MILAN KUNDERA: THE BOOK OF LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING (1978)

PART FIVE

Litost

Who Is Kristyna?

Kristyna is a woman of about thirty, who has a child, a butcher husband she gets along with quite well, and a very intermittent affair with a local mechanic, who now and then makes love to her after hours amid the discomforts of the auto-repair shop. The small town hardly lends itself to extramarital love, or rather it requires a wealth of ingenuity and audacity, qualities Kristyna is not abundantly endowed with.

Meeting the student turned her head powerfully. He had come to the town to spend his summer vacation with his mother, had twice stared at the butcher's wife as she stood behind the shop counter, and the third time, when he spoke to her at the local swimming place, he was so charmingly timid that the young woman, accustomed to the butcher and the mechanic, could not resist. Ever since her marriage (a good ten years now), she had not dared touch another man except in the safety of the locked repair shop, among dismantled cars and old tires, and suddenly she had found the audacity for amorous meetings out in the open, exposed to prying eyes. Though the spots they chose for their walks were the most isolated and the likelihood of anyone intruding on them negligible,

Kristyna's heart would pound and she would be filled with stimulating fear. But the more bravely she faced the danger, the more reserved she was with the student. They did not go very far. He got only some brief hugs and tender kisses, she would often slip out of his arms entirely, and when he was fondling her body she kept her legs tightly together.

It was not that she did not want the student. It was that she had fallen in love with his tender timidity and wanted to preserve it for herself. Hearing a man expound ideas about life and mention the names of poets and philosophers was something that never before had happened to Kristyna. The student, poor boy, could talk about nothing else; the range of his seducer's eloquence was very limited, and he could not adapt it to women of varying social levels. Anyway, he felt no need to blame himself in this regard, because the quotations from the philosophers produced much more of an effect on that simple butcher's wife than on any fellow student. One thing nonetheless escaped him: an effective quotation from a philosopher might charm the butcher's wife's soul, but it stood as an obstacle between the butcher's wife's body and his own. For Kristyna vaguely imagined that by giving her body to the student she would lower their affair to the butcher's or the mechanic's level and she would never again hear a word about Schopenhauer.

With the student she suffered from an embarrassment she had never known before. With the butcher and the mechanic she always arrived quickly and

cheerfully at an understanding about things. For instance, both men agreed to be very careful, because the doctor had told her after her child was born that she could risk her health if not her life by having another. This story happened a very long time ago, when abortion was strictly forbidden and women themselves had no means of limiting their fertility. The butcher and the mechanic well understood Kristyna's apprehensions, and before she allowed them to enter her, she would make sure with good-humored naturalness that they had taken the required precautions. But the thought that she would have to behave like that with her angel, who had come down to her from the cloud where he conversed with Schopenhauer, made her feel she would be unable to find the words she needed. I therefore conclude that her erotic reserve had two motives: to keep the student as long as possible in the enchanted territory of tender timidity and to avoid as long as possible the disgust sure to be inspired in him, as she saw it, by the crude instructions and precautions without which physical love could not take place.

But the student, despite all his refinement, was persistent. Though Kristyna kept her thighs tightly closed, he bravely got hold of her rump, meaning that someone who likes to quote Schopenhauer is not for all that ready to give up a body that pleases him.

Anyway, vacation ended and the two lovers realized it would be hard for them to go a whole year without seeing each other. Kristyna had only to find an excuse

to go see him. They both understood what that visit would mean. In Prague, the student lived in a small attic room, and Kristyna would have to end up spending the night there.

What Is Litost?

Litost is an untranslatable Czech word. Its first syllable, which is long and stressed, sounds like the wail of an abandoned dog. As for the meaning of this word, I have looked in vain in other languages for an equivalent, though I find it difficult to imagine how anyone can understand the human soul without it.

Let me give an example: The student went swimming in the river one day with his girlfriend, a fellow student. She was athletic, but he was a very poor swimmer. He could not time his breathing properly and swam slowly, his head held tensely high above the surface. She was madly in love with him and tactfully swam as slowly as he did. But when their swim was coming to an end, she wanted to give her athletic instincts a few moments' free rein and headed for the opposite bank at a rapid crawl. The student made an effort to swim faster too and swallowed water. Feeling humbled, his physical inferiority laid bare, he felt *litost*. He recalled his sickly childhood, lacking in physical

exercise and friends and spent under the constant gaze of his mother's overfond eye, and fell into despair about himself and his life. They walked back to the city together in silence on a country lane. Wounded and humiliated, he felt an irresistible desire to hit her. "What's the matter with you?" she asked him, and he started to reproach her: she knew about the current near the other bank, and that he had forbidden her to swim there because of the risk of drowning—and then he slapped her face. The girl began to cry, and when he saw the tears on her cheeks, he took pity on her and put his arms around her, and his *litost* melted away.

Or take an instance from the student's childhood: His parents made him take violin lessons. He was not very gifted and his teacher would interrupt him to criticize his mistakes in a cold, unbearable voice. He felt humiliated, and he wanted to cry. But instead of trying to play in tune and not make mistakes, he would deliberately play wrong notes, the teacher's voice would become still more unbearable and harsh, and he himself would sink deeper and deeper into his *litost*.

What then is *litost*?

Litost is a state of torment created by the sudden sight of one's own misery.

One of the customary remedies for misery is love. Because someone loved absolutely cannot be miserable. All his faults are redeemed by love's magical gaze, under which even inept swimming, with the head held high above the surface, can become charming.

Love's absolute is actually a desire for absolute

identity: the woman we love ought to swim as slowly as we do, she ought to have no past of her own to look back on happily. But when the illusion of absolute identity vanishes (the girl looks back happily on her past or swims faster), love becomes a permanent source of the great torment we call *litost*.

Anyone with wide experience of the common imperfection of mankind is relatively sheltered from the shocks of *litost*. For him, the sight of his own misery is ordinary and uninteresting. *Litost,* therefore, is characteristic of the age of inexperience. It is one of the ornaments of youth.

Litost works like a two-stroke engine. Torment is followed by the desire for revenge. The goal of revenge is to make one's partner look as miserable as oneself. The man cannot swim, but the slapped woman cries. It makes them feel equal and keeps their love going.

Since revenge can never reveal its true motive (the student cannot confess to the girl that he slapped her because she swam faster than he did), it must put forward false reasons. *Litost,* therefore, is always accompanied by a pathetic hypocrisy: the young man proclaims he is terrified his girlfriend will drown, and the child incessantly playing off key feigns an irremediable lack of talent.

Initially this chapter was entitled "Who Is the Student?" But to deal with *litost* was to describe the student, who is *litost* incarnate. No wonder the fellow student he loves finally left him. It's not very pleasant to be slapped for knowing how to swim.

The butcher's wife, whom he had met in his home-

town, had come to him like a huge adhesive bandage, prepared to cover all his wounds. She adored him, she worshiped him, and when he talked about Schopenhauer, she did not try to display her own independent personality by raising objections (as did the girlfriend of grievous memory) but looked at him with eyes in which, moved by Kristyna's emotion, he thought he was seeing tears. And too, let us not forget to add that he had not made love to a woman since breaking up with his girlfriend.

