

n.  
re  
g  
ly  
is  
re  
r.  
to  
t,  
is  
d  
y.  
e.  
is

NOVAK SIMIĆ — Born at Vareš on January 14, 1906. A prominent short-story writer and novelist. He works as editor at the »Zora« publishing house and in the review »Republika«. His books have been translated into several foreign languages and he himself translates from German and English.

Works: *The Time Mirror*, poems, 1934; *The Unknown Bosnia*, short stories, 1937; *Tašlihan Dusk*, short stories, 1937; *The Orchard*, a novel, 1939; *On Soot and Grasses*, poems, 1940; *Behind the Curtain*, short stories, 1946; *Laws and Fires*, short stories, 1947; *Miškovići*, a novel, 1952; *The Second Shore*, a novel, 1953; *Brothers and Idols*, a novel, 1956; *Stjepan Obrdali's Love*, short stories, 1958.



NOVAK SIMIĆ

## The Knave of Diamonds

FROM THE NOVEL »BROTHERS AND IDOLS«

THE SOUND of a clock striking ten rang through the corridor, and at the same time the rubber works' siren hoarsely announced the start of the night shift.

Night, the time for sleep in the Shoe Town, the time when all sounds were extinguished, all streets deserted, when the lights in the offices went out, when the night watchmen began their rounds, and when the moon, stuck to the sky like a superfluous decoration, shone dejectedly, lost in the brilliant neon slogans and only the machines in the rubber works hummed contentedly. The time when Benedict Tkač got up from his desk, or interrupted his meeting or inspection

R00060320

of the departments, in order to continue the next morning on the stroke of six.

When he heard the clock strike and the siren blow, Tkač got up from his desk as usual and found himself, quite unintentionally, face to face with his own portrait. He looked at it attentively again, but now with even greater satisfaction than when he had come. He found himself supremely remarkable.

In all this wealth of self-admiration, however, something nagged at him relentlessly. There was always that muffled reminder. Lida was always there, sitting in the empty white-tiled kitchen, waiting silently. She had sat and waited like that for years, laying out cards, and when he came in the evening, she would look at him plaintively, reproachfully. He knew: it was a look of accusation and conscious disassociation. And it had begun long before they even came here, with the death of their little boy, when she learned that she could have no more children. She had not said a word to him, but she drew away. When they moved here, into this little house, that he had built at the same time as the first factories, she retired straight away into the kitchen, took the little room off it and never stirred from there ever again. She never went upstairs onto the first floor, into the bedroom, the living room, the guest rooms, the dining room. She was not interested. The kitchen, the little room and the hall on the ground floor were hers—all the rest was his. In any case he ate at the factory, and on Sundays the gardener's wife could cook for him. His bedtime drink of milk would be waiting for him on the bedside table. That is all she said then, and that is how it had continued to be. And now whenever he came home to sleep at ten o'clock, he knew that she was sitting in the kitchen waiting for someone, and that it was not for him (his presence, the realization that he existed probably only annoyed her) but for someone else—Vic, their long dead child. She never said so, but somehow he knew it for certain. And every evening when he is in town, when he goes home, he calls in to her kitchen (although he can go quite simply upstairs unnoticed and so avoid this uncomfortable and disturbing meeting) and says good-night, she returns his greeting, or simply says nothing, or sometimes says a few words. Usually, when he comes back from a journey she asks for playing cards. She always refuses any presents, but she will accept playing cards, only, that is, if he does not offer them first. He must have them ready, and if she says: »Have you brought my cards, Ben?« give them to her straight away, and if she does not ask for them, he must not mention them. Over the years it has become firmly established, as though by some unwritten law between them. And the remarkable, forceful Tkač complies and submits silently to his quiet, withdrawn, prematurely old wife. The uneasy feeling of guilt (aroused by no-one and nothing in the whole world but her) and silence. Both come now after a few months absence, immediately after the clock strikes ten and the siren sounds, and submit again to the familiar order. His house and home. All men think of them with warmth and pleasure, as they return from being away, and delight in the thought of them. Tkač shudders, however. He will call in to the kitchen again as though he had done so the night before, and the night before that, and so on ad infinitum (and suddenly his whole journey is wiped out), and she will perhaps look at him and say: »Your milk is upstairs.« Or »Oh, it's you Ben.«

