, cupboards; in the midst of them, people; they place their hands on objects and have relationships. I have you. And I have a flute. (*He says these lines not as if drafting a letter, but rather, he is experiencing these sentences in his facial expressions, and when they have been experienced he captures them in his hand and puts them in the letter: there is silence, he listens, something starts to grow, it comes alive, and so forth. Only when he has said everything out loud, does he start to put down silently on paper what he has worked out earlier.*)

"You do not know the man who loves you; you do not know of his existence, and you will probably never know of him. Just as we are surrounded by a great deal of life we know nothing about: wood creaks in a table in the night, and we do not hear it; the darkness feels its way upwards with ragged hands. All kinds of things happen around us. If a person is very much alone, his hearing becomes extremely acute and he knows how to value every sound. But such things do not interest you; in your ears there is still the noise

of the metropolis. The cry of the newsboy, the barking of automobiles. You will not be interested in cupboards and the hushed sounds of attic rooms. . . .

“Princesses with tear-drenched faces, the bowed heads of pensive princes – illusion is the only paradise from which we cannot be driven.” *(He folds the sheet of paper carefully, seals the envelope and places it in the box on the left.)*

FATHER KVIRIN and BAILIFF KAPS enter walking along the road. *Kvirin, a fat, red-faced little man, carries a bassoon under his arm. The bailiff, incredibly tall and thin, touches the walls with his hands as he walks. He plays the trumpet. He never laughs; he is a philosopher.*

KVIRIN *(overflowing with laughter, he is trying to tell a joke but he can't because he is laughing so much)*: Please . . . please . . . isn't this unfair? – It's always me – I'm always the one who has to pay the fines for disturbing the peace – just because I'm musical! *(Chokes with laughter.)*

KAPS *endures Kvirin's jokes with stoic calmness and deathly seriousness.*

KVIRIN: Well, today the authorities are on my side, so I have nothing to fear.

They reach the spot beneath Klikot's window.

KVIRIN *(puts his hands to his mouth)*: Meow . . . meow . . . I'm sure he's delighting us again with one of his immortal essays. Klikot, Klikot, have mercy on us! From now on, we'll all be kind to you!

KLIKOT *(comes to the window)*: Shush . . . ! Shush . . . ! For Christ's sake, Maestro, I beg you! – A moment! Give me just a moment!

He quickly rearranges one thing and another, then, flute in hand, disappears from the room. His friends below – Kvirin is making fun of Klikot: “Shush . . . ! Shush . . . !” although he too tries not to make too much noise – make their way to the nearest streetlamp and sit on its base.

Klikot emerges from the house with the lapels of his jacket turned up and his hat sitting low on his forehead; he tiptoes over to the streetlamp trying, in an exaggerated way, not to make any noise. They speak in whispers – but Kvirin deliberately says a word or two in a louder voice so as to disconcert Klikot. They huddle tightly beneath the eaves of the Vajda house below Hana’s window; then, with a dramatic gesture of his hand the bailiff makes a sign – and stirring music resounds through the street: a rousing old marching song.

At once, there is a lively reaction in the various houses: Hana, her makeup on and now dressed for the dance, moves with a big smile toward the window, though she is still not close enough to be seen from the road; a few moments later, TEREZA enters the room as well; she, too, is dressed in her best clothes and wearing makeup. The hunchback is joined by MRS. PRESTOPIL, whose hands are floury from making bread. The sisters TARBULA and AFRA, who cannot bear to stay in bed when something is happening, stick their inquisitive noses through the door of the balcony. Many other heads appear, too, in the various windows – perhaps they are merely drawn on paper with wide-open eyes. The only people who do not stir are Gapit in his “cellar” and the quiet woman in the room above him.

People talk with each other excitedly as they listen to the music. But because it is so loud, their voices cannot be heard.

The music stops. Bailiff Kaps clears his throat – it appears that he is about to make a speech. Klikot is alarmed – he did not think the bailiff capable of such bad taste – so he grabs him by the arms and, in a whisper, desperately begs him to keep quiet.

HANA (*when the music has stopped, with childlike glee*): Who are these merry musicians?

TEREZA: You can’t see them from here; they’ve squeezed themselves right beneath the guttering. But everybody knows who our musicians are: Father Kvirin, Bailiff Kaps – he’s the tall, thin one; surely you remember him, he makes the proclamations in the square – and then there’s Klikot, the scrivener – he also writes poetry, over there in his room in the attic . . . Haven’t you heard him playing flute at night?

