

⑥ MILAN KUNDERA

Milan Kundera (b. 1929) was born in Czechoslovakia into a highly cultured musical family. In his youth, Kundera experienced Nazi occupation and, as most Czechs after World War II, initially favored Communism. He later came to disagree with its totalitarianism and took an important role in the movement for cultural freedom, the Prague Spring. After its repression, Kundera was deprived of a means of earning a living and went into permanent exile in France. In his youth, Kundera was influenced by surrealism and experimented with poetry. By the end of the 1950s, he turned to writing

KUNDERA • EDWARD AND GOD

499

novels and short stories because he felt that fiction was the best means for exploring the crisis of modernity which Kundera viewed as encompassing a recognition of the limits of rationalism and secularism while still upholding these as significant ideals. The protagonists of Kundera's short stories in Laughable Loves and his novels The Joke, Life Is Elsewhere, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, and The Unbearable Lightness of Being wish to oblivate this dilemma. Most frequently through erotic passion, they engage in a collective forgetting, from which Kundera prods them with jokes, irony, and misadventures.

Edward and God

1

We can advantageously begin Edward's story in his elder brother's little house in the country. His brother was lying on the couch and saying to Edward, "Ask the old hag. Never mind, just go and talk to her. Of course she's a pig, but I believe that even in such creatures a conscience exists. Just because she once did me dirt, now perhaps she'll be glad if you'll allow her to make amends for her past wrongdoings."

Edward's brother was still the same, a good-natured guy and a lazy one. Just this way perhaps had he been lolling on the couch in his university attic when, many years ago (Edward was still a little boy then), he had lazed and snored away the day of Stalin's death. The next day he had unsuspectingly gone to the department and caught sight of his fellow student, Miss Chehachkova, standing in ostentatious rigidity in the middle of the hall like a statue of grief. Three times he circled her and then began to roar with laughter. The offended girl denounced her fellow student's laughter as political provocation and Edward's brother had had to leave school and go to work in a village, where since that time he had acquired a little house, a dog, a wife, two children, and even a cottage.

In this village house, then, was he now lying on the couch and speaking to Edward. "We used to call her the chastising scourge of the working female and she was always after young boys, so she'll meet you halfway."

Edward was at that time very young. He had just graduated from teachers' college (the course his brother had not completed), and was looking for a position. The next day, following his brother's advice, he knocked on the director's door. Then he saw a tall, bony woman with the greasy black hair of a gypsy, black eyes, and black down under her nose. Her ugliness relieved him of the shyness to which feminine beauty still always reduced him, so that he managed to talk to her in a relaxed manner, amiably, even courteously. The directress was evidently delighted by his approach and

several times said with perceptible elation, "We need young people here."
She promised to find a place for him.

2

And so Edward became a teacher in a small Czech town. This made him
neither happy nor sad. He always tried hard to distinguish between the 5
important and the unimportant, and he put his teaching career into the
category of *unimportant*. Not that teaching itself was unimportant; after all,
it constituted his livelihood (in this respect, in fact, he was deeply attached
to it, because he knew that he would not be able to earn a living any other
way). But he considered it unimportant in terms of his true nature. He
hadn't selected it. Social demand, his party record, the certificate from high
school, entrance examinations had selected it for him. The interlocking
conjunction of all these forces eventually dumped him (as a crane drops a
sack onto a truck) from secondary school into teachers' college. He didn't
want to go there (it was superstitiously stigmatized by his brother's fail-
ure), but eventually he acquiesced. He understood, however, that his oc-
cupation would be among the fortuitous aspects of his life. It would be
attached to him like a false beard—which is something laughable.

If, however, his professional duties were something not important 6
(laughable, in fact), perhaps on the contrary, what he did voluntarily was.
In his new place of work Edward soon found a young girl who struck him
as beautiful, and he began to pursue her with a seriousness that was almost
genuine. Her name was Alice and she was, as he discovered to his sorrow
on their first dates, very reserved and virtuous.

Many times during their evening walks he had tried to put his arm 7
around her so that he could touch the region of her right breast from
behind, and each time she'd seized his hand and pushed it away. One day
when he was repeating this experiment once again and she (once again)
was pushing his hand away, she stopped and asked: "Do you believe in
God?"

With his sensitive ears Edward caught secret overtones in this question 8
and immediately forgot about the breast.

"Do you?" Alice repeated her question and Edward didn't dare answer. 9
Do not let us condemn him for fearing to be frank; in his new place of work
he felt lonely and was too attracted to Alice to risk losing her favor over a
single solitary answer.

"And you?" he asked in order to gain time. 10

"Yes, I do." And once again she urged him to answer her. 11

Until this time it had never occurred to him to believe in God. He 12
understood, however, that he must not admit this. On the contrary, he
saw that he should take advantage of the opportunity and knock together
from faith in God a nice Trojan horse, within whose belly, according to the

ancient example, he would enter the girl's heart unobserved. Only it wasn't so easy for Edward to say to Alice simply *yes, I believe in God*. He wasn't at all cynical and was ashamed to lie; the vulgar and uncompromising nature of a lie went against the grain with him. If he absolutely had to tell a lie, even so he wanted it to remain as close as possible to the truth. For that reason he replied in an exceptionally thoughtful voice:

"I don't really know, Alice, what I should say to you about this. Certainly I believe in God. But . . ." He paused and Alice glanced up at him in surprise. "But I want to be completely frank with you. May I?"

"You must be frank," she said. "Otherwise surely there wouldn't be any sense in our being together."

"Really?"

"Really," said Alice.

"Sometimes I'm bothered by doubts," said Edward in a low voice. "Sometimes I doubt whether He really exists."

"But how can you doubt that!" Alice almost shrieked.

Edward was silent, and after a moment's reflection a familiar thought struck him: "When I see so much evil around me, I often wonder how it is possible that God would permit it all."

This sounded so sad that Alice seized his hand. "Yes, the world is indeed full of evil, I know this only too well. But for just that reason you must believe in God. Without Him all this suffering would be in vain. Nothing would have any meaning. And if that were so, I couldn't live at all."

"Perhaps you're right," said Edward thoughtfully, and on Sunday he went to church with her. He dipped his fingers in the font and crossed himself. Then there was the Mass and people sang, and with the others he sang a hymn whose tune was familiar, but to which he didn't know the words. Instead of the prescribed words he chose only various vowels and always started to sing a fraction of a second behind the others, because he only dimly recollected even the tune. Yet the moment he became certain of the tune, he let his voice ring out fully, so that for the first time in his life he realized that he had a beautiful bass. Then they all began to recite the Lord's Prayer and some old ladies knelt. He could not hold back a compelling desire to kneel too on the stone floor. He crossed himself with impressive arm movements and experienced the incredible feeling of being able to do something that he'd never done in his life, neither in the classroom nor on the street, nowhere. He felt magnificently free.