And go on laying out her cards. Or she will say nothing and respond inaudibly to his »Good-night.« Why must he call in to greet her? And in all the rush, in his preoccupation with other things and people, he has forgotten the playing cards. And perhaps she will ask for them in her reproachful voice. What then? What will he say, and is there anything he can say? »You always did forget me, Ben.«—he cannot bear to hear that, he cannot endure it, but he will have to endure it. That: you forgot me. The hate and fear which he can sense, which he can perceive, with which—he knows for certain—everyone surrounds him: Jan and Cizek and Havelka, and from tonight Božena and even Jara as well (he does not deceive himself), and finally the whole of Shoe Town—this hate and fear only refresh him, harden him, they are as vital to him as air (he would suffocate without them), they are tokens of power and strength, a sign that he really is in control. But Lida is the one being who does not hate and fear him. She says nothing, she looks at him reproachfully and despises him. She dares do that! What does »dare« mean? She does not even think about it, she never has done. It simply is like that to her. She is outside life and the world, the kind of world that exists for him and everyone else. Since Vic's death, since all the doctors over there told her... she lives her own life of waiting and laying out cards and is utterly indifferent to all other events. So, then, what can he do? Put her in a mental home? Not even that. Nothing. He is quite helpless before her. Helpless before her helplessness, the weakness of her closed circle of sorrow, before her silence.

Suddenly (and for that reason) as he approaches the light in the kitchen window (he does not notice any lights other than that one in the ground floor of their house), his anger grows, together with his self-admiration, his satisfaction with his successes, his kingship of rubber and shoes, his delight at how he will ruin Jan and the others. In this light behind which Lida is sitting, it is all now somehow distant and alien.

»You're back, Ben. Have you brought my cards?«

»You're back, Ben. Your milk is upstairs.«

That is the sound of the engine stopping. He is in front of the house. The row of young fir trees and the glass globes. The light from the kitchen is unusually strong and glares reflected in the glass. The white gravel path to the garage gleams, and in the background is the gardener's cottage. Perhaps the gardener's mother-in-law is sitting with Lida. Saying nothing. She had taught her too. The dark, deep green of night and the garden. Tkač gets out of the car, and as soon as he shut the door the light in the kitchen vanished, it vanished from the street, the path, from the fir trees, the flower-bed, from the street lights, from the whole district. The Shoe Town was lost in the night. But another, melancholy, supernatural and indefinite light came from somewhere, quite beyond Tkač's understanding, and spread over everything, including himself. There was something brittle in that light, as in a frozen waterfall. Something indescribably forlorn and mournful.

It came from beyond, from somewhere in the vast distances unknown to him. From Lida's world, for she lives in the moon, she is lost in the distant spaces of the unreal. And at the same time his car

catches the sad, muffled breath of a harmonica from the gardener's cottage, a sound equally helplessly lost and unbearable in its mournful other-worldliness as this superfluous, strange and (for him here and now) fearful light. And he sees out of the corner of his eye two embracing shadows somewhere in the winding street.

All this exists despite his decree that people work, live and breathe according to the rigid instructions of his will, despite all his endeavours to give them and build for them a peaceful, well-organized life. The wave of anger wells up suddenly in Tkač. Disorder and confusion as soon as he is not here (and something creeps in, unbearably disagreeable when he is here as well, it needs only that momentary interruption, that brief connection somewhere in the mains for him to see it). He must investigate who is responsible for this darkness, and this moonlight, music and love at an unauthorized, prohibited hour — and punish them. As an example. And forbid them. Forbid the moonlight, abolish it. This unsightly, ridiculous moonlight, which only hinders you and drives you to trivial, noxious thoughts, pernicious, unworthy emotions. Forbid and abolish music and love in working hours (from Saturday to Saturday, that is). It all hampers and weakens you, jeopardizes your work and cripples you as a man. Public music, music for everyone, no individual harmonicas and violins in the night, in the moonlight, after ten o'clock — in the hours laid down for rest. And he will see to it in the morning, eradicate it as he has eradicated treachery, Jan and the others, as he will eradicate anything else that gets in his way. The morning of the decision to establish perfect, uninterrupted work. Tkač's definitive order.

This lasts a couple of minutes — a minute, two at the most. Why did it seem so long to him? All the lights were shining again, and everything had vanished. The frozen, imaginary waterfall and the sad other-worldliness and the feeling of helplessness and the unbearable, ghostly sound of the harmonica and the embracing couple. He parks the car and goes into his house. A dazzling, bright light glares from the kitchen. Lida is sitting inside.