Who Is Voltaire?

Voltaire is a lecturer in the university faculty of arts and letters, he is witty and aggressive, and he eyes his adversaries with a malicious look. Reason enough to call him Voltaire.

He liked the student, and that is no slight distinction, because Voltaire was particular about the company he kept. After the seminar one day, he went up to him to ask whether he was free the following evening. The following evening, alas, was when Kristyna was coming. It took courage for the student to tell Voltaire he was busy. But Voltaire waved the objection away: "Well, just reschedule. You won't regret it." And then he told him that the country's best poets were getting together tomorrow at the Writers Club and that he,

Voltaire, wanted to introduce the student to them.

Yes, the great poet about whom Voltaire was writing a monograph and whose house he frequented would also be there. He was ill and walked with crutches. That is why he rarely went out, and an opportunity to meet him was all the more to be valued.

The student knew the books of all the poets who would be there next day, but of the great poet's verse he knew whole pages by heart. He had never wanted anything more ardently than to spend an evening in their company. Then he remembered he had not made love to a woman in months, and he said again that it would be impossible for him to come.

Voltaire did not understand what could be more important than meeting great men. A woman? Can't that be put off? Suddenly his glasses were flashing ironically. But the student was seeing before him the image of the butcher's wife who had shyly evaded him during a long vacation month, and though it took great effort, he shook his head. Just then, Kristyna was worth all his country's poetry.

The Compromise

She arrived in the morning. During the day, she ran the errand that would serve as her alibi. The student

had arranged to meet her in the evening at a restaurant he had chosen himself. When he entered, he became nearly frightened: the room was full of drunks, and the small-town sylph of his vacation was sitting in the corner near the toilets, at a table meant not for customers but for dirty dishes. She had dressed with the awkward formality of a provincial lady visiting the capital after a long absence and wanting to sample all its delights. She was wearing a hat, garish beads around her neck, and black high-heeled pumps.

The student felt his cheeks burning—not with excitement but with disappointment. The impression Kristyna created against the backdrop of a small town, with its butchers, mechanics, and pensioners, was entirely different in Prague, the city of pretty students and hairdressers. With her ridiculous beads and her discreet gold tooth (in an upper corner of her mouth), she seemed to personify the negation of that youthful feminine beauty in jeans who had been cruelly rejecting him for months. He made his way uncertainly to her, bringing his *litost* along with him.

The student was disappointed, and Kristyna no less so. The restaurant he had invited her to had a nice name—King Wenceslaus—and Kristyna, who did not know Prague well, had imagined a deluxe establishment, where the student would dine with her before she was shown the fireworks display of Prague's pleasures. When she noticed that the King Wenceslaus was just the kind of place where the mechanic drank his beer and that she was waiting for the student in the

corner near the toilets, she did not experience the feeling I have referred to as *litost* but rather felt quite ordinary anger. By which I mean that she felt neither miserable nor humiliated but thought her student did not know how to behave. She did not, moreover, hesitate to tell him so. She looked furious and talked to him as she did to the butcher.

They stood face-to-face, she volubly and loudly reproaching him and he feebly defending himself. His distaste for her intensified. He wanted to take her to his room quickly, hide her from everyone's sight, and wait for the privacy of their refuge to revive the vanished charm. But she refused. She had not been to the capital for a long time, and she wanted to go out, see things, have a good time. Her black pumps and big garish beads were noisily demanding their rights.

"But this is a great little place. All the best people come here," the student pointed out, implying that the butcher's wife understood nothing about what was interesting in the capital and what was not. "Unfortunately, there's no room now, so I'll have to take you somewhere else." But as if deliberately, all the other places were just as crowded, it was a distance from one to the other, and Kristyna seemed unbearably comic to him with her little hat, beads, and shining gold tooth. The streets were filled with young women, and the student realized he would never forgive himself for giving up, for Kristyna's sake, the opportunity to spend an evening with his country's giants. But neither did he want to incur her hostility,

because, as I have said, he had not been to bed with a woman in a long time. Only a masterfully constructed compromise could bring the dilemma to an end.

They finally found a table in an out-of-the-way café. The student ordered two aperitifs and looked sadly into Kristyna's eyes: Here in Prague, he announced, life is full of surprises. Just yesterday the country's most famous poet had phoned him.

When he said his name, Kristyna gave a start. She had learned his poems by heart in school. The great men whose names we learn in school have something unreal and immaterial about them, having been admitted, while still alive, to the majestic gallery of the dead. Kristyna could not really believe that the student knew him personally.

Of course he knew him, the student declared. He was even writing his master's thesis on him, a monograph that was likely to be published as a book someday. The reason he had never spoken of it before was that she would have thought he was bragging, but he had to talk about him now because the great poet had suddenly gotten in their way. A private meeting of the country's poets was taking place this evening at the Writers Club, and only a few critics and insiders had been invited. It's an extremely important meeting. There will be a debate, and sparks will fly. But obviously the student is not going. He is thrilled to be here with Kristyna!

In my sweet, singular country, the charm of poets still agitates women's hearts. Kristyna felt admiration for the

student and a kind of maternal desire to advise him and defend his interests. With striking and unexpected altruism, she declared it would be a pity if the student were to miss an event attended by the great poet.

The student said he had tried everything to enable Kristyna to come with him, because he knew how happy she would be to see the great poet and his friends. Unfortunately, that was not possible. Even the great poet would not be bringing his wife. The discussion was intended exclusively for specialists. Initially he had actually even considered not going, but now he realized that Kristyna was probably right. Yes, it was a good idea. He could run over there for an hour or so. Kristyna would wait for him at his place, and then they would be together, just the two of them.

The temptations of the theaters and the variety shows were forgotten, and Kristyna went with the student and entered his attic room. At first she experienced the same disappointment she had felt upon entering the King Wenceslaus. It was not an apartment, merely a tiny room with no anteroom and no furniture but a daybed and a desk. But she was no longer sure of her judgments. She had entered into a world with a mysterious scale of values she did not understand. So she rapidly reconciled herself to this uncomfortable and filthy room and called on all her feminine talent to make herself feel at home in it. The student invited her to remove her hat, gave her a kiss, made her sit down on the daybed, and showed her his small library, where she would find

something to distract her while he was gone.

Then Kristyna had an idea: "Do you have a copy of his book?" She was thinking of the great poet.

Yes, the student had his book.

She went on very shyly: "Would you like to give it to me as a present? And ask him to inscribe it to me?"

The student was exultant. The great poet's inscription would replace, for Kristyna, the theaters and variety shows. She had given him a bad conscience, and he was ready to do anything for her. As he expected, the intimacy of his attic room had revived Kristyna's charm. The young women coming and going on the streets had vanished, and the enchantment of her modesty silently invaded the room. The disappointment slowly wore off, and the student left for the Writers Club calmed and delighted by the thought of the splendid double program the evening promised him.

The Poets

He waited for Voltaire in front of the Writers Club and then went up with him to the second floor. They passed through the cloakroom and into the vestibule, where a jovial din reached them. When Voltaire opened the door to the function room, the student saw, sitting around a large table, all of his country's poetry.

