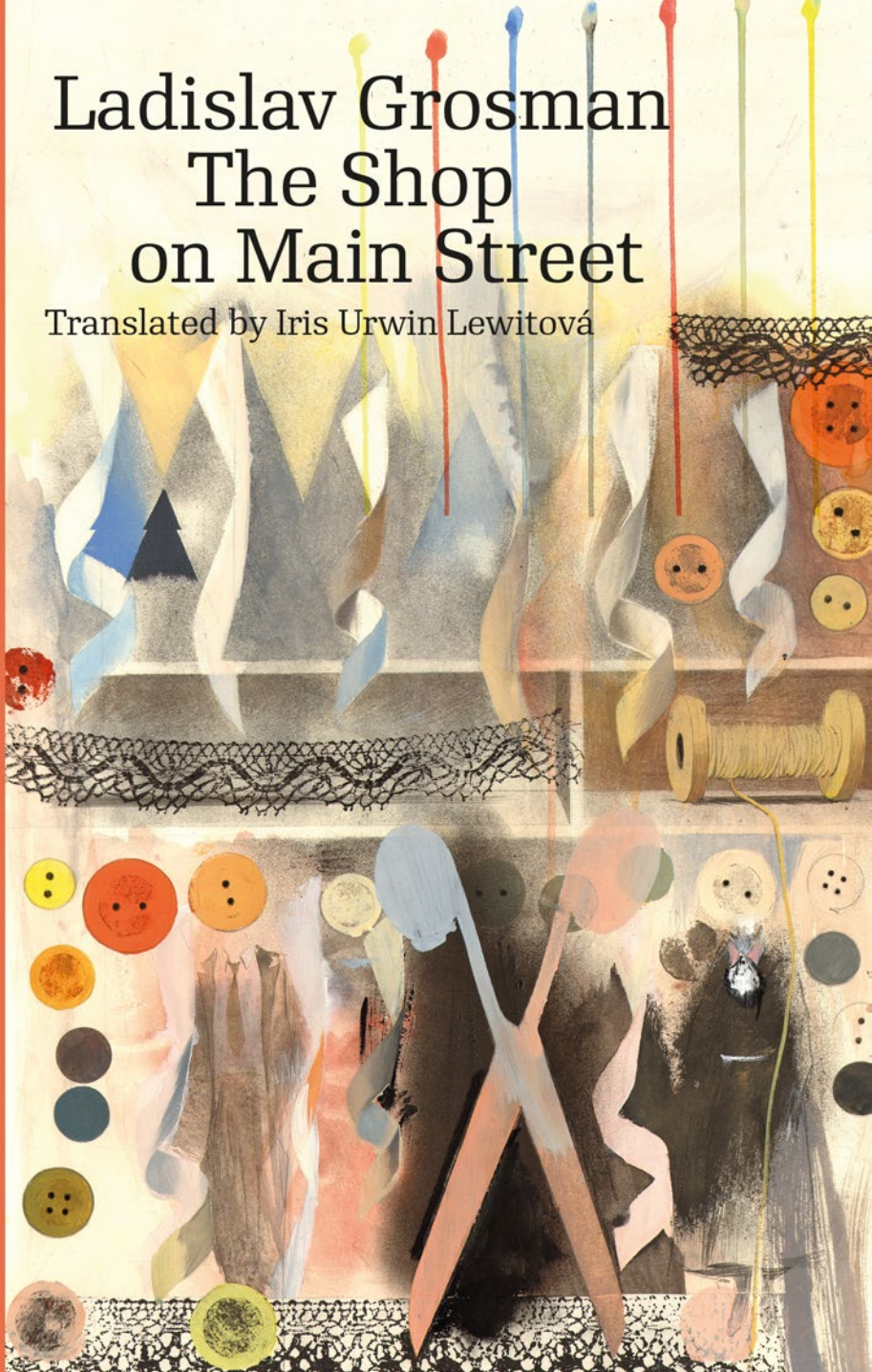
Ladislav Grosman
The Shop on Main Street

Translated by Iris Urwin Lewitová



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ladislav Grosman (1921–1981) was born in Humenné, Slovakia to a Jewish family. The son of a tanner father and a shopkeeper mother, Grosman was a talented student but was prevented from graduating secondary school due to anti-Jewish legislation when Slovakia became a puppet state of Nazi Germany in 1939. He worked as a laborer in a brick factory before being conscripted into (unarmed) military service. After an unsuccessful escape attempt, he was sent to a forced labor camp. He went into hiding after the Slovak National Uprising of 1944, the same year his parents and three of his siblings died during the German attack on Ružomberok. After the end of the war, he returned briefly to Humenné in order to obtain his diploma.