When it was all over, Alice looked at him with a radiant expression in her eyes. "Can you still say that you have doubts about Him?"

"No."

And Alice said, "I would like to teach you to love Him just as I do."

They were standing on the broad steps of the church and Edward's soul was full of laughter. Unfortunately, just at that moment the directress was walking by and she saw them.

This was bad. We must recall (for the sake of those to whom perhaps the historical background of the story is missing) that although it is true people weren't forbidden to go to church, all the same, churchgoing was not without a certain danger. 26

This is not so difficult to understand. Those who had been leading the fight for the revolution were very proud, and their pride went by the name of: *standing on the correct side of the front lines*. When ten or twelve years have already passed since the revolution (as had happened approximately at the time of our story), the front lines begin to melt away, and with them the correct side. No wonder former adherents of the revolution feel cheated and are quick to seek *substitute* fronts. Thanks to religion they can (as atheists opposing believers) stand again in all their glory on the correct side and retain that so habitual and precious sense of their own superiority. 27

But to tell the truth, the substitute front was also useful to others, and it will perhaps not be too premature to disclose that Alice was one of them. Just as the directress wanted to be on the *correct* side, Alice wanted to be on the *opposite* side. During the revolution they had nationalized her dad's business and Alice hated those who had done this to him. But how should she show her hatred? Perhaps by taking a knife and avenging her father? But this sort of thing is not the custom in Bohemia. Alice had a better alternative for expressing her opposition: she began to believe in God. 28

Thus the Lord came to the aid of both sides (who had already almost lost the living reason for their positions), and, thanks to Him, Edward found himself between Scylla and Charybdis. 29

When on Monday morning the directress came up to Edward in the staff room, he felt very insecure. There was no way he could invoke the friendly atmosphere of their first talk because since that time (whether through artlessness or carelessness) he had never again engaged in polite conversation with her. The directress therefore had good reason to address him with a conspicuously cold smile: 30

"We saw each other yesterday, didn't we?" 31

"Yes, we did," said Edward. 32

The directress went on, "I can't understand how a young man can go to church." Edward shrugged his shoulders in bewilderment and the directress shook her head. "A young man." 33

"I went to see the baroque interior of the cathedral," said Edward by way of an excuse. 34

"Ah, so that's it," said the directress ironically, "I didn't know you had such artistic interests." 35

This conversation wasn't a bit pleasant for Edward. He remembered how his brother had circled his fellow student three times and then roared with laughter. It seemed to him that family history was repeating itself and he felt afraid. On Saturday he made his excuses over the telephone to 36

Alice, saying that he wouldn't be going to church because he had a cold. "You are a real mollycoddle," Alice rebuked him after Sunday and it seemed to Edward that her words sounded cold. So he began to tell her (enigmatically and vaguely, because he was ashamed to admit his fear and his true reasons) about the wrongs being done him at school, and about the horrible directress who was persecuting him for no reason. He wanted to get her pity and sympathy, but Alice said:

"My woman boss, on the contrary, isn't bad at all," and giggling, she began to relate stories about her work. Edward listened to her merry voice and became more and more gloomy.

4

Ladies and gentlemen, these were weeks of torment. Edward longed hellishly for Alice. Her body fired him up and yet this very body was utterly inaccessible to him. The settings in which their dates took place were also agonizing. Either they hung about together for an hour or two in the streets after dark or they went to the movies. The banality and the negligible erotic possibilities of these two variants (there weren't any others) prompted Edward to think that perhaps he would achieve more outstanding successes if they could meet in a different environment. Once, with an ingenuous face, he proposed that for the weekend they go to the country and visit his brother, who had a cottage in a wooded valley by a river. He excitedly described the innocent beauties of nature. However, Alice (naive and credulous in every other respect) swiftly saw through him and categorically refused. It wasn't Alice alone who was repulsing him. It was Alice's God Himself (eternally vigilant and wary).

This God embodied a single idea (He had no other wishes or concerns): He forbade extramarital sex. He was therefore a rather comical God, but let's not laugh at Alice for that. Of the ten commandments which Moses gave to the people, fully nine didn't trouble her at all; she didn't feel like killing or not honoring her father, or coveting her neighbor's wife. But the one remaining commandment she felt to be not *self-evident*, and therefore a genuine inconvenience and imposition, the famous seventh: *Thou shalt not commit adultery*. If she wanted to put her religious faith into practice somehow, to prove and demonstrate it, she had then to fasten onto this single commandment. She had thereby created for herself from an obscure, diffuse, and abstract God, a God who was quite specific, comprehensible, and concrete: the God of No Fornication.

I ask you where in fact does fornication begin? Every woman fixes this boundary for herself according to totally mysterious criteria. Alice quite happily allowed Edward to kiss her, and after many, many attempts she eventually became reconciled to letting him stroke her breasts. However, at the middle of her body, let's say at her navel, she drew a strict and un-

compromising line below which lay the area of sacred prohibitions, the area of Moses's denial and of the anger of the Lord.

Edward began to read the Bible and to study basic theological literature. He had decided to fight Alice with her own weapons. 42

"Alice dear," he then said to her, "if we love God, nothing is forbidden. If we long for something, it's because of His will. Christ wanted nothing but that we should all be ruled by love." 43

"Yes," said Alice, "but a different love from the one you're thinking of." "There's only one love," said Edward. 44

"That would certainly suit you," she said, "only God set down certain commandments, and we must abide by them." 45

"Yes, the Old Testament God," said Edward, "but not the Christian God." 46

"How's that? Surely there's only one God," objected Alice. "Yes," said Edward, "only the Jews of the Old Testament understood 48

him a little differently from the way we do. Before the coming of Christ, men had to abide above all by a specific system of God's commandments and laws. What a man was like inside was not so important. But Christ considered some of these prohibitions and regulations to be external. For Him, the most important thing was what a man is like inside. When a man is true to his own ardent, believing heart, everything he does will be good and pleasing to God. After all, that's why St. Paul said, 'Everything is pure to the man who is pure at heart.' " 49

"Only I wonder if you are this pure-hearted man." 50

"And St. Augustine," continued Edward, "said, 'Love God and do what it pleases you to do.' Do you understand, Alice? Love God and do what it pleases you to do!" 51

"Only what pleases you will never please me," she replied, and Edward understood that his theological assault had foundered completely this time, therefore he said: 52

"You don't like me." 53

"I do," said Alice in a terribly matter-of-fact way. "And that's why I don't want us to do anything that we shouldn't do!" 54