I am watching them from the great distance of two thousand kilometers. It is the autumn of 1977, my country has been sweetly dozing for nine years now in the strong embrace of the Russian empire, Voltaire has been expelled from the university, and my books, having been gathered up from all the public libraries, are locked away in some state cellar. I waited for a few years, and then I got into a car and drove as far west as possible, to the Breton town of Rennes, where on the first day I found an apartment on the top floor of the tallest high-rise tower. When the sun woke me the next morning, I realized its large windows faced east, toward Prague.

And so I am watching them from the height of my lookout, but the distance is too great. Fortunately, there is a tear in my eye, which, like a telescope lens, brings me nearer to their faces. Now I can clearly make out the great poet, seated solidly among the others. He is surely more than seventy, but his face is still handsome, his eyes are still lively and wise. His crutches lean against the table next to him.

I see them all against the backdrop of the luminous Prague of fifteen years ago, when their books had not yet been locked away in a state cellar and when they chatted loudly and cheerfully around the large table laden with bottles. Because I am very fond of them all, I hesitate to give them ordinary names taken at random from the telephone book. If we must hide their faces behind the masks of assumed names, I want to give them as gifts, as adornments and in homage.

Since his students nicknamed the lecturer Voltaire,

what prevents me from calling the beloved great poet Goethe?

Facing him is Lermontov.

And the one over there, with the dark dreamy eyes, I want to call Petrarch.

And then there are Verlaine, Yesenin, and several others not worth mentioning, as well as someone who surely is there by mistake. From far away (from that distance of two thousand kilometers), it is obvious that Poetry has not kissed his brow and that he does not like verse. He is called Boccaccio.

Voltaire took two chairs from against the wall, pushed them over to the table laden with bottles, and introduced the student to the poets. The poets nodded to him courteously, all but Petrarch, who was too absorbed in an argument he was having with Boccaccio to notice him. He ended the debate with these words: "Something in women always gives them the upper hand. I could talk about that for weeks."

And to egg him on, Goethe said: "Weeks is a bit much. But give us at least ten minutes of it."

Petrarch's Story

"Last week, an unbelievable thing happened to me. My wife had just taken her evening bath, she was in

her red bathrobe with her golden hair undone, and she was beautiful. At ten past nine the doorbell rang. When I opened the apartment door I saw a girl pressed against the wall. I recognized her immediately. Once a week I go to a girls' school. They've organized a poetry club and secretly worship me.

"I said: 'May I ask what you're doing here?'

"'I need to talk to you!'

"'What do you have to tell me?'

"'I have to tell you something terribly important!'

"'Listen,' I said, 'it's late, you can't come in now, get yourself downstairs and wait for me at the cellar door.'

"I went back into the bedroom and told my wife someone had the wrong door. And then, picking up two empty buckets, I casually announced I had to go down to the cellar for some coal. That was damned stupid. My gallbladder had been bothering me all day, and I'd been lying down. Such unexpected zeal made my wife suspicious."

"You have gallbladder trouble?" asked Goethe with interest.

"I've had it for years now," said Petrarch.

"Why don't you have an operation?"

"Not a chance!"

Goethe nodded sympathetically.

"Where was I?" Petrarch asked.

"Your gallbladder hurts and you're holding two coal buckets," prompted Verlaine.

"I found the girl at the cellar door," Petrarch went on, "and I told her to come down there with me. I

picked up a shovel and, while I was filling the buckets, tried to find out what she wanted. She kept repeating she *had* to see me. I couldn't get anything more out of her.

"Then I heard footsteps on the staircase above. I grabbed the full bucket and ran up out of the cellar. My wife was on the way down. I passed her the bucket: 'Please take this up right away, I'm going to fill the other one.' My wife went back up with the bucket, and I went back down to the cellar and told the girl we couldn't stay there and she should wait for me on the street. I quickly filled the other bucket and ran upstairs. Then I gave my wife a kiss and told her to go to bed, that I wanted to take a bath before going to sleep. She went off to bed, and I went into the bathroom and turned on the faucets. The water gushed noisily into the tub. I took off my slippers and in my socks went to the apartment door, where I'd put the shoes I wore that day. I left them there to show that I hadn't gone far. I took another pair of shoes from the wardrobe, put them on, and slipped out of the apartment."

Here Boccaccio interrupted: "Petrarch, we all know you're a great poet. But now I see you're also very methodical, a wily strategist who not even for a moment allows himself to be blinded by passion! What you did with the slippers and the two pairs of shoes is a masterpiece!"

All the poets agreed with Boccaccio and showered Petrarch with praise, which visibly flattered him.

"She was waiting for me on the street. I tried to calm

her. I told her I had to go back inside and suggested she return next day in the afternoon, when my wife would be away at work. There's a streetcar stop right in front of the building. I insisted she go over to it. But when the streetcar arrived, she started laughing and tried to rush to the building door."

"You should have pushed her under the streetcar," said Boccaccio.

"My friends," Petrarch announced almost solemnly, "there are times when, against your will, it's necessary to be nasty to a woman. So I said to her: 'If you won't go home of your own accord, I'll lock the building door. Don't forget, this is my home and I can't turn it into a barnyard!' And keep in mind, my friends, that while I was arguing with her in front of the building, upstairs the bathtub faucets were running and the tub was about to overflow!

"I turned around and dashed through the building door. She started to run after me. And to top things off, some people were entering the building just then and she edged her way in with them. I went up those stairs like a sprinter! I could hear her footsteps behind me. We live on the fourth floor! It was quite a feat! But I was faster, and I practically slammed the door in her face. And I had just enough time to tear the doorbell wire off the wall so no one could hear her ringing, because I knew she was going to push the button and not let go of it. After that I ran on tiptoe into the bathroom."

"Had the tub overflowed?" asked Goethe solicitously.

"I shut the faucets at the last instant. Then I went to

take a quick look at the apartment door. I opened the peephole and saw she was still there, standing motionless, with her eyes riveted on the door. My friends, that frightened me. I wondered whether she was going to stay there all night."

Boccaccio Behaves Badly

"Petrarch, you're an incorrigible worshiper," Boccaccio interrupted. "I can imagine how these girls who started a poetry club invoke you as their Apollo. Nothing would make me want to meet any of them. A woman poet is doubly a woman. That's too much for a misogynist like me."

"Listen, Boccaccio," said Goethe, "why are you always bragging that you're a misogynist?"

"Because misogynists are the best of men."

All the poets reacted to these words with hooting. Boccaccio was forced to raise his voice:

"Please understand me. Misogynists don't despise women. Misogynists don't like femininity. Men have always been divided into two categories. Worshipers of women, otherwise known as poets, and misogynists, or, more accurately, gynophobes. Worshipers or poets revere traditional feminine values such as feelings, the home, motherhood, fertility, sacred flashes of hysteria,

and the divine voice of nature within us, while in misogynists or gynophobes these values inspire a touch of terror. Worshipers revere women's femininity, while misogynists always prefer women to femininity. Don't forget: a woman can be happy only with a misogynist. No woman has ever been happy with any of you!"