He soon moved to Prague to study, earning an advanced degree from the University of Political and Social Sciences. He then went on to work in publishing, while at the same time studying educational psychology. During this time he also began to write seriously – first in Slovak and then in Czech. His novella, *The Shop on Main Street*, was adapted into a film that became the first Czechoslovak movie to win an Academy Award. Ján Kádar, who co-wrote the screenplay with Grosman and directed the movie with Elmar Klos, said the short novel "appealed to Klos and myself by its special angle of truthfulness, the tragicomedy of the story and the author's humanistic approach." In 1965 Grosman became a screenwriter for the acclaimed Barrandov Studios; in 1967 he received his doctorate in psychology.

Grosman emigrated to Israel the month following 1968's Soviet-led invasion and occupation of Czechoslovakia. He spent the rest of his life teaching Slavic literature and creative writing at Bar-Ilan University.

ONE

The clouds dispersed as the anger of the sudden storm departed and the wind made the most of the respite, blowing and veering, buffeting them into odd shapes and chasing them all over the sky. Blue patches appeared above, lit up by the sun and by the reflection of fiery blows rising from the earth below.

Hammers were ringing on the anvil, clear and solemn like weighty bells of precious bronze. The clanging gave a new burst of energy to a flying stork. With joyful flapping of wings, it found a favorable current and took a short cut home to the nest. Swooping over the church steeple, over scattered shingle roofs and tin roofs, it rose in the air for one more view of the little town among the hills and then glided down in a steep dive, straight for the nest, encouraged by the children calling from the road: "Storks are homing, babies coming!" The great black and white bird lowered its legs, gave a last flap of its wings, and settled on the straggly nest near the smithy.

This left the children free to watch the bearded smith in his big leather apron and to admire his bold sleight of hand as he seized a horse's leg. The inexperienced foal jerked its head and reared, struggling to escape the relentless grip. The mare harnessed to a farm cart a few feet away neighed angrily, but the foal resisted the fire and the paring knife.

Wisps of blue smoke twisted up from the scorched hoof. "Scram!" The smith turned on the children. "Get out of here and find someplace else to play." As if they were in his way! Still, it was never wise to be around when Balko the smith got worked up, and so the kids went off.

Hell-fire and brimstone,
Let the smith pass;
The pony's broken loose
And kicked him in the ass!

They chanted in chorus; he wasn't going to get away with it. One voice started and the rest took it up, even the tiniest. There were seven of them at play, barefoot little urchins darting to and fro, grandchildren of the drummer from the yard, the tobacconist's kids, and some from the neighboring cottages. A girl, pigtail flapping and her skirt above her knees, was hopping along with a jump rope.

The children started chasing each other, jumping up and down and squealing as they swerved round the linden trees on the edge of the sidewalk. The smallest of the lot, a freckled boy of six or so with short, bristly hair, tried to get possession of the jump rope by tickling the back of the girl's neck, just under the plait of hair. She hung on to her precious toy, and they started a tug of war, back and forth, pulling and tugging, the others taking sides and shouting encouragement, until all at once the boy jerked backward and fell on his backside. Laughter and wails mingled, and the children disappeared like thieves behind the yard gate.

The little girl was left on the street, skipping first on one foot and then on the other and then both together. She stood still for a minute, pitying a little donkey drawing a huge barrel of stable manure. The poor little thing could hardly put one foot before the other; it was no use the driver's yelling "Gee up! Gee up!" as though testing his voice in order to keep his own spirits up. It was hot, and the sun beat mercilessly down.

The sound of the boys shouting in the yard brought the girl in after them. With a hop, a skip, and a jump she went over to the ladder and the makeshift dog kennel, hens and chickens clucking and flapping round her feet, and didn't stop until she had reached the line of snowy wash hanging between two old walnut trees.