As we have already mentioned, these were tormenting weeks. And the torment was that much greater because Edward's desire for Alice was not only the desire of a body for a body; on the contrary, the more she refused him her body, the more lonesome and afflicted he became and the more he coveted her heart as well. However, neither her body nor her heart wanted to do anything about it; they were equally cold, equally wrapped up in themselves, and contentedly self-sufficient. 55

It was precisely this unruffled moderation of hers which exasperated Edward most in his relations with Alice. Although in other respects he was quite a sober young man, he began to long for some extreme action through which he could drive Alice out of her unruffled state. And because it was too risky to provoke her through blasphemy or cynicism (to which by 56

nature he was attracted), he had to go to the opposite (and therefore far more difficult) extreme, which would coincide with Alice's own position but would be so overdone that it would put her to shame. To put it more simply: Edward began to exaggerate his religiousness. He didn't miss a single visit to church (his desire for Alice was greater than his fear of unpleasantness) and once there he behaved with eccentric humility: at every opportunity he knelt, while Alice prayed beside him and crossed herself standing, because she was afraid for her stockings.

One day he criticized her for her lukewarm religiosity. He reminded her of Jesus's words: "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' shall enter the kingdom of heaven." He criticized her, saying that her faith was formal, external, shallow. He criticized her for being too pleased with herself. He criticized her for not being aware of anyone except herself.

As he was saying all this (Alice was not prepared for his attack and defended herself feebly), he suddenly caught sight of a cross on the opposite corner of the street, an old, neglected, metal cross with a rusty, iron Christ. He pretentiously slipped his arm out from under Alice's, stopped and (as a protest against her indifferent heart and a sign of his new offensive) crossed himself with stubborn conspicuousness. He did not even really get to see how this affected Alice, because at that moment he spied on the other side of the street the woman janitor who worked at the school. She was looking at him. Edward realized that he was lost.

5

His fears were confirmed when two days later the woman janitor stopped him in the corridor and loudly informed him that he was to present himself the next day at twelve o'clock at the directress's office: "We have something to talk to you about, comrade."

Edward was overcome by anxiety. In the evening he met Alice so that, as usual, they could hang about for an hour or two in the streets, but Edward no longer pursued his religious crusade. He was downcast and longed to confide what had happened to him, but he didn't dare, because he knew that in order to save his unloved (but indispensable) job, he was ready to betray the Lord without hesitation the next morning. For this reason he preferred not to say a word about the inauspicious summons, so he couldn't even get any consolation. The following day he entered the directress's room in a mood of utter dejection.

In the room four judges awaited him: the directress, the woman janitor, one of Edward's colleagues (a tiny man with glasses), and an unknown (gray-haired) gentleman, whom the others called Comrade Inspector. The directress asked Edward to be seated, and told him they had invited him for just a friendly and unofficial talk. For, she said, the manner in which Edward had been conducting himself in his extracurricular life was making

them all uneasy. As she said this she looked at the inspector, who nodded his head in agreement, then at the bespectacled teacher, who had been watching her attentively the whole time. Now, intercepting her glance, he launched into a fluent speech about how we wanted to bring up healthy young people without prejudices and how we had complete responsibility for them because we (the teachers) served as models for them. Precisely for this reason, he said, we could not countenance a religious person within our walls. He developed this thought at length and finally declared that Edward's behavior was a disgrace to the whole school.

Even a few minutes earlier Edward had been convinced that he would deny his recently acquired God and admit that his church attendance and his crossing himself in public were only jokes. Now, however, face to face with the real situation, he felt that he couldn't do it. He could not, after all, say to these four people, so serious and so excited, that they were getting excited about some misunderstanding, some bit of foolishness. He understood that to do that would be to involuntarily mock their earnestness, and he also realized that what they were expecting from him were only quibbles and excuses which they were prepared in advance to reject. He understood (in a flash, there wasn't time for lengthy cogitation) that at that moment the most important thing was for him to appear truthful—more precisely, that his statements should resemble the ideas they had constructed about him. If he was to succeed in correcting these ideas to a certain extent, he would also have to play their game to a certain extent. Therefore he said:

"Comrades, may I be frank?" 63

"Of course," said the directress. "After all, that's why you're here." 64

"And you won't be angry?" 65

"Just talk," said the directress. 66

"Very well, I shall confess to you then. I really do believe in God." 67

He glanced at his judges and it seemed to him that they all exhaled with satisfaction. Only the woman janitor snapped at him. "In this day and age, comrade? In this day and age?" 68

Edward went on. "I knew that you would get angry if I told the truth. But I don't know how to lie. Don't ask me to lie to you." 69

The directress said (gently): "No one wants you to lie. It's good that you are telling the truth. Only, please tell me how you, a young man, can believe in God!" 70

"Today, when we fly to the moon!" The teacher lost his temper. 71

"I can't help it," said Edward. "I don't want to believe in Him. Really, 72

I don't." 73

"How come you say you don't want to believe, if you do?" The gray-haired gentleman (in an exceedingly kind tone of voice) joined the conversation. 74

"I don't want to believe, but I do believe." Edward quietly repeated his confession.

The teacher laughed, "But there's a contradiction in that!"
"Comrades, I'm telling it the way it is," said Edward. "I know very well that faith in God leads us away from reality. What would socialism come to if everyone believed that the world was in God's hands? No one would do anything and everyone would just rely on God."

"Exactly," agreed the directress.

"No one has ever yet proved that God exists," stated the teacher with glasses. Edward continued: "The history of mankind is distinguished from prehistory by the fact that people have taken their fate into their own hands and do not need God."

"Faith in God leads to fatalism," said the directress.

"Faith in God belongs to the Middle Ages," said Edward, and then the directress said something again and the teacher said something and Edward said something and the inspector said something, and they were all in complete accord, until finally the teacher with glasses exploded, interrupting Edward:

"So why do you cross yourself in the street, when you know all this?"

Edward looked at him with an immensely sad expression and then said, "Because I believe in God."

"But there's a contradiction in that!" repeated the teacher joyfully.

"Yes," admitted Edward, "there is. There is a contradiction between knowledge and faith. Knowledge is one thing and faith another. I recognize that faith in God will lead us to obscurantism. I recognize that it would be better if He didn't exist. But when here inside I . . ." he pointed with his finger to his heart, "feel that He exists . . . You see, comrades, I'm telling it to you the way it is. It's better that I confess to you, because I don't want to be a hypocrite. I want you to know what I'm really like," and he hung his head.