These words provoked another round of hostile clamor.

"Worshipers or poets can bring drama, passion, tears, and worries to women, but never any pleasure. I knew one once. He worshiped his wife. Then he took up worshiping someone else. He didn't like humiliating the one by deceiving her and the other by making her a clandestine mistress. So he confessed everything to his wife, asked her to help him, his wife fell ill, he spent all his time crying, so his mistress finally couldn't stand it anymore and announced she was leaving him. He lay down on the tracks in front of a streetcar. Unfortunately, the motorman saw him in time, and that worshiper had to pay fifty crowns for impeding traffic."

"Boccaccio is a liar!" shouted Verlaine.

"The story Petrarch just told us," Boccaccio went on, "is the same old stuff. Does your wife with the golden hair deserve your taking that hysterical girl seriously?"

"What do you know about my wife?" Petrarch shouted. "My wife is my faithful friend! We have no secrets from each other!"

"Then why did you change shoes?" asked Lermontov.

But Petrarch was not flustered. "My friends, at that

crucial moment, when the girl was out there and I really didn't know what to do, I went to my wife in the bedroom and told her everything."

"Just like my worshiper!" said Boccaccio, and laughed. "To tell everything! It's the reflex of every worshiper! Surely you asked her to help you!"

Petrarch's voice was filled with tenderness: "Yes, I asked her to help me. She'd never refused me her help. Not this time either. She went to the door by herself. I stayed in the bedroom, because I was afraid."

"I'd be afraid too," said Goethe, filled with understanding.

"When she came back she was quite calm. After looking through the peephole she'd opened the door, and no one was there. One might have said I'd invented the whole thing. But suddenly we heard loud banging behind us, and then the sound of shattering glass; as you know, we live in one of those old buildings where the apartment windows and entrance doors give onto a gallery facing the courtyard. When no one answered the ringing doorbell, the girl got a metal bar somewhere and went along the gallery breaking all our windows, one after the other. We watched from inside the apartment, unable to do anything, nearly terrified. Then, coming from the dark other side of the gallery, we saw three white shadows. They were the old ladies from the apartment opposite. The shattering glass had awakened them. They were rushing around eagerly and impatiently in their nightgowns, happy with this unexpected scene. Just imagine! A beautiful teenager

with a metal bar in her hand, surrounded by the malevolent shadows of three witches!

"Then the girl broke the last window and came through it into the bedroom.

"I tried to go talk to her, but my wife took me by the arms and begged me, 'Don't go, she'll kill you!' And the girl stood there in the middle of the room with the metal bar in her hand, beautiful and majestic like Joan of Arc with her lance! I tore myself away from my wife's arms and headed for the girl. The nearer I got to her, the more she lost her threatening look, it softened, radiated a celestial peacefulness. I grabbed the metal bar, threw it on the floor, and took the girl by the hand."

Insults

"I don't believe a word of your story," Lermontov announced.

"Of course, it didn't happen quite the way Petrarch told it," Boccaccio again interrupted, "but I believe it really happened. The girl is a hysteric, and any normal man in that kind of situation would long since have slapped her a couple of times. Worshipers or poets have always been perfect prey for hysterics, who know they'll never be slapped by them. Worshipers are disarmed when faced by a woman, because they're still in

their mothers' shadows. In every woman they see a messenger from their mother and submit to her. Their mothers' skirts spread over them like the sky." That last image pleased him so much he repeated it several times: "Poets, what you're seeing overhead is not the sky but your mothers' enormous skirts! You're all living under your mothers' skirts!"

"What did you say?" Yesenin yelled out with incredible loudness, springing up from his chair. He was tottering. From the start, he had been drinking more than anyone else. "What did you say about my mother? What did you say?"

"I wasn't talking about your mother," said Boccaccio gently. He knew that Yesenin lived with a famous dancer thirty years older than he, and he felt genuinely sorry for him. But the spit was already on Yesenin's lips, and he leaned forward and let fly. But he was too drunk, and the gob landed on Goethe's collar. Boccaccio took out his handkerchief and wiped it off the great poet.

Spitting had made Yesenin feel deathly tired, and he fell back into his chair.

Petrarch went on: "Listen, all of you, my friends, to what she said to me, it was unforgettable. She said to me, and it was like a prayer, like a litany, 'I'm a simple girl, I'm quite an ordinary girl, I have nothing to offer you, but I came here because I was sent by love, I came'—and now she squeezed my hand very hard—'so that you'll know what real love is, so that you'll experience it once in your life.'"

"And what did your wife say to that messenger of love?" asked Lermontov with heavy irony.

Goethe laughed: "What wouldn't Lermontov give to have a woman come and break his windows! He'd even pay her to do it!"

Lermontov cast a look of hatred at Goethe, and Petrarch went on: "My wife? You're mistaken, Lermontov, if you think this is just a funny Boccaccio story. The girl turned to my wife with a celestial look and said to her, and again it was like a prayer, like a litany, 'You shouldn't hold it against me, because you're good and I love you too, I love you both,' and with her free hand, she took my wife by the hand."

"If it were a scene from a funny Boccaccio story, I'd have nothing against it," Lermontov said. "But what you've just told us is something worse. It's bad poetry."

"You're just jealous!" Petrarch shouted at him. "It's never happened to you in your whole life, being alone in a room with two beautiful women who love you! Do you know how beautiful my wife is in a red bathrobe, with her golden hair undone?"

Lermontov laughed mockingly, and this time Goethe decided to punish him for his caustic comments: "You're a great poet, Lermontov, we all know that, but why do you have such complexes?"

For a few moments Lermontov was stunned, then he said to Goethe, barely controlling himself: "Johann, you shouldn't have said that to me. It's the worst thing you could have said to me. It's boorish."

Goethe, a lover of harmony, would not have gone on

teasing Lermontov, but Voltaire laughingly interrupted: "It's as plain as the nose on your face, Lermontov, that you're loaded with complexes," and he started to analyze all his poetry, which lacked both Goethe's happy natural charm and Petrarch's impassioned inspiration. He even started to dissect each of his metaphors to show brilliantly that Lermontov's inferiority complex was the direct source of his imagination and that it had taken root in a childhood marked by poverty and the oppressive influence of an authoritarian father.

Just then Goethe leaned over to Petrarch and said in a whisper that resounded throughout the room, to be heard by everyone, including Lermontov: "Come off it! What a bunch of nonsense. Lermontov's trouble is hypercelibacy!"

The Student Takes Lermontov's Side

The student kept quiet, pouring himself wine (a discreet waiter noiselessly removed empty bottles and brought full ones) and listening attentively to the conversation with its flying sparks. He couldn't swivel his head fast enough to follow their giddy whirl.

He tried to decide which of the poets he liked most. He venerated Goethe just as much as Kristyna venerated him, just as much, for that matter, as the entire country. Petrarch cast a spell on him with his burning

eyes. But strangely enough it was the much-insulted Lermontov for whom he felt the greatest affinity, especially after Goethe's last remark, which led him to think that even a great poet (and Lermontov really was a great poet) could experience the same difficulties as an ordinary student, such as himself. He looked at his watch and noted it was time he returned home if he wanted to avoid ending up just like Lermontov.