The carpenter appeared in the shadow of the half-open door on the other side of the yard. The children could not be sure Brtko's wife would not appear, too, heftier and more

to be feared. Brtko scratched behind one ear, wondering, probably, whether to bother to hear his wife out to the end.

"It won't cost you anything and they can't bite your head off." Her voice came from within the kitchen.

"We'll see," he answered. "It's no good forcing things, Eveline, and I'm not going on my knees to them, neither."

He stepped out.

The dog squeezed out between his master's felt boots and shot over to the children on the grass. He was a mongrel, white with a yellow smudge over his right eye.

As the door slammed, the little girl's voice rose in greeting: "Praise be to the Lord!"

Brtko the carpenter turned to face the children, one hand making sure his folding rule was in its right place in his back pocket. The children said nothing. The carpenter straightened his baize apron over his chest and scratched his short hair thoughtfully. "For ever and ever, amen," he mumbled in the direction of the little girl crouching on the grass with the rest, watching the scene as though it were a play.

"Nugget!" Brtko called the dog to him, and they went out of the yard together. A train whistled not far off.

The smith at his open forge was too busy to break off and chat with him, even if Brtko had had it in mind to stop; but he was in a hurry, too. As he passed the low cottage windows, he peered into some and found the dark dwellings uncared-for and deserted.

There was something up, although nobody else in the street seemed to notice it. Even the dog looked up at his master, puzzled. Brtko checked on the time, in case he had made a mistake, and shook his head uncomprehendingly. All the years he had lived near the station he had never known them to close the level crossing at this hour of the day.

It was a train–a special train, not in the timetable, and it roared past as though the engine driver were afraid he'd be in for it if he didn't reach the end of the world before sunset.

Brtko and the dog stepped back a few paces. Dust and noise came swirling out from under the wheels, and the military train blocked their view of the main street beyond the line. Nugget gave vent to his dissatisfaction in short barks, but in the dreadful uproar Brtko could not hear him; he could only see the angry jerking, and it irritated him all the more. Trucks loaded with guns and manned by soldiers in camouflage uniforms flashed by as the train clattered past at speed.

At last the brake van at the end of the train roared away out of sight, and they both felt relieved. The sun came out from behind the clouds.

The one-armed tobacconist was sitting beneath his enamel TOBACCONIST AND OFFICIAL STAMPS sign, staring out at the sleepy street. It was all he could do to keep awake in the afternoons; as soon as the days grew warm, he would drag his shabby old cane chair out and sit in the sun. He came to slowly, not realizing at first that the dog was by him. "Naughty dog," he said with a little smile.

"Hi there, Gejza," the carpenter called out.

"Woke me up, he did–the devil take him. You're not getting anything out of me today, mate."

The man was pleased at how the dog pricked up his ears, looking from one to the other as if he knew it was all put on for his benefit.

"Not even a pinch of backy for a pipe?"

"Not a single pinch."

"Not even enough to roll a ciggie?"

"No."

"Oh, come on, just a pinch."

"No."

"Not even a fag end?"

"No, no, no!"

Then the scene reached its climax: as the tobacconist repeated his determined refusal, Nugget gave three short, sharp barks, and the two friends laughed, seeing that their joke had worked yet again.

Nugget had played his role, sitting up and begging in order to soften the tobacconist's heart. Brtko took three cigarettes from the case generously held out towards him and slipped them into his breast pocket.

Between the butcher's shop and the municipal weigh-bridge the dogs were waiting for their share of the bones. The horse-drawn cart had come out of the slaughterhouse yard, and it was high time. Today there was a bigger pack than usual-rumors of a generous hand must have been spread from kennel to kennel all over the town. Sensing the greater risk of competition, the dogs were getting irritable and worrying the mare.

Growling angrily and impatiently, the dogs demanded their customary rights.

The butcher's assistant stood in the doorway in his white apron, a bucket under his arm, and waited for the right moment to throw the next lot of bones into the middle of the pack.

Brtko was uneasy and took good care to keep an eye on Nugget, the only dog not rushing at the prize. He stood there waiting for the word, hard though it was for him. "Go!" Brtko gave the order at a moment when the dogs were all busy with another lot of bones and failed to notice one that had fallen to one side. Nugget leaped through the air and landed right on his target.

"Good times ahead, it seems," said his master, dreamily watching the busier end of the street, near the square.