The teacher's brain was no larger, proportionally, than his body. He didn't know that even the strictest revolutionary considers force only a necessary evil and believes the intrinsic *good* of the revolution lies in re-education. He, who had become a revolutionary overnight, did not enjoy too much respect from the directress and did not suspect that at this moment Edward, who had placed himself at his judges' disposal as a difficult case and yet as an object capable of being remolded, had a thousand times more value than he. And because he didn't suspect it, he attacked Edward with severity and declared that people who did not know how to part with their medieval faith belonged in the Middle Ages and should leave the modern school.

The directress let him finish his speech then administered her rebuke: "I don't like it when heads roll. This comrade was frank; he told us everything just as it was. We must know how to respect this." Then she turned to Edward. "The comrades are right, of course, when they say that religious people cannot educate our youth. What do you yourself suggest?"

"I don't know, comrades," said Edward unhappily.

"This is what I think," said the inspector. "The struggle between the old and the new goes on not only between classes, but also within each individual man. Just such a struggle is going on inside our comrade here. With his reason he knows, but feeling pulls him back. We must help our comrade in this struggle, so that reason may triumph." 88

The directress nodded. Then she said: "I myself will take charge of him." 89

6

Edward had thus averted the most pressing danger. His fate as a teacher was now in the hands of the directress exclusively, which was entirely to his satisfaction. He remembered his brother's observation that the directress was always after young men, and with all his vacillating, youthful self-confidence (now deflated, then exaggerated) he resolved to win the contest by gaining as a man the favor of his ruler. 90

When, according to an agreement, he visited her a few days later in her office, he tried to assume a light tone. He used every opportunity to slip an intimate remark or bit of subtle flattery into the conversation, or to emphasize by way of discreet double-talk his curious position as a man in the hands of a woman. But he was not to be permitted to choose the tone of the conversation. The directress spoke to him affably, but with the utmost restraint. She asked him what he was reading, then she herself named some books and recommended that he should read them. She evidently wanted to embark upon the lengthy job to be done on his thinking. Their short meeting ended with her inviting him to her place. 91

As a result of the directress's reserve, Edward's self-confidence was deflated again, so he entered her bachelor apartment meekly, with no intention of conquering her with his masculine charm. She seated him in an armchair and, assuming a friendly tone, asked him what he felt like having: some coffee perhaps? He said that he didn't. Some alcohol then? He was embarrassed: "If you have some cognac . . ." and was immediately afraid that he had been presumptuous. But the directress replied affably: "No, I don't have cognac, but I do have a little wine," and she fetched a half-empty bottle, whose contents were just sufficient to fill two tumblers. 92

Then she told Edward that he must not look upon her as some inquisitor; after all, everyone had a complete right to profess what he recognized as right. Naturally, it is another matter (she added at once) whether he is then fit or not fit to be a teacher; for that reason, she said, they had had (although they hadn't been happy about it) to summon Edward and have a talk with him and they (at least she and the inspector) were very pleased with the frank manner in which he had spoken to them, and the fact that he had not denied anything. Then she said she had talked with the inspector about Edward for a very long time and they had decided that they 93

would summon him for another interview in six months' time and that until then the directress would help his development through her influence. And once again she emphasized that she merely wanted to help him in a friendly way, that she was neither an inquisitor nor a policeman. Then she mentioned the teacher who had attacked Edward so sharply, and said, "That man is hiding something himself and so he would be ready to sacrifice others. Also, the woman janitor is letting it be known everywhere that you were insolent, and pig-headedly stuck to your opinions, as she puts it. She's not to be talked out of the view that you should be dismissed from the school. Of course, I don't agree with her, but you cannot startle her so completely again. I wouldn't be happy either if someone who crosses himself public in the street were teaching my children."

Thus the directress showed Edward in a single outpouring of sentences how attractive were the prospects of her mercy, and also how menacing the prospects of her severity. And then to prove that their meeting was genuinely a friendly one, she digressed to other subjects; she talked about books and led him to her bookcase. She raved about Rolland's *Enchanted Soul* and scolded him for not having read it. Then she asked how he was getting on at the school, and after his conventional reply, she herself spoke at length. She said that she was grateful to fate for her position; she liked her work because it was a means for her to educate children and thus be in continuous and real touch with the future, and only the future could, in the end, justify all this suffering, of which she said ("Yes, we must admit it") there was plenty. "If I did not believe that I was living for something more than just my own life, I couldn't perhaps live at all."

These words suddenly sounded very ingenuous and it was not clear whether the directress was trying to confess or to commence the expected ideological polemic about the meaning of life. Edward decided to interpret them in their personal sense and asked her in a low, discreet voice:

"And how about your own life?"

"My life?" she repeated after him.

"Wouldn't it have been satisfying in itself?"

A bitter smile appeared on her face and Edward felt almost sorry for her at that moment. She was pitifully hideous: her black hair cast a shadow over her bony, elongated face and the black down under her nose began to look as conspicuous as a mustache. Suddenly he glimpsed all the sorrow of her life. He perceived her gypsylike features, revealing passion, and he perceived her ugliness, revealing the hopelessness of that passion; he imagined how she had passionately turned into a living statue of grief upon Stalin's death, how she had passionately sat up late at hundreds of thousands of meetings, how she had passionately struggled against poor Jesus. And he understood that all this was only a sad outlet for her desire, which could not flow where she wished it to. Edward was young and his compassion was not used up. He looked at the directress with sympathy. She, however, as if ashamed of having involuntarily fallen silent, now assumed a brisk tone and went on:

"It doesn't depend on that at all, Edward. Anyhow, a man is not in the world only for his own sake. He always lives for something." She looked deeply into his eyes: "However, the question is for what. For something real or for something fictitious? God—that is a beautiful fiction. But the future of the people, Edward, that is reality. And I have lived for reality, I have given up everything for reality."

She spoke with such an air of commitment, that Edward did not stop feeling that sudden rush of human sympathy which had awoken in him a short while before. It struck him as stupid that he should be lying to another human being (one fellow creature to another), and it seemed to him that this intimate moment in their conversation offered him the opportunity to cast away finally the unworthy (and after all difficult) pretense of being a believer.

"But I quite agree with you," he quickly assured her. "I too prefer reality. Don't take this religion of mine so seriously."

He soon learned that a man should never let himself be led astray by a rash fit of emotion. The directress looked at him in surprise and said with perceptible coldness: "Don't pretend. I liked you because you were frank. Now you're pretending to be something that you aren't."

