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The Great Performance

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The Great Performance

I was walking along the side where all the bookshops are. I stopped now and then although I was pretending all the time to be in a hurry. It was rather difficult that day. The pavements were covered with a layer of melting snow. Anyhow, I made out that I had some purpose in stopping. The silhouettes of the shapely girls going past me were somehow especially piquant reflected in the windows of the second-hand bookshops. Here was a complete flavor! Excitement plus the quiet wisdom of yellowish tomes. Frivolity and seriousness. Glances. They were chattering, some of them. Tossing about the simplest remarks. I tried to catch the rest. The pompous titles of the books began to lose their meaning. I blundered along towards the church. Eva had told me she had no time today. I knew it was coming to an end. I was afraid of an empty flat. Maybe that's why I was in no hurry. That girl had been a sort of crow's nest to me for seeking out unknown lands. She wasn't a bad cook either.

I battered into the wind around the corner. One had to take care here. The square had an irregular shape and I never knew whether I was crossing it the right way. Cars rushed on like mad. I noticed Zanecki. Driving past. Again that bloody galling awareness of my own inadequacy. Passed by the likes of him at every turn. And Eva fancied an electric sewing machine. Absurd thought: "It's all because I haven't enough to buy it." Rubbish.

The man shouted suddenly. It was getting darker and darker and I could distinctly see his silhouette on the ledge of a lighted window on the third floor of a grey building. Offices. His voice wasn't used to tones of such *forte*. He shouted again. "You there, get out of the way! Look out!"

He must have been over sixty. A throat that innumerable clouds of cigarette smoke had passed through.

I followed the others, clambering over the heaps of snow shovelled to the side. "He's gone mad, going to jump down," I thought hopefully. For everyone else, too, this was something. Maybe they were waiting for the same thing. This town had gone through the insurrection. I didn't understand. He was waiting. The crowd was growing, standing under the building. Now he was directing his orders more individually: "Hey, miss, you with the basket! Look out!" He bent forward. He held something in his hand. It was an ordinary brush on a long stick.

"He wants to sweep the snow down," my neighbor turned to me. People

were as close to each other as at an accident. I felt disappointed. So he wasn't going to jump. I noticed a white overhang of snow above his head. The crowd was already so big that the cars had to stop. They were waiting in long lines. It gave me a feeling of satisfaction that they turned out to be so submissive.

The man in the window was in no hurry. He shouted out more rarely now but his movements had slowed down, were full of dignity. I got it. This was his last chance. For a moment I could see his tired old face. In just another year from now he wouldn't be able to draw such a crowd just by himself. But for the moment he was the most important one. The policeman was also watching. "What a smash that'll make! Christ!" a student behind me exclaimed. "Smash," I thought hopefully. We waited. The old man peered down. Just the way actors sometimes look at the audience in a theater through the curtains. Before the performance.

"Look out!" he yelled once more and that was the last cry of his ever to be heard on this earth by a crowd and probably also his first. He pushed forward with his hand. The snow fell soundlessly in a white cloud. We fell out in silence. The man on the ledge closed the window and disappeared for ever.

IMRE SZÁSZ / HUNGARY

The Covered Wagon

To Paul Engle

The student apartment building lay parallel to the road some distance from the town. It was twelve stories high, about six hundred feet long and housed at least two thousand people. It had been built only a few years ago; the aggressive angularity of glass and concrete was somewhat alleviated by the surrounding trees which gave the false impression of being the edge of a forest, just as papier maché and wooden façades pretend to be towns in cowboy films. One almost expected to hear the swearing of the film-hands from behind a clump of trees.

The Covered Wagon, as the building was romantically called, aimed at a new conception in student living. And indeed, with its comfortable modern