Brtko turned impatiently as the sound of a trumpet rang out. The trumpeter—as yet unseen though no one could

miss the sound of him-seemed to be intent on drowning out the noise of the street with his blaring instrument. Obviously this was no ordinary occasion. The dragoons had only been quartered in the town a few days before.

The people on the sidewalks stood still, and the windows were in full bloom with women's heads fair and dark and smiling girls' faces. The trumpet sounded even louder, and round the corner came the village priest riding a bicycle. Behind him, as though the figure in a cassock had a secret mission to show the soldiers which way to follow, rode an officer, erect in the saddle. Then down the narrow trough of the street flowed the stream of hussars, two by two, in time to the march, as though the most important thing in the world was the impression they were making on the onlookers and the remarks being passed on the elegance of their trotting.

With smiling faces, the dragoons returned the greetings waved from the windows and sidewalks, but the trumpeter blew into the sounding brass with cheeks puffed out, no thought for the approving nods and cries of the onlookers, no eye for Brtko and his dog, not even for the barefoot imps of mischief.

Into the thud of hooves, the sound of the church bells fell softly. There were three grey pigeons on the steeple roof, and the hands of the black clock in the shadow of the steeple pointed to five.

In the middle of the busy street, Brtko stopped to compare his watch with the steeple clock and then felt free to enjoy the sight of people strolling up and down Main Street; things were getting livelier by the minute.

For a while he watched the carefree boys with their girls in flowered dresses. Then his gaze came to rest on an extraordinary hat; the wearer was taking her little dog for a walk, and the worst of it was that Brtko had forgotten all about his. The lady was incensed: "Keep him on the lead,

can't you? Tessie, Tessie darling, come along nicely, now. There's a good girl. Shoo!"

It was nothing but a harmless flirtation, limited on the part of Nugget to a few sniffs and longing glances. Brtko begged pardon in endless apologetic bows and embarrassed smiles, backing helplessly until he hit a stroller. Then, seized by a sudden interest in the curly-headed girl in the baby carriage, he tickled it under the chin, making funny noises and snapping his fingers for his own delight as much as for the mother's. Nugget was at his heels, displaying an equally fascinated interest in a black and white flock of nuns tripping with shy feet hidden beneath full skirts and fingers clasped round their rosaries. Eight of them, two by two, passed along Main Street, and the people made way for these women who had forsworn the delights of this world. Brtko ran a finger round under his collar trying to dig out the curiously uneasy feeling it gave him to think about them.

His carpenter's ear detected in the noise around him the familiar ring of axes, the thud of hammers, and the groan of planes. This clatter so dear to his heart was coming from a timber pyramid soaring up in the middle of the square, an amazing monument to pride and arrogance, its gleaming white tip high above the tops of the chestnut trees round the square.

The pyramid thrust up and up like a white tongue eager to lick the blue paint off the sky. Brtko slapped his knee and whistled through his fingers, for this was one of those moments when he wanted the dog by his side.

Nugget seemed to have decided he'd had enough of waiting for his hesitant master and set out to point the way forward himself. Even so, from time to time he turned to make sure he had not gone too far ahead. Bumping against a soldier's jack boot and rubbing softly against a girl's calf, he sat down on his slim rump and pricked up his ears.

"After him, boys!"

"Come on, let's get 'im!"

They might mean him; he had better be careful. Even Brtko felt in his self-conscious way that they might mean him. In the end it was only a game, the boys showing off in front of their girls. Brtko scratched the dog's ears and put on a determined, decided expression, tossing his head. "Ice cream, ice cream" came from a sunburned fellow in a red fez, pushing his ice-cream cart almost at the double, and furiously ringing the little brass bell tied to the handlebar. "Ice cream! Ice cream!" Then Brtko left behind him the tinkling bell and the hoarse cries of the local Turk.

He walked around the perimeter of the square with careful attention, as though he and his dog had been given a secret mission to record the smallest detail concerning the building of the pyramid. Brtko seemed to be calling on all his powers of invention and his craftsman's skill in order to commit to memory the testimony he would later be called upon to provide. He made a conscientious note of the comings and goings on the building site, considered the breadth of the base and the way each storey was being laid on top of the one below. From this distance, he could not recognize the faces of the men working there, but he could see them impatiently passing beams and planks. Against the white of the scaffolding, they looked like big black ants.