No, Edward was not to be permitted to step out of the religious costume in which he had originally clothed himself. He quickly reconciled himself to this and tried hard to correct the bad impression: "No, I didn't mean to be evasive. Of course I believe in God, I would never deny that. I only wanted to say that I also believe in the future of humanity, in progress and all that. After all, if I didn't believe in that, what would my work as a teacher be for? Why should children be born and why should we live at all? And I've come to think that it is also God's will that society continue to advance toward something better. I have thought that a man can believe in God and in communism, that it is possible for them to be combined."

"No," the directress smiled with maternal authoritativeness, "it isn't possible for those two things to be combined."

"I know," said Edward sadly. "Don't be angry with me."

"I'm not angry. You are still a young man and you obstinately stick to what you believe. No one understands you the way I do. After all I was young once too. I know what it's like to be young. And I like your youthfulness. Yes, I rather like you."

And now it finally happened. Neither earlier nor later, but now, at precisely the right moment. It is evident that Edward was not the instigator but merely the instrument. When the directress said she rather liked him he replied, not too expressively:

"I like you too."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Well I never! I'm an old woman . . ." objected the directress.

"That's not true," Edward had to say.

"But it is," said the directress.

"You're not at all old, that's nonsense," he had to say very resolutely. 115
 "You think so?" 116
 "It happens that I like you very much." 117
 "Don't lie. You know you mustn't lie." 118
 "I'm not lying. You're pretty." 119
 "Pretty?" The directress made a face to show that she didn't really 120
 believe it.
 "Yes, pretty," said Edward, and because he was struck by the obvious 121
 incredibility of his assertion, he at once took pains to support it: "I'm mad
 about black-haired women like you."
 "You like black-haired women?" asked the directress. 122
 "I'm mad about them," said Edward. 123
 "And why haven't you come by all the time that you've been at the 124
 school? I had the feeling that you were avoiding me."
 "I was ashamed," said Edward. "Everyone would have said that I was 125
 sucking up to you. No one would have believed that I was coming to see
 you only because I liked you."
 "But you must not be ashamed," said the directress. "Now it has *been* 126
decided that you must meet with me from time to time."
 She looked into his eyes with her large brown irises (let us admit that in 127
 themselves they were beautiful), and just before he left she lightly stroked
 his hand, so that this foolish fellow went off with the sprightly feelings of
 a winner.

7

Edward was sure that the unpleasant affair had been settled to his advan- 128
 tage, and the next Sunday, feeling carefree and impudent, he went to
 church with Alice. Not only that, he went full of self-confidence—for (al-
 though this arouses in us a compassionate smile) in retrospect, he per-
 ceived the events at the directress's apartment as glaring evidence of his
 masculine appeal.
 In addition, this particular Sunday in church he noticed that Alice was 129
 somehow different; as soon as they met she slipped her hand under his
 arm and even in church clung to him. Formerly she had behaved modestly
 and inconspicuously; now she kept looking around and smilingly greeted
 at least ten acquaintances.
 This was curious and Edward didn't understand it. 130
 Then two days later as they were walking together along the streets after 131
 dark, Edward became aware to his amazement that her kisses, once so
 unpleasantly matter-of-fact, had become damp, warm, and passionate.
 When they stopped for a moment under a street lamp he found that her
 eyes were looking amorously at him.
 "Let me tell you this, I like you," blurted out Alice and immediately 132

covered his mouth. "No, no, don't say anything; I'm ashamed, I don't want to hear anything."

Again they walked a little way and again they stopped. This time Alice said, "Now I understand everything. I understand why you reproached me for being too comfortable in my faith." 133

Edward, however, didn't understand anything. So he also didn't say anything. When they'd walked a bit further, Alice said, "And you didn't say anything to me. Why didn't you say anything to me?" 134

"And what should I have said to you?" asked Edward. 135

"Yes, that's you all over," she said with quiet enthusiasm. "Others would put on airs; but you are silent. But that's exactly why I like you." 136

Edward began to suspect what she was talking about, but nevertheless he questioned her. "What are you talking about?" 137

"About what happened to you." 138

"And who told you about it?" 139

"Come on! Everybody knows about it. They summoned you, they threatened you, and you laughed in their faces. You didn't retract anything. Everyone admires you." 140

"But I didn't tell anyone about it." 141

"Don't be naive. A thing like that gets around. After all, it's no small matter. How often today do you find someone who has a little courage?" 142

Edward knew that in a small town every event is quickly turned into a legend, but he hadn't suspected that the worthless episodes he'd been involved in, whose significance he'd never overestimated, possessed the stuff of which legends are made. He hadn't sufficiently realized how very useful he was to his fellow countrymen who, as is well-known, do not really like *heroes* (men who struggle and conquer), but rather *martyrs*, for such men soothingly reassure them about their loyal inactivity, and corroborate their view that life provides only two alternatives: to be submissive or to be destroyed. Nobody doubted that Edward would be destroyed, and admiringly and complacently they all passed this on, until now, through Alice, he himself encountered the beautiful image of his own crucifixion. He accepted it cold-bloodedly and said: 143

"But my not retracting anything was after all a matter of course. Anyone would have done that much." 144

"Anyone?" blurted out Alice. "Look around you at what they all do! How cowardly they are! They would renounce their own mothers!" 145

Edward was silent and Alice was silent. They walked along holding hands. Then Alice said in a whisper: "I would do anything for you." 146

No one had ever said such words to Edward. They were an unexpected gift. Of course, Edward knew that they were an undeserved gift, but he said to himself that if fate withheld from him deserved gifts, he had a complete right to accept these undeserved ones. Therefore he said: 147

"No one can do anything for me any more." 148

"How's that?" whispered Alice. 149
 "They'll drive me from the school and those who speak of me today as
 a hero won't lift a finger for me. Only one thing is certain. I shall remain
 entirely alone." 150
 "You won't," Alice shook her head. 151
 "I will," said Edward. 152
 "You won't!" Alice almost shrieked. 153
 "They've all abandoned me." 154
 "I'll never abandon you," said Alice. 155
 "You will," said Edward sadly. 156
 "No, I won't," said Alice. 157
 "No, Alice," said Edward, "you don't like me. You've never liked me." 158
 "That's not true," whispered Alice and Edward noticed with satisfaction 159
 that her eyes were wet.
 "You don't, Alice; a person can feel that sort of thing. You were always
 cold to me. A woman who loves a man doesn't behave like that. I know
 that very well. And now you feel pity for me, because you know they want
 to ruin me. But you don't really like me and I don't want you to deceive
 yourself about it." 160
 They walked still further, silently, holding hands. Alice cried quietly for
 a while, then all at once she stopped walking and amid sobs said, "No,
 that's not true. You mustn't believe that. That's not true." 161
 "It is," said Edward, and when Alice did not stop crying, he suggested 162
 that on Saturday they go to the country. In a beautiful valley by the river
 was his brother's cottage, where they could be alone.
 Alice's face was wet with tears as she dumbly nodded her assent. 163

8

That was on Tuesday, and when on Thursday he was again invited to 164
 the directress's bachelor apartment, he made his way there with gay self-
 assurance, for he had absolutely no doubt that his natural charm would
 definitively dissolve the church scandal into little more than a cloud of
 smoke, a mere nothing. But this is the way life goes: a man imagines that
 he is playing his role in a particular play, and does not suspect that in
 the meantime they have changed the scenery without his noticing, and
 he unknowingly finds himself in the middle of a rather different perfor-
 mance.