That same feeling of a minute before, reinforced always by that realization he has been evading but which is now unattainable, forces itself on him and settles in him in a hard immovable lump: he can forbid everything, arrange everything, drive everything completely away — but here, in his own home, here, immediately beside him, welded inseparably to him, all that is forbidden and eradicated, exists and will continue to exist, and he can do nothing about it, absolutely nothing — here he is utterly helpless.

Lida is sitting and day-dreaming, wrapped in the stuff of her dreams, woven from threads of moonlight, bitter secret love and sorrow.

He cannot say anything to her, he dare not — for he is *guilty*.

An album of photographs from over there—beyond. Lida as a little girl with her parents. Her mother and father alone, dignified. Lida alone. In the class photograph, a tiny white dot. Lida at eighteen. At the christening fête of the youngest Kohout, when she met Ben. Here he was as her fiancé, with his dedication to her on the back of the picture. She had thought of throwing this one away, because it did not belong here. He was never part of the family. Still, she left it because he was the same in the wedding photograph and then she

would have had to cut him out of that one as well. And after all there was a difference between them: between Ben then and later. Lida at the hospital with Vic, Vic alone with a note of his weight, nine pounds — a splendid boy! How proud she was! Ben had not taken any notice, had not marvelled at her, he did not know how to be tender. What appreciation had he shown? She had seen fathers weep with happiness. He did not even take the baby in his arms. He was frightened. He made the excuse that he was clumsy. He looked at the child and went away. *She knows*, that is the beginning of everything. Vic in her arms. Vic when he first learned to walk. And the last picture: the three year old fairhaired little boy at the time when they bought him his own little bed.

How much had he slept in it? She listened to her worn-out, broken heart, its dull beating. She heard that twilight when the little boy began to suffocate, when he got out of bed and gasped for air, when he called her feebly in a broken, rasping little voice, and she laid him back in his bed and stood desperate and speechless over him, beside herself, waiting for Ben.

The attack passed, before he arrived, and he just shrugged his shoulders, when she told him what had happened.

He passed his hand over the child's damp forehead (Vic was sleeping, exhausted): »It's nothing, he hasn't got a temperature«, he said. »I'm tired, I've got important business decision to make early tomorrow.«

He lay down and went straight to sleep and she was left alone with her terror. She heard every sound, every voice in that night and heard them constantly ever since; the voices in the water pipes, the chimneys, the windows, the ventilators, the invisible creaking of the furniture, the sounds of the paint and walls, of sleep, full of black anxiety and uncertainty—until they were uneasily smothered by Vic's gasping (before then these ghostly sounds had formed an accompaniment to his quiet breathing), tossing and turning and — like a muffled thunder-clap — the sound of that fatal rattle in his throat.

And at the same time a sudden, metallic sound was wrenched from the silence, the sound of her heart breaking.

She did not hear herself, only her lips moved noiselessly as when a huge continuous ball of thread is unwound, slipping into a shriek, which left Terror with her forever.

»He's choking again, Ben!«

He stared sleepily at her, and she felt acutely that his eyes were hard as metal.

»For God's sake, why did you wake me up?«

The night was waning, she knew, and they were separated from morning by a narrow thread; she trembled at these empty, hard eyes, she trembled at the child's gasping.

»Do you hear, Victor's suffocating, pull yourself together!«

A whole eternity passed before he got up and dragged himself to the little bed (how often the alarm-clock ticked and how mercilessly it ticked, until her ear-drums nearly burst!). He felt the child's brow with his hand again, then looked at her so heartlessly that she felt as though she had been hit.

»He probbaly coughed a little in his sleep, it's all your imagination and you seem determined not to let me sleep. If you think there's something wrong, take him to the doctor in the morning.«

Pulling the covers round him he added: »Don't wake me again for nothing.« Glancing at the alarm clock ticking on the bedside table: »Just one more hour.«

She was left alone with the dawn, Victor's uneasy sleep and her own heavy, black anxiety.

She listened to his breathing, she listened to the clock, to the building waking up, she felt each door opening, the lift humming, the rumble in the street, the first people walking past, the first cars, the milkman's wan, and she waited, tense and fearful. Then came the shrill ringing of the alarm clock, Ben's rising and his virtually silent departure, when she made him tea and endured his good-bye kiss without speaking.