Brtko knew well enough what a job it must be to set up a monster like that. The very proportions of this pyramid suggested a pagan Moloch overwhelming mere man with awe. The carpenter made no secret of his admiration; or was it just the uneasiness that we feel when faced with some mighty exotic creature, incalculable and therefore dangerous, that made him walk more quickly?

He had made a tour of the square and suddenly did not know what to do next. He stretched out a hand toward the pyramid and then, catching the eye of a chimney sweep

grinning from ear to ear, pretended to be fumbling with a button. He hesitated, a prey to that feeling of uneasiness again. What was he to do with those hands of his? He looked down at his blistered palms and up at the pyramid and down at his hands again, and in powerless anger he struck out at the dog.

Shocked by this unexpected attack, Nugget growled and bared his teeth at his master. With his tail between his legs he disappeared into the crowd, hurt to the quick.

A great pile of panels lay there, unloaded that very day or perhaps just an hour or so ago. Brtko clambered halfway up, testing the quality of the material, tapping here and there, assessing how hard and seasoned the timber was, measuring the thickness of the panels and breathing in their fine aroma.

Then he called the dog to him.

Nugget did not intend to be dragged away from what he had discovered. It was even a dangerous business, trotting about on that polished slab of marble, and there were many remarkable features to be observed on the stone monument lying overturned under the chestnut tree. There were words cut into the marble:

They gave their lives for freedom
Josef Turna
Mikuláš Gazda
Emil Bruder

His head to one side, the dog seemed to understand what he read. He listened for his master's whistle, and, when he thought he had the direction right, he sat up and begged, waving his paws wildly, as if expecting a reward. What could he expect from the giggling children and indifferent grownups passing by? Nugget lifted a leg and sent a thin stream over the stone, then ended his performance by

the overturned slab with a neat jump down. All he cared about now was not to annoy anyone; nose to the ground, he picked up his master's scent and pushed his way through the legs of the throng to where the carpenters' benches stood under the open sky.

It was just at this moment that the crowd parted to make way for an important person: a tall man accompanied by two of the Hlinka guards was approaching from the sidewalk. Catching sight of the man in his freshly pressed uniform, Brtko took an anxious step backwards and mingled with the crowd. He had really come here meaning to meet Marcus Kolkocky and tell him what he thought of him, but he had soon changed his mind. With his hangers-on round him and the crowd about, Marcus Kolkocky was in any case far too busy to notice an insignificant little man in a carpenter's apron. He stretched out his hand and pointed at the tip of the pyramid, looking very pleased with himself. He ran a hand over the scaffolding, slapped the bearded carpenter on the back, and listened to the report made by the foreman, a small fellow in an open-necked shirt. The report on progress seemed to be satisfactory, and Kolkocky was able to proceed to the most important moment in his tour of inspection. He ran up the wooden steps and onto the pyramid, and then he appeared two storeys up and waved to the crowd below. Brtko followed the gaze of the rest of the crowd. He hated Kolkocky and yet he knew the value of what the commander could grant him by a mere wave of his hand. Never, never would he lower himself to ask a favor of this man. Standing here so far below him, Brtko realized that quite clearly, and regret and powerless fury were etched into his features, while the people round him could laugh and take life easy.

TWO

Eveline could not resist unloading herself on her husband; she made no bones about what she thought at the best of times, and why spoil the pleasure of a good row?

"They're all better off than we are," she burst out, and the brevity of her complaint may also have been due to the difficulty of launching into a diatribe kneeling on one knee by the fire. She was loading her iron with red-hot coals.

"It's not a bit of good giving you good advice; you always know better. Why don't you better yourself like Skablo and Petrus and the rest of them? But you wouldn't do something like that, would you? Why don't you find work? That wouldn't be like you, would it? Why don't you whistle to their tune? Think you'd choke on it?"

Now that the iron was as full of coals as it could be, she was free to watch the effect of her words. Her free hand straightened the new print frock under her apron and tried to pull it down to cover her bare knees. Her clothes were tight and narrow and threatening to burst at the seams with the robust vitality of her body. Even the sloppy old slippers seemed too tight for her feet.