He was again seated in the armchair opposite the directress. Between 165
 them was a little table and on it a bottle of cognac and two glasses. And this
 bottle of cognac was precisely that new prop by which a bright man with
 a sober temperament would have immediately recognized that the church
 scandal was no longer the matter in question.

But innocent Edward was so intoxicated with himself that at first he didn't realize this at all. He quite gaily took part in the opening conversation (the subject matter of which was vague and general). He drank the glass that was offered him, and was quite ingenuously bored. After half an hour or an hour the directress inconspicuously changed to more personal topics; she talked a lot about herself and from her words there emerged before Edward the image that she wanted: that of a sensible, middle-aged woman, not too happy, but reconciled to her lot in a dignified way; a woman who regretted nothing and even expressed satisfaction that she was not married, because only in this way, after all, could she fully enjoy her independence and privacy. This life had provided her with a beautiful apartment, where she felt happy and where perhaps now Edward was also not too uncomfortable. 166

"No, it's really very nice here," said Edward, and he said it glumly, because just at that moment he had stopped feeling good. The bottle of cognac (which he had inadvertently asked for on his first visit and which was now hurried to the table with such menacing readiness), the four walls of the bachelor apartment (creating a space which was becoming ever more constricting and confining), the directress's monologue (focusing on subjects ever more personal), her glance (dangerously fixed), all this caused *the change of program* to begin finally to get to him. He understood that he had entered into a situation, the development of which was irrevocably predetermined. He realized that his livelihood was jeopardized not by the directress's aversion, but just the contrary, by his physical aversion to this skinny woman with the down under her nose, who was urging him to drink. His anxiety made his throat contract. 167

He listened to the directress and had a drink, but now his anxiety was so strong that the alcohol had no effect on him at all. On the other hand, after a couple of drinks the directress was already so thoroughly carried away that she abandoned her usual sobriety, and her words acquired an exaltation that was almost threatening. "One thing I envy you," she said, "that you are so young. You cannot know yet what disappointment is, what disillusion is. You still see the world as full of hope and beauty." 168

She leaned across the table in Edward's direction and in gloomy silence (with a smile that was rigidly forced) fixed her frightfully large eyes on him, while he said to himself that if he didn't manage to get a bit drunk, he'd be in real trouble before the evening was over. To that end he poured some cognac into his glass and downed it quickly. 169

And the directress went on: "But I want to see it like that! The way you do!" And then she got up from the armchair, thrust out her chest, and said, "That I am not a boring woman! That I'm not!" And she walked around the little table and grabbed Edward by the sleeve. "That I'm not!" 170

"No," said Edward. 171

"Come, let's dance," she said, and letting go of Edward's arm she skipped over to the radio and turned the dial until she found some dance music. Then she stood over Edward with a smile. 172

Edward got up, seized the directress, and began to guide her around the room to the rhythm of the music. Every now and then the directress would tenderly lay her head on his shoulder, then suddenly raise it again, to gaze into his eyes, then, after another little while, she would sing along with the melody in a low voice. 173

Edward felt so out of sorts that several times he stopped dancing to have a drink. He longed for nothing more than to put an end to the discomfort of this interminable trudging around, but also he feared nothing more. For the discomfort of what would follow the dancing seemed to him even more unbearable. And so he continued to guide the lady who was singing to herself around the room and at the same time steadily (and meticulously) observe in himself the influence of the alcohol, which he longed for. When it finally seemed to him that his brain was sufficiently deadened, with his right arm he firmly pressed the directress against his body and put his left hand on her breast. 174

Yes, he did the very thing that had been frightening him the whole evening. He would have given anything not to have had to do this, but if he did it all the same, then believe me, it was only because he really *had* to. The situation, which he had got into at the very beginning of the evening, was so compelling that, though it was no doubt possible to slow down its course, it was not possible to stop it, so that when Edward put his hand on the directress's breast, he was merely submitting to totally irreversible necessity. 175

The results of his action exceeded all expectations. As if by magic command, the directress began to writhe in his arms and in no time had placed her hairy upper lip on his mouth. Then she dragged him onto the couch and, wildly writhing and loudly sighing, bit his lip and the tip of his tongue, which hurt Edward a lot. Then she slipped out of his arms, said, "Wait!" and ran off to the bathroom. 176

Edward licked his finger and found out that his tongue was bleeding slightly. The bite hurt so much that his painstakingly induced intoxication receded, and once again his throat contracted from anxiety at the thought of what awaited him. From the bathroom could be heard a loud running and splashing of water. He picked up the bottle of cognac, put it to his lips, and drank deeply. 177

But by this time the directress had already appeared in the doorway in a transparent nylon nightgown (thickly decorated with lace over the breasts), and was walking steadily toward Edward. She embraced him. Then she stepped back and reproachfully asked, "Why are you still dressed?" 178

Edward took off his jacket and, looking at the directress (who had her big eyes fixed on him), he couldn't think of anything but the fact that there 179

was the greatest likelihood that his body would sabotage his assiduous will. Wishing therefore to arouse his body somehow or other, he said in an uncertain voice, "Undress completely."