Nonetheless, he could not tear himself away from the great men, and instead of going back to Kristyna, he went to the toilet. Filled with grandiose thoughts as he stood in front of the white tiles, he heard Lermontov's voice next to him: "You heard them. They're not *subtle*. Do you understand? They're not *subtle*."

Lermontov said the word "subtle" as if it were in italics. Yes, there are words unlike all the others, those words whose particular meaning is known only to initiates. The student did not know why Lermontov said the word "subtle" as if it were in italics, but I, who am among the initiates, know that Lermontov once read Pascal's *pensée* about subtle minds and geometrical minds, and ever since had divided the human race into two categories: those who are subtle, and all the others.

"You think they're *subtle,* don't you?" he said aggressively to the silent student.

Buttoning his fly, the student noticed that Lermontov, just as Countess Rostopchin had noted in her diary one hundred fifty years before, had very short legs. He felt grateful to him as the first great poet to ask him a serious question and await an equally serious answer.

The student said the word "subtle" in roman type: "They're not subtle at all."

Lermontov stood still on his short legs: "No, not *subtle* at all." And raising his voice, he added: "But I'm *proud*! Do you understand, I'm *proud*!"

The word "proud" was another that came from his mouth in italics, to indicate that only a fool could think Lermontov's pride was like a girl's in her beauty or a shopkeeper's in his goods, for it was a singular kind of pride, a pride justified and noble.

"I'm *proud*," shouted Lermontov, and he returned with the student to the function room, where Voltaire was delivering a panegyric to Goethe. Lermontov then went into a frenzy. Planting himself at the edge of the table, which at once made him a head taller than the seated others, he said: "And now I'm going to show you what I'm *proud* of! Now I'm going to tell you something, because I'm *proud*! There are only two poets in this country: Goethe and me."

This time it was Voltaire who raised his voice: "You may be a great poet, but you're a small man! I can say you're a great poet, but you don't have the right to say it."

Lermontov was taken aback for a moment. Then he stammered: "Why don't I have the right to say it? I'm *proud*!"

Lermontov repeated several more times that he was proud, Voltaire roared with laughter, and then the others roared with him.

The student realized that the moment he was waiting for had arrived. He stood up like Lermontov and looked

around at the assembled poets: "You don't understand Lermontov. A poet's pride is not ordinary pride. Only the poet himself can know the value of what he writes. Others don't understand it until much later, or they may never understand it. So it's the poet's duty to be proud. If he weren't, he would betray his own work."

A moment before, they had been roaring with laughter, but now at a single stroke they all agreed with the student, because they were just as proud as Lermontov and were only ashamed to say so, not realizing that when the word "proud" is properly enunciated it stops being laughable and becomes witty and noble. So they were grateful to the student for giving them such good advice, and one of them, probably Verlaine, even applauded.

Goethe Turns Kristyna into a Queen

The student sat down and Goethe turned to him with a kindly smile: "My boy, you certainly know what poetry is."

The others were again immersed in their drunken discussions, leaving the student alone with the great poet. He wanted to make the most of the precious opportunity, but suddenly he did not know what to say. Because he was looking hard for a suitable remark—

Goethe was merely smiling at him in silence—he was unable to come up with anything, and so he just smiled back. And then the thought of Kristyna came to his aid.

"Right now, I'm going out with a girl, I mean a woman. She's married to a butcher."

That greatly pleased Goethe, who responded with a friendly laugh.

"She venerates you. She gave me one of your books for you to inscribe."

"Hand it over," said Goethe, and took the book of his verse from the student. Opening to the title page, he went on: "Tell me about her. What is she like? Is she beautiful?"

The student could not lie to Goethe's face. He admitted that the butcher's wife was no beauty. On top of that, today she was dressed in a ridiculous outfit. She had gone around Prague all day wearing big beads around her neck and old-fashioned black pumps.

Goethe listened with sincere interest and said, with a bit of yearning: "That's wonderful."

Becoming bolder, the student went so far as to admit that the butcher's wife had a gold tooth shining in her mouth like a gilded fly.

Excited, Goethe laughed and suggested: "Like a ring."

"Like a lighthouse!" replied the student.

"Like a star!" said Goethe with a smile.

The student told him the butcher's wife was really the most ordinary kind of small-town woman, and that was exactly what had attracted him to her.

"I know what you mean," said Goethe. "It's just those

details—poorly chosen clothes, slightly flawed teeth, delightful mediocrity of soul—that make a woman lively and real. The women on posters or in fashion magazines, the ones almost all women nowadays try to imitate, lack charm because they're unreal, because they're merely the sum total of a set of abstract instructions. They're not born of human bodies but of computers! I assure you, my friend, your small-town woman is just what a poet needs, and I congratulate you!"

Then he bent over the title page, took out his pen, and started to write. Enthusiastically, nearly in a trance, his face radiant with love and understanding, he filled the whole page.

The student took back the book and blushed proudly. What Goethe had written to a woman unknown to him was beautiful and sad, yearning and sensual, lively and wise, and the student was certain that such beautiful words had never before been addressed to any woman. He thought of Kristyna and desired her infinitely. Poetry had cast a cloak woven of the most sublime words over her ridiculous clothes. She had been turned into a queen.

Carrying a Poet

The waiter entered the room, this time with no new bottles. He asked the poets to get ready to leave. It was

time to close up the building. The caretaker was threatening to lock them in for the night.

He had to repeat this announcement several times, loudly and softly, to all of them collectively and to each one individually, before the poets finally realized that the part about the caretaker was no joke. Petrarch suddenly remembered his wife in her red bathrobe and got up from the table as if he had been kicked in the pants.

Goethe then said, with infinite sadness: "Leave me here, boys. I want to stay here." His crutches were still leaning against the table next to him, and to the poets trying to persuade him to leave with them, he merely responded by shaking his head.

They all knew his wife, a harsh, spiteful lady. They were all afraid of her. They knew that if Goethe did not come home on time his wife would make a terrible scene in front of all of them. They implored him: "Be reasonable, Johann, you've got to go home!" and they took him shyly by the armpits and tried to lift him from his chair. But the Olympian god was heavy, and their arms were hesitant. He was at least thirty years their elder and their true patriarch; all of a sudden, when they were lifting him and passing him his crutches, they all felt small and embarrassed. And he kept repeating that he wanted to stay there!

No one agreed with him except Lermontov, who seized the opportunity to be more cunning than the others: "Leave him here, boys, and I'll keep him company till morning. Don't you understand? When he was young, he'd stay away from home whole weeks at

a time. He's trying to regain his youth! Don't you understand that, you morons? Right, Johann? The two of us are going to lie down on the rug and stay here with this bottle of red wine till morning, and all the rest of them have to get out! Petrarch can go run to his wife, with her red bathrobe and her hair undone!"