She threw the poker into the corner, but not even that clatter roused her husband. There was nothing she could do to disturb his calm, so deeply was he engrossed in what he was doing, and what- she was convinced-was as pointless as everything else he did. The only thing that still mattered to him was getting the last bit of engrained dirt off the cracked washbowl. He was sitting on a bench with the bowl between his knees as though he were soldering a patch on it, but all he was doing was wasting her precious scouring powder, rubbing away obstinately with a bit of rag. She shook a hand in his direction in helpless fury. "What's the use?" And Brtko did not bother to lift his head as he waved in her direction.

“Carry on, carry on in your own way. I don’t meddle in your business, and don’t you meddle in mine.” He went on rubbing the washbowl clean.

“Just you wait, I’ll give you meddling!” she raged, and ran out of the kitchen. She did not go far. The iron in her upraised hand, she paused on the doorstep looking round the yard as though she wanted to light her way across. The dog licked her bare leg in passing and got a kick for his pains. “You filthy cur!” The wind in the branches of the walnut trees drowned his whimper, and his white legs pattered off into the shadows. Eveline clicked the iron shut, checking that it wouldn’t fly open, and then the coals, glowing as she swung the iron through the air, blinked through the holes in its sides and carved fiery trajectories through the darkness of a forlorn and run-of-the-mill evening.

She seemed to Brtko to have worked off her anger, and the angry stamping of her feet seemed but the echo of their quarrel; but in fact she was reminding him of her presence.

Tono Brtko looked determined not to notice anything his wife did or said. Standing by the fire, he was scooping warm water into the bowl on the floor, using a little pan. He watched the stream of water falling and splashing in delight, like a child who has discovered something that is not only harmless, but a pleasure as well.

“Stop splashing!” Eveline shouted at him. “You’re worse than a kid.” Then she gave up; there was no use wasting her breath, and there was enough ironing in the basket to keep her going till midnight.

The stream of water falling from the pan struck the bottom of the bowl and then rose in a geyser of spray and steam. He felt like an artist creating a great work, something that called for passionate concentration and endless patience. He had taken off his boots and tucked his trousers up above his knees, and now he took his jacket off as well. With a tentative finger he tested the heat of the water in

the bowl and added a pan of cold. From beginning to end this was a ceremony that could not be carried out in rush and haste but called for conscious enjoyment of measured gestures. Carrying the bowl of water over to the bench, he wiped the floor round it, pulled it nearer to his feet, and threw a wary glance at his wife as he sat down. He wanted to make sure he was going to be allowed to enjoy his foot bath right to the last moment, or else be ready for the attack on his freedom that was being prepared. He was not at all sure. Just as he lifted his feet, Eveline banged the iron down on the upturned saucepan she used as an iron stand, rested her hands on the ironing board like an orator about to address the throng, thrust her imposing bust forward, and held forth:

"No sense, that's what's the matter with you, not a grain of sense. Everybody knows it, it's only you don't know yet that all you have to do is open your great mouth and yell *Support the Hlinka guards!* and they'll come running to help you to your feet. You're the only one who's fool enough to try to stay out of that; you're the fool that doesn't want to know what's going on; you'll never know any better."

She followed it up with one more hopeless sigh. "It was an unlucky hour indeed when the good Lord punished me by tying me to a nincompoop for the rest of my days!"

Brtko had finally decided not to let himself be bothered. Leaning back against the wall with his arms crossed and his feet in the steaming bowl of water, he half closed his eyes and let himself dream that his wife's reproaches were aimed at somebody else, somebody he didn't even know. Warm water has the miraculous power of driving worries away; it was sheer enjoyment, and it washed the poison right out of that insistent voice.

And yet he suddenly spoke to her: "Say, Eveline, d'you know what?" His voice was mild and he looked like a man who has found the answer he wanted at last. Then, as if he

had lost his thread, he started fumbling for a cigarette in his jacket pocket, drew the lighted match toward his lips and his eyes widened. At that moment a furious barking outside the house startled him. He lifted his feet out of the water and poised them in mid-air, listening; there was no doubt about it-steps were passing the window and approaching the door.

The two of them looked towards the door as an impatient knocking demanded entrance.

"Come in," Eveline called out, and Brtko blew on his match.