She watched motionless over the child and waited. The clock showed seven o'clock, eight. Vic opened his eyes: »It hurts mummy«, he said. He was red in the face, soaked through, his eyes were clouded, she knew that he was burning all over. She called the doctor, it was still early. She telephoned the clinic: »Only if it's an emergency,« replied the voice over the wire. Eventually a busy middle-aged man appeared, bustled urgently in, examined Vic, took a smear, wrote a prescription. At about midday an ambulance and a trim young nurse swept up to the building.

»Diphtheria,« she said, »we must take him to hospital.«

That was how they took Vic from her. In a long white shirt, exhausted, his fair curls clinging to his hot head. Vic, as he is here, in the album, in the last photograph. She saw him again six days later, — on the bier.

There is just one thing from that time that she does not remember, and cannot remember: Ben's stupified face, and the fact that she wanted to go away, anywhere, to disappear, only to be as far as possible from that big town on the northern lake. She knows that since then, since that morning when they took Vic from her, Ben cannot look her in the eyes and that he feels he is to blame. For that bier, for that little mound of earth. Where did she go afterwards, how long was she in that sanatorium? Who could say. She cannot remember at all. The ambulance took all that away with Vic and it is all buried under that mound. And now she knows the secret with absolute certainty (the secret that no-one else know or can ever know), that that mound was a fraud.

A lie like everything else around her, everything connected with Ben. A lie like her flight from the starless sky into the silence of the little town with the avenue of chestnuts and limes, with their dense scent, with the belts of rye-fields and fruit-trees — everything that was promised her, and the way she had once lived, everything that had waited innocently for her in the blue, quivering air, in the copper of those, bright, sunny days, offering a respite from her sadness, a veil for her great sorrow. Not even the long shadows of the poplars which stretched out from the doors of the sanatorium, followed her, grew and

always vanished, those shadows which were damp as a poultice, not even they could veil the lie.

A lie, like the lie when he said (assuming that she had recovered a little and that he could console her — what a pathetic attempt): »We shall have more children.«

Return to their old country and have children! As if anyone could bring back or replace Vic! A lie and a pretext, as though she was not prepared to go to the end of the world — nothing made any difference to her. He did not know how long she had borne Vic and how much she had suffered. He had not measured that silent torture of hers, when she had lain for hours and days, clutching the pillows and tearing the bedclothes in her torment, while the others screamed out loud. On the third day they had taken her into a large room and shaken their heads doubtfully in their white masks. Then they had put a mask on her too.

Then, when he told her they could still have children, she went round all the doctors and they all replied vaguely, deceitfully consolingly: »perhaps«.

The day before they returned to their own country she went to a very well-known and very expensive professor.

»I want to know the truth, and I'm prepared to pay double for it.« she said, because she knew that the truth is always very expensive.

»Unfortunately, you cannot bear any more children.«

That was Ben's last lie, his last deceit in her life. But nonetheless a support to help her persevere in her long wait for that secret discovery, for which her poor broken heart was dying — that sweet, infinitely precious discovery, which was to be a reward for all her suffering, for all her unshed tears. For even her tears had dried up.

Then, when the green of the meadows completely disappeared, with the fields of hops and rye, when the limes and chestnuts disappeared, and the Shoe Town sprang up with its orderly square districts, straight neat roads, asphalt, concrete and glass—the Shoe Town with its uniform green hedges, criss-crossing telephone wires, radion acrials, advertisements and slogans, glaring light-bulbs and half-circle of huge factories surrounding it symmetrically. The Shoe Town with the thunder of machinery, whirring of conveyor belts, shrieking of sirens, rubber-works chimneys as far as the eye could see, topped always with a brown cloud of smoke, from which on clear nights the moon would come down, mild and tranquil. She must have been sitting interminably long in the white-tiled kitchen, solitary and silent — when that ragged old woman with the worn pack of cards appeared. She sat down without a greeting and without being invited, it was dusk and a curtain of rain was falling, and she said (how ever did she come to be there in that sober town of labour and machines...):

»Just cut the pack, I know your sorrow. And don't tell a soul what I am going to tell you.«

Was that how it was?

Lida went quietly and obediently up to the old woman, for she sensed that that infinitely long awaited moment of discovery had come; she was trembling all over, shaking like a fragile leaf.