But Voltaire knew it was not nostalgia for his youth that was keeping Goethe there. Goethe was ill and forbidden to drink. When he drank, his legs refused to carry him. Voltaire seized the crutches and ordered the others to give up their unnecessary hesitancy. And so the tipsy poets' feeble arms took hold of Goethe's armpits and lifted him from his chair. They carried him through the function room to the vestibule, or rather dragged him (sometimes Goethe's feet touched the floor, sometimes they were above it like the feet of a child being swung by its parents). But Goethe was heavy and the poets were drunk: they dropped him in the vestibule, and Goethe moaned and cried out: "Let me die right here, boys!"

Voltaire got angry and shouted to the poets to pick Goethe up again immediately. This shamed the poets. Some took Goethe by the arms, others by the legs, and they lifted him and carried him through the club door to the staircase. Everyone was carrying him. Voltaire was carrying him, Petrarch was carrying him, Verlaine was carrying him, Boccaccio was carrying him, and even the staggering Yesenin was holding on to Goethe's leg, for fear of falling.

The student too tried to carry the great poet, know-

ing it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. But in vain, because Lermontov had become so fond of him. He took him by the arm and could not stop finding things to say to him.

"Not only are they not *subtle*, they're also clumsy. They're all spoiled children. Look how they're carrying him! They're going to drop him! They've never worked with their hands. Do you know I worked in a factory?"

(We should not forget that all the heroes of that time and country did factory work, either voluntarily, out of revolutionary enthusiasm, or under duress, as punishment. In either case they were equally proud of it, because it seemed to them that in the factory, Hard Life herself, that noble goddess, had kissed their brows.)

Holding their patriarch by the arms and legs, the poets carried him downstairs. The stairwell was square, with several right-angle turns that put their strength and agility to a hard test.

Lermontov went on: "Do you know, my friend, what it is to carry a crossbeam? You've never carried one. You're a student. But these characters have never carried one either. Look how stupidly they're carrying him! They're letting him fall!" He shouted at them: "Hold on to him, you idiots, you're letting him fall! You've never worked with your hands!" And clinging to the student's arm, he came slowly down behind the staggering poets carrying the increasingly heavy Goethe with growing anguish. They finally arrived on the sidewalk with their burden and leaned him against a lamppost. Petrarch and Boccaccio kept him propped

up while Voltaire went out into the street to try to flag down one of the passing cars.

Lermontov said to the student: "Do you realize what you're seeing? You're a student, you don't know anything about life. But this is a great scene! They're carrying a poet. Do you know what a poem it would make?"

Goethe, however, had slumped to the ground; Petrarch and Boccaccio tried to prop him up again.

"Look," said Lermontov to the student, "they can't even lift him up. They have no strength in their arms. They don't have any idea what life is. Carrying a poet. What a magnificent title. Do you understand? Right now I'm putting together two collections of verse. Two entirely different collections. One is in strictly classical form, rhymed and in a definite meter. And the other is in free verse. It's going to be called *Accounts Rendered.* The last poem in this collection will be 'Carrying a Poet.' It'll be a harsh poem. But honest. *Honest.*"

That was the third word Lermontov said in italics. The word expressed opposition to everything merely ornamental or witty. It expressed opposition to Petrarch's reveries and Boccaccio's pranks. It expressed the pathos of the worker's labor and a passionate faith in the aforementioned goddess, Hard Life.

Intoxicated by the night air, Verlaine was standing on the sidewalk, looking up at the stars and singing. Yesenin had sat down against the building wall and fallen asleep. Voltaire, still waving his arm in the street, finally succeeded in getting a taxi. Then, with Boccaccio's help, he settled Goethe in the back seat. He shouted to Petrarch

to sit down next to the driver, because Petrarch was the only one with any chance of mollifying Mrs. Goethe. But Petrarch frantically defended himself:

"Why me? Why me? She scares me!"

"You see," said Lermontov to the student. "When a friend needs help, he takes off. Not a single one of them is capable of talking to Goethe's old lady." Then, leaning inside the car, where Goethe, Boccaccio, and Voltaire were now crammed together in the back seat, he said: "Boys, I'm coming with you. I'll take care of Mrs. Goethe." And he got into the empty seat next to the driver.

Petrarch Condemns Boccaccio's Laughter

The taxi loaded with poets vanished and the student remembered it was time to go back to Kristyna.

"I have to go home," he said to Petrarch.

Petrarch nodded, took him by the arm, and went off with him in the opposite direction.

"You know," he said, "you're a sensitive boy. You're the only one there who was capable of listening to what the others were saying."

The student took it from there: "That girl standing in the middle of the room like Joan of Arc with her lance—I can repeat everything you said, in your own words exactly."

"Besides, those drunks didn't even hear the end of the story! Are they interested in anything other than themselves?"

"Or when you said your wife was afraid the girl wanted to kill you, and then you approached her and her look radiated a celestial peacefulness, it was like a small miracle."

"Ah, my friend, you are the one who is a poet! You and not they!"

Petrarch was holding the student by the arm and leading him to his own distant suburb.

"And how does the story end?" asked the student.

"My wife took pity on her and let her stay in the apartment for the night. But imagine this! My mother-in-law sleeps in a kind of storage room behind the kitchen and gets up very early. When she saw the windows were all broken, she quickly went to get the glaziers who by chance were working in the building next door, and all the windows were replaced by the time we woke up. There wasn't a trace of the evening's events. I felt I had dreamed them."

"And the girl?" asked the student.

"Gone too. She must have left quietly very early in the morning."

Just then, Petrarch stopped in the middle of the street and looked at the student with an almost stern expression: "You know, my friend, it would pain me greatly if you were to take my story for one of those Boccaccio anecdotes that end up in a bed. You should know this: Boccaccio is a jackass. Boccaccio never

understands anyone, because to understand is to merge and to identify with. That is the secret of poetry. We consume ourselves in the beloved woman, we consume ourselves in the idea we believe, we burn in the landscape we are moved by."

The student listened to Petrarch ardently and saw before him the image of his Kristyna, about whose charms he had had his doubts some hours earlier. He was ashamed of those doubts now, because they belonged to the less good (Boccaccian) half of his being; they sprang from his weakness, not his strength: they proved that he did not dare enter into love completely, with all his being, proved that he was afraid of being consumed in the beloved woman.

"Love is poetry, poetry is love," said Petrarch, and the student resolved to love Kristyna with a love ardent and grand. A short time earlier, Goethe had arrayed her in a royal cloak, and now Petrarch was adding to the fire in the student's heart. The night awaiting him would be blessed by two poets.

"Laughter, on the other hand," Petrarch went on, "is an explosion that tears us away from the world and throws us back into our own cold solitude. Joking is a barrier between man and the world. Joking is the enemy of love and poetry. That's why I tell you yet again, and want you to keep in mind: Boccaccio doesn't understand love. Love can never be laughable. Love has nothing in common with laughter."

"Yes," agreed the student enthusiastically. The world seemed to him to be divided in two, the side of love and

the side of joking, and he knew that he belonged and would go on belonging to Petrarch's army.