With a violent and enthusiastically obedient movement she flung off her nylon nightie and bared her skinny white body, in the middle of which her thick black bush protruded in gloomy desolation. She came slowly toward him and with terror Edward discovered what he already knew anyway: his body was completely fettered by anxiety. 180

I know, gentlemen, that in the course of the years you have become accustomed to the occasional insubordination of your own bodies, and that this no longer upsets you at all. But understand, Edward was young then! His body's sabotage threw him into an incredible panic each time and he bore it as an inexpiable disgrace, whether the witness to it was a beautiful face or one as hideous and comical as the directress's. The directress was now only a step away from him, and he, frightened and not knowing what to do, all at once said, he didn't even know how (it was rather the fruit of inspiration than of cunning reflection): "No, no, on Lord, no! No, it is a sin, it would be a sin!" and jumped away. 181

The directress kept coming toward him muttering in a husky voice: "What sin? There's no sin!" 182

Edward retreated behind the round table, where they had been sitting a while before: "No, I can't do this, I can't do it." 183

The directress pushed aside the armchair, standing in her path, and went after Edward, never taking her large brown eyes off him. "There is no sin! There is no sin!" 184

Edward went around the table, behind him was only the couch and the directress was a mere step away. Now he could no longer escape and perhaps his very desperation advised him at this moment of impasse to command her: "Kneel!" 185

She stared at him uncomprehendingly, but when he once again repeated in a firm (though desperate) voice, "Kneel!" she enthusiastically fell to her knees in front of him and embraced his legs. 186

"Take those hands off," he called her to order. "Clasp them!" 187

Once again she looked at him uncomprehendingly. 188

"Clasp them! Did you hear?" 189

She clasped her hands. 190

"Pray," he commanded. 191

She had her hands clasped and she glanced up at him devotedly. 192

"Pray, so that God may forgive us," he hissed. 193

She had her hands clasped. She was looking up at him with her large eyes and Edward not only obtained an advantageous respite, but looking down at her from above, he began to lose the oppressive feeling that he was mere prey, and he regained his self-assurance. He stepped back, away from her, so that he could survey the whole of her, and once again commanded, "Pray!" 194

When she remained silent, he yelled: "Aloud!" 195
And the skinny, naked, kneeling woman began to recite: "Our Father, 196
who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come. . . ."
As she uttered the words of the prayer, she glanced up at him as if he 197
were God Himself. He watched her with growing pleasure. In front of him
was kneeling the directress, being humiliated by a subordinate; in front of
him a naked revolutionary was being humiliated by prayer; in front of him
a praying lady was being humiliated by her nakedness.
This threefold image of degradation intoxicated him and something un- 198
expected suddenly happened: his body revoked its passive resistance. Ed-
ward was excited!
As the directress said, "And lead us not into temptation," he quickly 199
threw off all his clothes. When she said, "Amen," he violently lifted her off
the floor and dragged her onto the couch.

9

That was on Thursday, and on Saturday Edward went with Alice to the 200
country to visit his brother, who welcomed them warmly and lent them the
key to the nearby cottage.

The two lovers spent the whole afternoon wandering through the woods 201
and meadows. They kissed and Edward's contented hands found that the
imaginary line, level with her navel which separated the sphere of inno-
cence from that of fornication, didn't count any more. At first he wanted to
verify the so long awaited event verbally, but he became frightened of
doing so and understood that he had to keep silent.

His judgment was quite correct, it seemed. Alice's unexpected turn- 202
about had occurred independently of his many weeks of persuasion,
independently of his argumentation, independently of any *logical* consid-
eration whatsoever. In fact, it was based exclusively upon the news of
Edward's martyrdom, consequently upon a *mistake*, and it had been de-
duced quite *illogically* even from this mistake. Why should Edward's suf-
ferings for his fidelity to his beliefs have as a result Alice's infidelity to
God's law? If Edward had not betrayed God before the fact-finding com-
mission, why should she now betray Him before Edward?

In such a situation any reflection expressed aloud could reveal to Alice 203
the inconsistency of her attitude. So Edward prudently kept silent, which
went unnoticed, because Alice herself kept chattering. She was gay, and
nothing indicated that this turnabout in her soul had been dramatic or
painful.

When it got dark they went back to the cottage, turned on the lights, 204
made the bed, and kissed, whereupon Alice asked Edward to turn off the
lights. However, the light of the stars continued to show through the
window, so Edward had to close the shutters as well upon Alice's request.
Then, in total darkness, Alice undressed and gave herself to him

Edward had been looking forward to this moment for so many weeks, but surprisingly enough, now, when it was actually taking place, he didn't have the feeling that it would be as significant as the length of time he had been waiting for it suggested; it seemed to him so easy and self-evident that during the act of intercourse he was almost not concentrating. Rather, he was vainly trying to drive away the thoughts that were running through his head of those long, futile weeks when Alice had tormented him with her coldness. It all came back to him: the suffering at the school, of which she had been the cause, and, instead of gratitude for her giving of herself to him, he began to feel a certain vindictiveness and anger. It irritated him how easily and remorselessly she was now betraying her God of No Fornication, whom she had once so fanatically worshiped. It irritated him that nothing was able to throw her off balance, no desire, no event, no upset. It irritated him how she experienced everything without inner conflict—self-confidently and easily. And when this irritation threatened to overcome him with its power, he strove to make love to her passionately and furiously so as to force from her some sort of sound, moan, word, or pathetic cry, but he didn't succeed. The girl was quiet and in spite of all his exertions in their love-making, it ended silently and undramatically.

205

Then she snuggled up against his chest and quickly fell asleep, while Edward lay awake for a long time and realized that he felt no joy at all. He made an effort to imagine Alice (not her physical appearance but, if possible, her being in its entirety) and it occurred to him that he saw her blurred.

206

Let's stop at this word: Alice, as Edward had seen her until this time, was, with all her naiveté, a stable and distinct being. The beautiful simplicity of her looks seemed to accord with the unaffected simplicity of her faith, and her simple fate seemed to be a substantiation of her attitude. Until this time Edward had seen her as solid and coherent; he could laugh at her, he could curse her, he could besiege her with his guile, but he (involuntarily) had to respect her.

207

Now, however, the unpremeditated snare of false news caused a split in the coherence of her being and it seemed to Edward that her convictions were in fact only something *extraneous* to her fate, and her fate only something extraneous to her body. He saw her as an accidental conjunction of a body, thoughts, and a life's course; an inorganic conjunction, arbitrary and unstable. He visualized Alice (she was breathing deeply on his shoulder) and he saw her body separately from her thoughts. He liked this body but the thoughts struck him as ridiculous, and together they did not form a whole being. He saw her as an ink line spreading on blotting paper, without contours, without shape.

208

He really liked this body. When Alice got up in the morning, he forced her to remain naked, and, although just yesterday she had stubbornly insisted on closed shutters, for even the dim light of the stars had bothered her, she now altogether forgot her shame. Edward was scrutinizing her

209

(she gaily pranced about, looking for a package of tea and cookies for breakfast), and Alice, when she glanced at him after a moment, noticed that he was lost in thought. She asked him what was the matter. Edward replied that after breakfast he had to go and see his brother.

His brother inquired how he was getting on at the school. Edward replied that on the whole it was fine, and his brother said, "That Chehachkova is a pig, but I forgave her long ago. I forgave her, for she did not know what she was doing. She wanted to harm me, but instead she helped me find a beautiful life. As a farmer I earn more, and contact with Nature protects me from the skepticism to which city-dwellers are prone."