»You've come to tell me. You know what I'm waiting for.«

»I know. Your heart is dead. I have glad news for you. Be joyful.«

»Is there anything that can bring me joy?«

The old woman had shuffled the cards by now, and was laying them one beside the other with swift movements. The nine of Hearts, the Queen of Clubs, the melancholy old King of Spades, the insignificant eight of Clubs, the dignified Ace of Hearts, the pretty Queen of Diamonds, two tens one beside the other—Clubs and Spades—then three joyful cards: the eight and nine of Diamonds and the Queen of Hearts, immediately beside them the stiff frowning King of Clubs, and unexpectedly -- the Knave of Diamonds with his tousled curls.

Did she hear the sing-song professional voice of the old woman at all?

»Everything is big and strong, the King of Clubs, your husband, is too powerful, but you are sad because of him, the Knave of Diamonds, your son, here!« The old woman picked up the transfigured, shining face and went on: »You are waiting for him, all the time, ceaselessly but the barriers have fallen and he will come at any minute.«

She knew that they had been deceiving her all along. Ben had lied, that brisk, busy doctor had lied that morning, the trim little nurse had lied when she took Vic away, (and the ambulance had lied), the priest had lied at the funeral, the grave-diggers had lied, her sadness had lied. Everything had lied, was still lying tirelessly and would continue to do so — only her broken mother's heart does not lie, it cannot be deceived. It hurries to take the Knave of Diamonds, who is coming out of the cards, into its arms — to hold Vic, sweet little fair-haired Vic, the dear Knave of Diamonds.

And he is the same as in the last photograph, the same as when they took him away, a little angel in a long white shirt, the same, although he has grown and is now seventeen: for he is her big son at the same time as her little three year old boy. Does a child ever grow up in its mother's eyes?

#### What the Knave of Diamonds said when he came out of the cards

»Mother, that man, that unemployed worker with the lense-less glasses took me away in exchange for his son, what he gained from this — I doubt whether anyone knows, one can only guess. In the Infectious Diseases ward, in the bed next to mine (the beds were arranged in pairs) I found another little boy just like me, the same age, who looked just like me, so that at first glance we might have been taken for twins. You know very well that everyone in the infectious wards was rigourously cut off from everything and that no-one except the hospital staff who worked there could come near us. I sensed (as far as I could, so young) that you used to walk round that guarded section, that you made constant enquiries, I could imagine you trembling with anxiety, and finally you were told nothing. For from there one either went to the mortuary (and there was a special one you will remember for those who had died of infectious diseases) or to the convalescent wing. On the sixth day, before dawn, the other boy next to me died. No-one heard, no-one knew when he died — except me. I bent over his bed and stared into his fixed eyes, his lolling face, slipped through the woven screen and went to him. He was cold, and I wanted to hug him. I put



my arms round him and tried to warm him with my breath. And fell asleep like that.

When I woke up, I was lying in his bed, and mine was empty. I had become him and he me.

A few days later that man, that unemployed worker with the lenseless glasses came into the convalescents' ward. They gave me to him. I cried and mumbled that he was not my father. I asked for my mother. I called you in vain, mother, wrenched myself away and beat my little fists in vain. The people in white interpreted my behaviour as fear, because I had been found with that dead little boy, who was me.

That man, that unemployed worker with the lenseless glasses immediately recognized that I was not the one. I felt the shadow on his face. It was dark and came from his heart. I know that that feeling was violet, for now whenever I see violet in a rainbow I remember that moment. What the dark violet shadow in that man's heart said I understood much later and put into words. This is not my son, said the darkness in the man's heart, that other child, the one they buried and mourned, he is my son. They buried him as the son of the factory owner (father had a workshop then already, almost a little factory and he was thinking of moving here, back to his own country, wasn't he?) with flowers and tears, they buried him in a beautiful little grave and they will put up a beautiful monument with carved angels, as small factory owners do for their children. They will mourn him and remember him always, they will shed tears, or at least the mother will. And my son, the darkness in the man's heart goes on, my son has no mother, he is a poor man's son and he would be buried in a common grave, at the hospital's expense, and very soon no trace of him would remain. His only resting place is in my memory. And where might life not take me. So let the will of fate be done, since it has decided so mercifully.