Angels Hover Above the Student's Bed

She was not pacing tensely in the attic room, she was not angry, she was not sulking, she was not languishing at the open window. She was curled up in her nightgown under his blanket. He woke her with a kiss on the lips, and to forestall any reproaches told her with forced loquacity about the unbelievable evening, about the dramatic confrontation between Boccaccio and Petrarch, about Lermontov insulting all the other poets. She was not interested in his explanation and interrupted him suspiciously:

"I bet you forgot about the book."

When he handed her the book with Goethe's long inscription, she could not believe her eyes. Again and again she reread those unlikely phrases that seemed to embody all of her equally unlikely adventure with the student, all of last summer with its secret walks on unknown woodland paths, all the delicacy and all the tenderness apparently so alien to her life.

Meanwhile the student undressed and lay down beside her. She took him firmly in her arms. It was an embrace such as he had never before experienced. A

sincere, vigorous, ardent, maternal, sisterly, amicable, and passionate embrace. Several times that evening, Lermontov had used the word "honest," and the student thought Kristyna's embrace well deserved that term, which synthesized an entire cohort of adjectives.

The student felt that his body was outstandingly well disposed toward love. With a disposition so certain, hard, and durable, he could take his time and do nothing but savor the long, sweet minutes of that motionless embrace.

She thrust her tongue sensually into his mouth and a moment later showered most sisterly kisses all over his face. With the end of his tongue he felt her gold tooth on the upper left side, remembering what Goethe had said to him: Kristyna was born not of a computer but of a human body! She was just what a poet needed! He wanted to shout for joy. And Petrarch's words rang out in his mind, telling him that love is poetry and poetry is love and that to understand is to merge with the other and burn within her. (Yes, all three poets were here with him, hovering above the bed like angels, singing, rejoicing, and blessing him!) Overflowing with immense enthusiasm, the student decided it was time to transform the Lermontovian honesty of the motionless embrace into a real work of love. He turned over onto Kristyna's body and tried to open her legs with his knee.

But what's this? Kristyna is resisting! She is keeping her legs tightly together with the same obstinacy as on their woodland walks!

He wanted to ask her why she was resisting him, but he could not speak. Kristyna was so shy, so delicate, that love's functions lost their names in her presence. He dared use only the language of breathing and touching. Weren't they beyond the heaviness of words? Wasn't he burning within her? They were both burning with the same flame! And so, in stubborn silence, he kept attempting with his knee to force open Kristyna's tightly closed thighs.

She too was silent. She too was afraid to speak and tried to express everything with kisses and caresses. But finally, on his twenty-fifth attempt to open her thighs, she said: "No, please, no. It would kill me."

"What?"

"It would kill me. It's true. It would kill me," Kristyna repeated, and again she thrust her tongue deep into his mouth, yet keeping her thighs very tightly together.

The student felt despair tinged with bliss. He wildly desired to make love to her and at the same time wanted to weep for joy. Kristyna loved him as no one had before. She loved him so much it would kill her, she loved him to the point of being afraid to make love with him because if she were to make love with him, she would never be able to live without him and she would die of grief and desire. He was happy, he was madly happy, because he had suddenly, unexpectedly, and without having done anything to deserve it attained what he had always desired, the infinite love compared to which all the earth with all its continents and all its seas is as nothing.

"I understand you! I'll die with you!" he murmured, caressing and kissing her and almost weeping for love

of her. All the same, these grand, tender feelings did nothing to stifle his physical desire, which had become nearly intolerably painful. He again made some attempts to lever his knee between Kristyna's thighs and thus open the way into her body, which was suddenly more mysterious to him than the Holy Grail.

"No, not you, nothing would happen to you. *I'm* the one it would kill!" said Kristyna.

He imagined infinite pleasure, such pleasure that it would kill him, and he said: "We'll die together! We'll die together!" And he went on pushing his knee between her thighs, still in vain.

They didn't know what more to say. They were still pressed against each other. Kristyna shook her head as he launched a few more assaults on the fortress of her thighs before finally giving up. Resigned, he turned over and lay on his back beside her. She took hold of the scepter of her love standing up in her honor, and grasped it with all her splendid honesty: sincerely, vigorously, ardently, maternally, sisterly, amicably, and passionately.

At the student's, the bliss of an infinitely beloved man mingled with the despair of a rejected body. And the butcher's wife was still holding his weapon of love, not thinking about substituting, with some simple movements, for the carnal act he desired, but holding it in her hand like something rare, something precious, something she did not want to damage and wanted for a long, long time to keep just as it was, erect and hard.

But enough of that night, which went on without much change until nearly morning.

The Drab Light of Morning

Since they fell asleep very late, they did not wake up until just before noon, both with headaches. Soon Kristyna would be taking her train. Neither of them said much. Kristyna had put her nightgown and Goethe's book into her overnight bag and was again perched on her ridiculous black pumps and wearing her ill-chosen necklace.

As if the drab light of morning had broken the seal of silence, as if a day of prose had followed a night of poetry, Kristyna told the student quite simply: "You know, you shouldn't want it from me, it really could kill me. The doctor told me after I had my baby I should never get pregnant again."

The student gave her a despairing look: "Did you think I was going to make you pregnant? What do you take me for?"

"That's what they all say. They're always sure of themselves. I know what's happened to my friends. Young ones like you are terribly dangerous. And when it happens, that's it, you're stuck."

Despairingly, he told her he was not some inexperienced novice and would never have made her pregnant. "Are you really comparing me with your friends' boyfriends?"

"I know," she said almost apologetically. The student no longer needed to find ways to convince her. She believed him. He was no peasant and probably knew

more about matters of love than any mechanic. She probably had been wrong to resist him last night. But she did not regret it. A night of love with its brief coupling (in Kristyna's mind physical love could only be brief and hurried) always left her with the impression of something nice but also dangerous and deceitful. What she had experienced with the student was infinitely better.

He went with her to the railroad station, she already thrilled by the thought of sitting down in her compartment and recalling it all. She kept telling herself, with a simple woman's avaricious pragmatism, that she had experienced something "no one could take away" from her: she had spent the night with a young man who had always seemed unreal, elusive, and distant, and for a whole night had held him by his erect member. Yes, for a whole night! That's something which never happened to her before! She might never see him again, but she had never believed she could go on seeing him. She was happy with the thought of keeping something of his that was permanent: the Goethe book with its unbelievable inscription, which she could use at any time to prove to herself that her adventure had not been a dream.

The student, for his part, was in despair. Last night, one sensible sentence would have been enough! It would have been enough to call things by their right names, and he could have had her! She was afraid he would make her pregnant, and he thought she was frightened by the immensity of her love! Casting his eyes into the unfathomable depths of his stupidity, he wanted to burst into laughter, into whimpering, hysterical laughter.

He returned from the railroad station to his wasteland of loveless nights, and *litost* came with him.

Further Notes Toward a Theory of Litost

With two examples taken from the student's life, I explained the two basic reactions of someone faced with his own *litost*. If our counterpart is the weaker, we find an excuse to hurt him, like the student hurting the girl who swam too fast.

If our counterpart is the stronger, all we can do is choose circuitous revenge—the indirect blow, a murder by means of suicide. The child plays a wrong note on his violin over and over until the teacher goes mad and throws him out the window. As he falls, the child is delighted by the thought that the nasty teacher will be charged with murder.