Perhaps it was the shock that did it. Eveline put her iron down, but instead of standing it on the upturned saucepan she used as a stand, she put it on the blanket wrapped around the ironing board. The door swung open, and there stood Marcus Kolkocky, local commander of the Hlinka guards, and his wife, Rose, Eveline Brtko's sister.

The new arrivals stood stock-still, as if stopped in their tracks in a wild dash begun in a moment of folly. Everybody looked embarrassed, taken by surprise and not sure what the outcome of this sudden confrontation was going to be.

Kolkocky's smile, assumed for the occasion, died away. He had expected to be greeted with open arms. Instead, the inexplicable fixity of the pair in the kitchen made an unfortunate impression on him.

Things look very different when a moment of tension makes us see them as others do, and so Eveline's glance as she recovered from her surprise was full of shamefaced excuses. Her eyes roamed from one heap indicating slovenliness to another: the embarrassing poverty of the striped sheets on the unmade bed, the yellowish gleam of the pale electric-light bulb on a row of bottled tomatoes on the kitchen cupboard, the pile of unwashed saucepans in the sink that the newcomers' sharp eyes could not miss. She felt as though the ironing board in front of her was stuck to her

body, and, catching sight of her husband with his feet in the washbowl, she would have liked nothing better than to hurl it at him. And the depressing awkwardness of seeing plates licked clean and an overturned saltcellar on the oilcloth of the kitchen table! In those few seconds Eveline registered the elegance and trim superiority of her sister, with the silver-fox fur and the wonderful hat, the discreet gleam of smiling, gold-filled teeth, and the violet velvet dress with its V neck. She was daintily clean and well kept, and glittering with beads and earrings. Hastily, as if she had just remembered it, Eveline tore off her pinafore, and she would have torn off her print dress, too, if she could. Now she could compare the two men, her husband and her sister's, and she could not bear to look at the one sitting there motionless with his shoulders hunched up, looking like a scared tortoise faced with unexpected catastrophe.

If annoyance or a sudden inspiration had not made Brtko splash about in the water with his feet, perhaps Kolkocky would not have burst into that loud laugh of his. He raised his bulging briefcase high above his head in both hands, like a weight lifter triumphantly determined to break all records. "We've come to your rescue! It's high time you pulled yourselves together. Rescue, my dear in-laws, that's what we're after, rescue is what we've brought you!" His voice sounded like a response to people who'd fallen through thin ice and were drowning. The helping hand was stretched out-they had only to catch hold of it.

"Rose, darling! Is it really you? I can't believe my eyes!" Eveline gulped with emotion across the ironing board. Her hands fluttered desperately in the air, eager to wave away the embarrassment between them. "Oh, I'm so terribly glad to see you here."

Her voice grew more convincing as sincerity came to the surface, hope began to glimmer, and dreams that might come true seemed promisingly near.

Rose Kolkocky was not to be outdone in gushing affection. “My dearest little sister! How I’d like you to believe we’ve never forgotten you for an instant!”

The tapping of high heels grew hurried. The joy of both sisters was underscored by convulsive embraces, broken sobs, shrill squeals, flattering admiration, and mutual assurances that never, never again would anything in the world come between them.

“You’re as pretty as ever, Eveline. Every time I caught sight of you I was ashamed we’d let such a trifle come between us . . . I don’t know what came over us . . . You haven’t changed a bit!”

“You’re looking well, yourself, Rose. What a lovely hat! Did you buy it at Imrich’s? Let me have a good look at you, now.”

As the cries of mutual admiration died down, curiosity rose in its place; they held each other at arm’s length, as when the partners in a gypsy folk dance take a good look at each other before whirling round again at an even wilder tempo.

“Before you lose your heads altogether, take a look at this!” Marcus Kolkocky shouted, and started waving his bulging briefcase about again like a railway man trying to stop a hurtling locomotive in the darkness with his lantern. Every movement brought a white shirt cuff peeping out, and a gold watch glittering underneath it-or was it the dazzling sparkle of his diamond rings?

Tono Brtko ran a hand over his sweating forehead, eyes, and face and in his uneasiness tipped his bowl of water over.

The water trickled gaily over the wooden floor in little streams. Marcus Kolkocky’s laughter was like a cold shower: “A flood!” he hooted. “A flood! Help, help, we’re drowning! Take to the boats!” He hopped about between the puddles on tiptoe, taking care not to splash himself