From the hospital that man, that unemployed worker with the lenseless glasses, took me to the station. We travelled West for eighteen hours. In that big coastal town he took me to an orphanage. I think he sold me. Orphanages were pleased to take attractive little male children, illegitimate children from families which already had too many children who had no-one care for them. In this orphanage the parents had first to renounce their children (I learnt this afterwards) and they were given new names. Later, when someone adopted them they were given the name of whoever took them. Everything is business there, you know, mother, even children. I did not stay long at the orphanage, they soon gave me to the proprietor of a small, well-established restaurant patronized by middle-class people. They were a modest, devout couple, with no children of their own and they took me as soon as I was brought to them, I had hardly spent a year in the orphanage. They had called me just Vic at the orphanage, and these people gave me their surname and everyone thought I was their son. But I vaguely remembered that a young dark-haired woman had once played with me, taken me for walks and bought me a big rubber ball (you remember, mother) I remembered her laugh as well, distantly, and her embrace and the warmth only a mother can give, I had been with them for a long time and had started elementary school when business began to go badly. I helped in the restaurant and became

their little bar boy and cook's lad. But then everything went from bad to worse. My foster-father sold the restaurant (or it was sold to pay off debts, I do not know which) and we began to go east. We went from town to town. He tried to find work and we lived miserably. On this journey with its temporary stops of a month or two, four at the most, my foster-father died. Only my foster-mother and I were left. We went on and reached a town on a northern lake, I got work as a porter at Seifert's hotel, and went to night school. Why something there drove me to look for my real parents, why I kept remembering vaguely, as in a dream, the house where we had lived, why I constantly had that hospital on my mind, and why I kept seeing myself climbing onto that bed to warm that other stiff little boy — no-one could know or explain. I roamed in my spare time as though in a trance, fitfully and aimlessly, and searched. I roamed endlessly. And when one day I took a message for a guest to the seventh floor of that building and when that woman asked me in and offered me a cake, my whole soul told me that this was the flat from which I was taken that morning. I enquired who had lived there before and it came to me, everything became completely clear. I have come back to you, mother, and no-one must know it. I shall come to see you whenever I can, for distance does not exist for us.»

#### What Lida said to the Knave

»I always thought that it was not you. Even death nowadays is forced into regulations, paralysed in laws. Infection and glass, do not come too close, you cannot kiss the dear, cold forehead, in case of infecting relatives. Those indifferent relatives, who do not concern me. Everything was hazy despair. I never believed in that death. That is why I stayed alive after all those long, eternal months in the sanatorium, that is why I wanted to run away from that false mound. But why am I telling you all this: you know it perfectly well. At that time your father was building himself up, submerging himself in the illusion of his greatness. He wanted to be great and realize his dream. And that was really the cause of everything that happened. At the very beginning, right from our wedding, he became aware of himself, and later that awareness was transformed into the firm belief that I was somehow outside reality. It never occurred to him (poor thing) that it was only his reality he meant, and that his illusion had no bounds. While I was still a girl I had read all those thick books about castles, about abandoned mothers, neglected children, about them being exchanged at birth, and later about good and evil — those powerful, noble books in which good always triumphed. What fabrication! I still have those books and still read them. My reality is more just, and it has triumphed. In his reality you were an obstacle on his path to greatness. He had time and love only for himself and nothing else, you reminded him that he had to share them, and then (to his way of thinking) his life would have been a failure. And when they sent for both fathers (in this world of ours when children and death are involved it is always the fathers who are sent for) he denied you, he said that you were not his son, that the dead boy was you. And so he rid himself of the

only obstacle on his path, for I had never been an obstacle to him. Do you see? But I went on waiting in profound secret hope, a well-hidden hope, shut up in me—and I did not wait in vain.«

Uncertain, horrified, the old woman listened to these thoughts, these feelings which were becoming the superfluous, breathless words, cries and moans of wild happiness. What huge flood-gates had she opened, what vast, uncontrollable torrent had she let loose? She trembled at her foolish, unintentional action. She must get out as fast as she could, out of this lonely house at the edge of the town, out of this big solitary kitchen, out of the whirlpool which was carrying this woman in front of her. She wanted to pick up her cards.

»Leave them, don't touch them, don't you dare! You can have what you like for them,—but they are mine. You won't take him away, no-one can take him from me now. Isn't that right, Vic?«

Who was she talking to? How many deadly knives were there in those eyes focused on her in the fire of blazing sudden hatred. The old woman seemed to foresee the flying flash of the scissors on top of the sewing basket, in the corner, on the other side of the table. She knew that if she picked up any one of the cards she would find the scissors rammed into her body. The old woman's yellow fingers closed, hovering over the cards as over burnt out candles, and disappeared as though they had been wiped out. The old woman disappeared as well, leaving the cards, leaving Lida, leaving the kitchen. The electric light which Lida switched on a moment later, cut after her into the dense curtain of rain.