"That woman, as a matter of fact, brought me some happiness too," said Edward, lost in thought, and he told his brother how he had fallen in love with Alice, how he had feigned a belief in God, how they had judged him, how Chehachkova had wanted to re-educate him, and how Alice had finally given herself to him thinking he was a martyr. The only thing he didn't tell was how he had forced the directress to recite the Lord's Prayer, because he saw disapproval in his brother's eyes. He stopped talking and his brother said:

"I may have a great many faults, but one I don't have: I've never dissimulated and I've said to everyone's face what I thought."

Edward liked his brother and his disapproval hurt, so he made an effort to justify himself and they began to argue. In the end Edward said:

"I know, brother, that you are a straightforward man, and that you pride yourself on it. But put one question to yourself: *why* in fact should one tell the truth? What obliges us to do it? And why do we consider telling the truth a virtue? Imagine that you meet a madman, who claims that he is a fish and that we are all fish. Are you going to argue with him? Are you going to undress in front of him and show him that you don't have fins? Are you going to say to his face what you think? Well, tell me!"

His brother was silent and Edward went on: "If you told him the whole truth and nothing but the truth, only what you really thought, you would enter into a serious conversation with a madman and you yourself would become mad. And it is the same way with the world that surrounds us. If I obstinately told a man the truth to his face, it would mean that I was taking him seriously. And to take something so unimportant seriously means to become less than serious oneself. I, you see, *must* lie, if I don't want to take madmen seriously and become one of them myself."

10

It was Sunday afternoon and the two lovers left for town. They were alone in a compartment (the girl was already gaily chattering away again), and Edward remembered how some time ago he had looked forward to finding

in Alice, whom he'd chosen voluntarily, the seriousness of life, which his duties would never provide for him. And with regret he realized (the train idyllically clattered against the joints between the rails) that the love affair he'd experienced with Alice was worthless, made up of chance and errors, without any importance or sense whatsoever. He heard Alice's words, he saw her gestures (she squeezed his hand), and it occurred to him that these were signs devoid of meaning, currency without funds, weights made of paper, and that he couldn't grant them significance any more than God could the prayer of the naked directress. And all of a sudden it seemed to him that, in fact, all the people whom he'd met in his new place of work were only ink lines spreading on blotting paper, beings with interchangeable attitudes, beings without firm substance. But what was worse, what was far worse (it struck him next) was that he himself was only a shadow of all these shadowy people. After all, he had been exhausting his own brain only to adjust to them and imitate them. Yet even if he was inwardly laughing, and thus making an effort to mock them secretly (and so exonerate his accommodation), it didn't alter the case. For even malicious imitation remains imitation, and the shadow that mocks remains a shadow, subordinate, derivative, and wretched, and nothing more.

It was ignominious, horribly ignominious. The train idyllically clattered against the joints between the rails (the girl chattered away) and Edward said: 217

"Alice, are you happy?" 218

"Sure," said Alice. 219

"I'm miserable," said Edward. 220

"What, are you crazy?" said Alice. 221

"We shouldn't have done it. It shouldn't have happened." 222

"What's gotten into you? After all, you're the one who wanted to do it!" 223

"Yes, I wanted to," said Edward, "but that was my greatest mistake, for which God will never forgive me. It was a sin, Alice." 224

"Come on, what's happened to you?" said the girl calmly. "You yourself always used to say that God wants love most of all!" 225

When Edward heard Alice, after the fact, coolly appropriating the theological sophistries with which he had so unsuccessfully taken the field a while ago, fury seized him: "I used to say that to test you. Now I've found out how well you are able to be faithful to God! But a person who is able to betray God is able to betray man a hundred times more easily." 226

Alice found more ready answers, but it would have been better for her if she hadn't, because they only provoked his vindictive rage. Edward went on and on talking (in the end he used the words "disgust" and "physical aversion") until finally he did obtain from this placid and gentle face sobs, tears, and moans. 227

"Goodbye," he told her at the station and left her in tears. Only at home several hours later, when this curious anger had subsided, did it occur to him what he had done. He imagined her body, which had pranced stark 228

naked in front of him that morning, and when he realized that this beautiful body was lost to him because he himself, of his own free will, had driven it away, he inwardly called himself an idiot and had a mind to slap his own face.

But what had happened, had happened, and it was no longer possible to right anything.

Though we must truthfully say that even if the idea of the beautiful, rejected body caused Edward a certain amount of grief, he coped with this loss fairly soon. If once the need for physical love had tormented him and reduced him to a state of longing, it was the short-lived need of a recent arrival. Edward no longer suffered from this need. Once a week he visited the directress (habit had relieved his body of its initial anxieties), and he resolved to continue to visit her, until his position at the school was clarified. Besides this, with increasing success he chased all sorts of other women and girls. As a consequence of both, he began to appreciate far more the times when he was alone, and became fond of solitary walks, which he sometimes combined (come, let us turn our attention to this for the last time) with a visit to a church.

No, don't be apprehensive, Edward did not begin to believe in God. Our story does not intend to be crowned with the effect of so ostentatious a paradox. But Edward, even if he was almost certain that God did not exist, after all felt happy and nostalgic entertaining the thought of Him.

God is essence itself, whereas Edward had never found (and since the incidents with the directress and with Alice, a number of years had passed) anything essential in his love affairs, or in his teaching, or in his thoughts. He was too bright to concede that he saw the essential in the unessential, but he was too weak not to long secretly for the essential.

Ah, ladies and gentlemen, a man lives a sad life when he cannot take anything or anyone seriously.

And that is why Edward longed for God, for God alone is relieved of the distracting obligation of *appearing* and can merely *be*. For He solely constitutes (He Himself, alone and nonexistent) the essential opposite of his unessential (but so much more existent) world.

And so Edward occasionally sits in church and looks thoughtfully at the cupola. Let us take leave of him at just such a time. It is afternoon, the church is quiet and empty. Edward is sitting in a pew tormented with sorrow, because God does not exist. But just at this moment his sorrow is so great that suddenly from its depth emerges the genuine *living* face of God. Look! Yes. Edward is smiling! He is smiling, and his smile is happy . . .

Please, keep him in your memory with this smile.

Translated from the Czech by Suzanne Rappaport

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What features of "Edward and God" are unique to Eastern Europe? Which ones are universal?
2. What is Edward's view of society? How does it influence his behavior? What does he mean when he says, "I, you see, *must* lie, if I don't want to take madmen seriously and become one of them myself"?
3. Discuss Edward's involvement with religion. How does it affect his life?
4. How do Edward's relationship with Alice and the directress lead to deeper understanding of the human condition?
5. Discuss the author's use of humor and irony in conveying the meaning of the story.