The struggle beneath the eaves gives nothing away. Kaps steps onto the base of the streetlamp, as Klikot tries in vain to pull him back by the coattails.

KAPS (*waving his arms and nearly hitting the streetlamp, he speaks in sad and poignant tones*): Our dear Miss Hana!

Klikot is very embarrassed; when Kaps opens his mouth, Klikot is alarmed and jumps beneath the balcony so the sharp edge of its shadow might hide him.

KAPS: Miss Hana! Here beneath your window – beneath your window stands a company of townsmen who salute you and into whose beloved town you’ve decided to return. They salute you with a loud cheer: All hail! All hail! All hail!

The whole scene is great fun for Kvirin, who knows full well that Kaps will make a fiasco of it. He did nothing to interfere while Klikot was still next to him, but now he hypocritically spurs the bailiff on. And as if he has been waiting for a signal, he now joins Kaps in wildly shouting “All hail!” Playing the fool, he is about to shout it a fourth time, when the bailiff, unhappy, puts his hand on Kvirin’s mouth and shakes his head at such absurdity.

KAPS: But this is not the sole purpose of our presence here, Miss; another light has led us beneath your window. For down here among us . . . (*Under the balcony Klikot is dying of shame.*) is one who stands – there, beneath the rain gutter – and presses his hand to his heart. He has been awaiting your return even more eagerly, even more ardently than the rest of us: this is our most excellent fellow townsman Mr. Aloysius Desiderius Klikot, civil servant and writer, our own Desi, the hope and pride of our town. He has celebrated your name in many poems, and the name of our town, to boot. I’m well aware of his modesty and his bashfulness, and I am sure he would ask nothing more than to sing your name his entire life as a lowly stranger, but would it not be a sin – we must ask ourselves, ladies and gentlemen, at this quiet, holy hour – would it not be a sin to pass this pearl by without ever meeting him? Is it not incumbent upon us, his contemporaries, to draw attention to this modest, quiet creator? Dear

Miss Hana! Tonight, as you merrily twirl in the arms of noble gentlemen and dance partners, remember now and then a dim little light in an attic room, a light beneath which our writer bends as he wipes from his brow immortal thoughts. May God grant him long life and even greater happiness! And now I humbly take my leave! (*He steps down from the base of the streetlamp. Enthusiastically, he goes up to Klikot beneath the balcony, as if to ask, "Well, what do you think now?"*)

KLIKOT (*deeply mortified*): I will never forget this! (*He walks away, into his building, completely crushed, and slinks into his little room.*)

Kaps, who always tries to do something nice but always makes a mess of things, just stands there with a helpless shrug. Kvirin shuffles up to him. They look at each other.

TEREZA (*gives Hana a bug*): Oh, you lucky girl! Barons, poets – they're all on their knees – you can have your pick!

HANA: That was very nice. I think I'd like to meet this writer.

TEREZA (*only now is she able to examine Hana's dress*): It's lovely, it's splendid! (*She smooths out the creases on the dress.*) Only the flower maybe is just a smidgen too low and – well, I'm not so old-fashioned, but the hemline could be dropped just an inch or so . . . But hurry up now, the Baron has already paid his respects to the Emperor's portrait, as well as to the clock on the wall. (*She pushes Hana out of the room and switches off the light.*)

The sisters on the balcony, whispering excitedly, withdraw their heads; their light goes out as well. The hunchback's housekeeper goes back to her work, too, and leaves the hunchback to himself; he is soon absorbed in his reading. Klikot is in his room in the dark.

KVIRIN (*he and the bailiff have been staring at each other in silence*): Well, you made a real mess of it!

KAPS *is looking at Kvirin miserably.*

KVIRIN: You made a devil of a mess! You and your big mouth!