Which of the two of us is living in the shadows? In her silent, muffled, wordless quarrel with Tkač, that quarrel which had gone on perpetually between them ever since that morning when they took Vic away, she had sensed, despite her pretence, that she was not the one living in the shadows. Now, at the turning point of that evening when the old woman left the cards (like some kind of secret missive), that suspicion became a firm, joyful belief. For a long time already, always, she had felt that the Shoe Town was in fact a Shadow Town. Everyone who lived there was a mere shadow, for they did not live their own lives, but a life decreed for them by Ben's illusion of power. Now, at the turning point of that evening, it was all quite clear.

On certain evenings, at dusk, the Knave of Diamonds comes out of the cards and she stops the course of time, turns it back to the days when on Saturday nights, in the Klačterka beer-hall, she used to dance polkas, quiet wistful waltzes from her own country, and the darkness of her hair would flutter through the room. From the time when the Knave of Diamonds comes out of the cards and stays with her, until she hears Tkač coming into the house after ten o'clock, and opening the kitchen door—all that was near her in those twilight hours was no longer the Shoe Town, but those green avenues with the flowering acacia, which were promised her, the smart square in which the clock on the church tower chimed out the hours, where a brass band played wistful tunes in the little park on Sunday mornings—this was the Salem of her childhood. The Salem of her girlhood, Salem which did not exist. She remembered the old folk-songs of her youth:

»The big, bright sun smiled down on me  
Its eyes were like blue flax...«

She saw the fields of blue flowering flax, sat under the branches of trees weighed down with fruit, rowed on the still river, overhung with willows. All those dreams in the blue sky, when she returned on Sunday nights from their week-end cottage. Now she was rowing again on a river full of blue flax, which scattered into stars. He was coming to meet her, flaxen-haired, blue-eyed, he beside whom she would grow into a little white-haired old lady and go for evening walks, leaning on his arm. How bright and white they are!

She no longer waits for Ben, who will return from his fever of work and business intrigue, that tired, gloomy Ben who rushes off chasing his illusion in the morning only to return late, and so on and on eternally. She is no longer pushing Vic's pram on Sunday mornings, but beside her strides that other Ben, a Ben who does not live among shadows and with shadows.

»...My mother bakes  
The finest cakes  
While father grates  
Walnuts and dates  
Come and eat  
Come and eat  
If you're last you'll miss the treat!«

That was the Sunday cake, when he would wait at the street corner for it to be mixed, and for her and her mother to put it in the oven so that she could go to their rendez-vous. He is waiting again, and she is singing that ancient, distant song about the Sunday cake. She used to sing it to Vic as well, they would eat it, rest a little and go out for a walk, the three of them. No, it is not that Ben who would never go out for a walk with them, but a Ben who carries the tired sleepy Vic home in his arms. A Ben who plays wit him, worries and trembles for him, as she does.

This is the Sunday cake and Ben as he had become in her heart. A Ben who was not guilty. In the twilight the Knave of Diamonds comes out of the cards and she continues her real life, a life of happiness and dreams, a life of maternal love.

Vic is no longer a porter, he has finished secondary school and has been accepted at University in a town like the Salem of her childhood and girlhood, like the Salem that did not exist, in a town with a church steeple on a narrow little square, with avenues of chestnuts, a green town with a brass band playing wistfully on Sunday mornings. Vic must study hard, he is diligent and quick, he is not like his uncle who had to learn a trade because of his low marks at school. He will fulfill the hopes and desires of his grandfather and grandmother, the dreams of a sound artisan family, that someone in the family should study. If only his grandfather and grandmother were alive, how proud they would be of him, how they would delight in him! She would

ch  
ung  
ned  
ving  
was  
she  
lks,  
  
of  
off  
on  
day  
not

entrust her secret and her infinite happiness to them. As it was she is shut up in it, quite alone. The only cloud is that she cannot confide in anyone, and there is no-one anyway in whom she could confide. That was the condition. The gardener's mother-in-law! No, she would not understand, could not, for she lives a shadow life, like all the rest of them. Her job is to clean the house and prepare milk in the evening, and tea at dawn for Ben, the Lord of the Shadows. What had she to do with her? And Lida continues:

Vic cannot come so often to see her any more, as he is preparing for exams and he only comes for the winter and summer holidays. That is why he writes her long letters through the Ten of Hearts, describes his friends, pastimes, jokes from his lectures, his dreams and hopes. She answers him at similar length, even more lengthily and frequently (she writes nearly every day). He is going to be a doctor and has nearly finished his studies. Yes, he will go off into some country town to help people. He will live in a modest, clean house with white curtains and an apple tree. And she will come to visit him, she will not live with him, all the time. He has only to want to see his mother, and then — and Lida is quite faint with happiness— he must marry and have children. Two sons and a daughter, that is what she expects of him. Their Granny will come with presents to rock the grandchildren in their cradles and play with them, take them for walks, spell out their first words, when they start school. And she hears the happy cries of their little voices: »Granny's come, our dear Granny's come!«

Yesterday she had an express letter (the Nine of Spades turned up beside the Ten of Hearts) saying that he will come this evening, he wants to talk to her about something he cannot commit to paper. She can guess what it is, she is excited, she walks restlessly round the kitchen and waits for him to arrive, to come out of the cards at last.

Twilight passed and the night had already fallen. The gardener's mother-in-law slipped into the kitchen and turned on the light.

»I don't know whether I told you that the Master was back.« She said.

»This afternoon,« replied Lida sullenly. »Get his milk ready and take it upstairs. Don't keep bothering me all the time, I want to be quite alone.«

When the gardener's mother-in-law had prepared the milk and gone, Vic came out of the cards.

»The train was horribly delayed, mother, a goods train got de-railed and was blocking the line.«

Unlike Ben, he never travelled by 'plane: he hated them, and all machinery, just like her— well, he was her child.

»I was getting worried,« she said simply.

He walked about for a long time without saying anything, getting ready to confide in her what she sensed, and was waiting for in sweet anxiety.

If only it is the electrician's daughter! She would so like it to be her. He had always talked about her, in the spring they had been at a dance together. She is a modest girl, like me when I was young. That is how I imagine her from his descriptions. I would like her to be the mother of my grandchildren.

But perhaps it is someone else, she is worried.

The moon (silent, precious) closes the eyes of the kitchen lights, closes the eyes of all the lights in the town, for it knows that sons entrust their mothers with such confidences only in its light, and also because that is how it is in the good, thick novels of Lida's girlhood.

Vic comes right up to her first, looks devotedly into her eyes in the tender serenity of the moonlight.

»Mother, I'm in love with the electrician's daughter.«

Yes, Lida was right.

»I have come for your blessing.«

She cried out wildly in the exaltation of a dream come true:

»Oh, Vic, how happy I am, how infinitely happy I am!«

Tkač's car stopped in front of the house and he could be heard putting it in the garage. The eyes of the lights opened, the electric bulbs in the kitchen glared and Ben's steps could be heard approaching. He will come in here, to her, at any minute. She must hide her son, her son who wants to get married and who is already twenty three and at the same time only three at that morning when they took him away—that big son of hers who had always remained her little boy as well.

And Lida bends over the cards and says to the Knave of Diamonds:

»You must go, Vic, your father has come and he'll be in here at any moment.«

The Knave of Diamonds becomes an ordinary knave of diamonds in the cards.

Tkač has come into the kitchen meanwhile and hears Lida talking to the cards. »Poor creature, she's quite crazy«, he thinks, but that thought does not bring the desired relief to his anxiety, his discomfort, his feeling of guilt towards her. The thought only ramifies: »Why does she blame me for Victor's death. I did all I could.« And at the same time that old familiar feeling that he always evaded and that was always aroused here, when he was with Lida and when he came to rest, awoke now and made him powerless. »You were not the father she had imagined, a tender, devoted father—that's the point.«

»I'm back, Lida,« says Tkač. »Will you say 'hello'?«

»Ah, Ben, it's you, have you brought any cards for your wife?«

»You'll get them tomorrow.«

»In other words you've forgotten to buy them. You've bought factories, Ben, and those machines that give me no peace and those loathsome loudspeakers, isn't it so?«

»I like work, Lidusha, you know that perfectly well.«

»Or rather, power, Ben. You've sacrificed everything to it. Didn't I forbid you to call me Lidusha; you could do that only before it happened. Don't try to approach me ever again—I have my reasons for wanting to talk a little more tonight. But it's enough.«

She glances at him with sly contempt:

»Tell me, how many factories have you got, Ben, how many new ones have you bought, how many more are you going to build? What will you do with all those factories? Ben, this town, what do you get out of it? Why are you looking at me so blankly? Don't say anything, I don't want to hear you. Your milk is upstairs.«

*Translated by Celia Williams*