These are the two classic methods, and if the first is commonly found among lovers and spouses, what we conventionally call the history of mankind offers innumerable examples of the other kind of behavior. Everything our teachers called heroism may only be the form of *litost* I have illustrated with the example of the child and the violin teacher. The Persians conquered the Peloponnesus when the Spartans made one military mistake after another. Just like the child

refusing to play in tune, they were blinded by tears of rage and refused to take any reasonable action, being capable neither of fighting better nor of surrendering or fleeing, and it is through *litost* that they allowed themselves to be killed to the last man.

The idea occurs to me in this connection that it is no accident the notion of *litost* originated in Bohemia. The story of the Czechs—an endless story of rebellions against the stronger, a succession of glorious defeats that launched their history and led to ruin the very people who had done the launching—is a story of *litost*. When in August 1968 thousands of Russian tanks occupied that amazing small country, I saw a slogan written on the walls of a town: "We don't want compromise, we want victory!" You must understand, by then there was no more than a choice among several varieties of defeat, but this town rejected compromise and wanted victory! That was *litost* talking! A man possessed by it takes revenge through his own annihilation. The child lies shattered on the sidewalk, but its immortal soul is going to be eternally thrilled because the violin teacher has hanged himself from the window catch.

But how could the student hurt Kristyna? Before he had a chance to think about it, she was on the train. Theoreticians are familiar with this kind of situation and call it "*litost* block."

It is the worst that can happen. The student's *litost* was like a tumor growing by the minute, and he did not know what to do about it. Since he had no one on whom to take revenge, he hoped at least for consolation. That is why he thought about Lermontov. He

thought about how Goethe had insulted and Voltaire had humiliated Lermontov, and that he had stood up to them all by shouting about his pride as if all the poets around the table were violin teachers he was trying to provoke into flinging him out the window.

Wanting Lermontov the way one wants a brother, the student thrust his hand into his pocket. His fingers felt a folded sheet of paper. It was a large sheet torn from a notebook, and on it was written: "I await you. I love you. Kristyna. Midnight."

He understood. The jacket he was wearing had been hanging in his attic room yesterday evening. The message belatedly found only confirmed what he already knew. He had failed to have Kristyna's body because of his own stupidity. The *litost* that filled him to the brim could find no channel of escape.

In the Depths of Despair

It was late afternoon, and he thought the poets must at last be up and around after the drinking bout of the night before. Maybe they were back at the Writers Club. Taking four steps at a time, he rushed up to the second floor, passed through the cloakroom, and turned right into the restaurant. Not being an habitué, he paused at the entrance to look inside. Petrarch and

Lermontov were sitting at the far end of the room with two men unknown to him. There was a vacant table very near them; he went and sat down there. No one seemed to notice him. He even had the impression that Petrarch and Lermontov had glanced at him without recognizing him. He ordered a cognac from the waiter; the infinitely sad and infinitely beautiful text of Kristyna's message resounded painfully through his head: "I await you. I love you. Kristyna. Midnight."

He stayed there for about twenty minutes, taking tiny sips of cognac. Far from comforting him, the sight of Petrarch and Lermontov only brought him still more sadness. He had been abandoned by everyone, abandoned by Kristyna and by the poets. He was alone here, with nothing for company but a large sheet of paper with "I await you. I love you. Kristyna. Midnight" written on it. He had a craving to get up and wave the sheet of paper over his head, so everyone could see it, so everyone could know that he, the student, had been loved, infinitely loved.

He called the waiter over to pay him. Then he lit a cigarette. He no longer had any desire to stay at the Writers Club, but he was repelled by the thought of returning to his attic room, where no woman awaited him. Just as he was finally stubbing the cigarette out in the ashtray, he noticed Petrarch motioning to him with his hand. But it was too late, *litost* was driving him out of the club and toward his sad solitude. He got up and, at the last moment, once more took out of his pocket the sheet of paper with Kristyna's love message on it. That sheet of

paper would no longer give him any pleasure. But if he left it lying on the table here, someone might notice it and would know that the student had been infinitely loved.

He headed for the exit.

Unexpected Glory

"My friend!" The student heard a voice behind him and turned around. It was Petrarch, who had motioned to him and was now approaching him: "Are you leaving already?" He apologized for not having recognized him immediately. "When I've been drinking, I'm completely dazed the next day."

The student explained that he had not wished to disturb Petrarch because he did not know the gentlemen with him.

"They're idiots," said Petrarch, walking back with the student to sit down with him at the table he had just left. The student looked with anguish at the large sheet of paper lying casually on the table. If only it had been a discreet little piece of paper—but that large sheet loudly cried out the clumsily obvious intention with which it had been forgotten there.

Rolling his dark eyes with curiosity, Petrarch immediately noticed the sheet of paper and examined it: "What's this? Ah, my friend, it's yours, isn't it?"

Clumsily trying to feign the embarrassment of a man who has left a confidential communication lying around, the student tried to snatch the sheet of paper out of Petrarch's hands.

But he was already reading it aloud: "'I await you. I love you. Kristyna. Midnight.'"

He looked the student in the eyes and asked: "What midnight was that? It wasn't yesterday, I hope!"

The student lowered his eyes: "Yes, it was," he said. He had stopped trying to snatch the sheet of paper out of Petrarch's hands.

Meanwhile Lermontov was approaching their table on his squat little legs. He shook hands with the student: "I'm glad to see you. Those two," he said, indicating the table he had just come from, "are horrible cretins." And he sat down.

Petrarch immediately read Lermontov the text of Kristyna's message, read it several times in a row in a sonorous, melodic voice as if it were verse.

Which makes me think that when someone can neither slap a girl who swims too fast nor get himself killed by the Persians, when he has no means of escaping from *litost,* then poetry's charm flies to his assistance.

What remains of this beautiful and thoroughly bungled story? Only the poetry. Inscribed in Goethe's book, the words that Kristyna is taking away with her, and on a lined sheet of paper, the words that have adorned the student with unexpected glory.

"My friend," said Petrarch, seizing the student by

the arm, "admit it, admit that you write verse, admit that you're a poet!"

The student lowered his eyes and admitted that Petrarch was right.

And Lermontov Remains Alone

Lermontov is the one the student came to the Writers Club to see, but from that moment on he is lost to Lermontov and Lermontov is lost to him. Lermontov detests happy lovers. He frowns and speaks with disdain of the poetry of mawkish feelings and lofty words. He says that a poem must be as honest as an object fashioned by a worker's hands. He scowls and he is unpleasant with Petrarch and the student. We know full well what it is about. Goethe knows too. It is about hypercelibacy. About the terrible *litost* that comes from hypercelibacy.

Who could understand this better than the student? But that incorrigible idiot can only see Lermontov's gloomy face, only hear his spiteful words and be insulted by them.

I watch them from afar, from the top of my high-rise in France. Petrarch and the student stand up. They coldly take leave of Lermontov. And Lermontov remains alone.

My dear Lermontov, the genius of that sorrow my sad Bohemia calls *litost*.