KAPS *continues to look at him.*

KVIRIN: You see, he's really in love with her. You can't understand that; you've never had a woman in your arms. (*Imitating his rapturous speech.*) Ho-ho-ho, ho-la-hoo, ho-la-doo. But let us pay honor . . . to whom honor must be paid . . . you really know how to flap your trap, don't you? How do you do it? (*He starts opening and shutting his mouth making sounds like a lid opening and closing; he's trying to figure out the secret of Kaps's speech technique. Then he takes hold of Kaps's jaw and, by opening and closing it, tests how it works. Kaps just stands there helplessly and, like a little child, lets Kvirin do all this to him in the belief that the prankster really is admiring him. He then stands there with his mouth wide open, just as Kvirin leaves it.*) God only knows what will happen now! What if he hangs himself? It's entirely possible, you know; he loses hope so damn quickly. You could even be guilty of his death! Murderer, killer! You know, he loves her beyond all reason. He told me that he writes to her nearly every day: he neatly seals the letter, but never sends it; instead, he puts it in a little wooden box. He's already got a whole bunch of these letters stashed away. And she writes him back, too, or, rather, he very conscientiously writes her replies himself and then keeps these letters in a different box. Oh, they've got a wonderful correspondence going – it's a very passionate love affair! And now you come along with your big mouth – woof, woof, woof! Oh, I wouldn't like to be in your shoes today. No doubt about it: he's going to end it all. (*He goes up to Kaps, shuts his still-open mouth, and pulls him along after him.*) We'd better go! He's up there hanging himself!

KAPS (*alarmed, jumps away*): But – we can't let that happen!

KVIRIN: Come on, come on, what's done is done! If a man wants to kill himself, he certainly shouldn't be bothered. He's got a right to do *that* at least!

Kaps, half-dead, lets himself be pulled away by Kvirin. They disappear.

GAPIT (*all this time he has been pitifully hugging the doll and shaking. Suddenly he lifts his head, listening attentively to a noise he hallucinates as coming from the floor above him*): Do you hear it? Do you hear it? Just like yesterday. That damn woman! I've suspected for sometime now that she's been playing their game. Do you hear it? Believe me now? (*He drums his fingers on the table, copying the Morse code signals he thinks he hears coming through the ceiling.*) What does it mean? What does it mean? I must get a Morse Code book. Gizela, oh Gizela, there can be no doubt about it anymore, everything's falling into place now. Today, today . . . (*his voice chokes with terror*) when he was passing through my office this morning, my boss dropped a piece of string in the middle of the room, right in front of me. He was trying to tell me that . . . that . . . (*gasping in horror*) that I should hang myself! (*He strikes the table with his forehead.*) I'd do it, I'd do it, too, but I don't want to give these devils the pleasure, with the whole town watching and lying in wait for something to happen, to see who's going to be the first victim. They're all in it together. They already know about you, I'm sure of it; the whole kiosk in front of the office is pasted with posters: "Rubber tires!" they say. Well, let them have their fun, the devils! I'll really confuse them! First thing tomorrow I'm going to buy myself a ticket – oh, no, I'm not leaving yet, I'm not leaving! Are you trying to warn me? There's no need, no need – I can say whatever I want here at the table; they can't hear me when I'm over here; it's only the bed they have wired. Tomorrow, yes, I'll definitely get the ticket tomorrow! But we'll only get it as far as Pekno, to throw them off our trail. We'll get out at Pekno and continue our travels on a different train, and then take a third one. Oh, we'll have a new life, Gizela, a brand new life; we'll get a new start out there! I just mustn't fall sleep, I mustn't sleep, if I go to bed, they'll quickly catch me on their frequency, and slimmer me, and all my plans will be exposed. I've searched all around the bed, but I can't find anything, but somewhere there in the wood, or in the wall – the devil knows where – they must have their antenna! Over by the bed they hear everything, but they can't control the whole room. Yesterday, as long as I stayed awake at the table, it was all right, but when I lay down: "He is going to bed now,

he can't keep it up anymore, he's worn out . . . God, how he tortures himself just to stay awake at the table! He wants to buy a train ticket, wants to escape, thinks about crossing the border. Don't pretend – now you've just turned in your bed, now you're covering your ears – this is slimmering, the latest invention, thought vacuuming – antenna, frequency C-42!" – I must not sleep in the bed tonight; I must not. Let's stay awake, Gizela! Have a drink! Let's drink to our new life, our bright new life!

From somewhere nearby, right next to him, comes the sound of horrible, spine-chilling laughter – the hallucinated voice of the antenna. Triumphant, wild, ecstatic laughter. Gapit crouches down by the table as if he's being lashed by a whip.

THE HALLUCINATED VOICE (*as from a radio loudspeaker*): I must not sleep in the bed tonight; I must not. Let's stay awake, Gizela! Have a drink! Let's drink to our new life, our bright new life! Slimmering, the latest invention, thought vacuuming – antenna, frequency C-42!

Silence, deathly silence. After some time – long seconds of suffocating silence – Gapit turns his head – his face is contorted in white terror.

GAPIT (*whispering*): They're already here – they're everywhere!

Curtain