

VANEK: (*Gasps, jumps up, wildly staring at Stanek.*)

STANEK: (*Stares back in triumph.*) Right? (*Short tense pause.*)

VANEK: (*Almost inaudible.*) What??

(*The telephone rings.*)

VANEK: (*Broken, sinks back in his chair.*)

STANEK: (*Crosses to the phone, lifts the receiver.*) Hello—Yes—What?—Good Lord! You mean—Wait a minute—I see—I see—Where are you?—Yes, yes, of course—Absolutely!—Good!—You bet!—Sure—I'll be here waiting for you! Bye bye. (*Replaces the receiver. Pauses. Returns to his chair. To Vaneck.*) You can go and burn it downstairs in the furnace!

VANEK: What?

STANEK: He's just walked into the canteen! To see Annie.

VANEK: Who did?

STANEK: Javurek! Who else?

VANEK: (*Jumps up.*) Javurek? You mean he was released? But that's wonderful! So your private intervention did work, after all! Just as well we didn't send off the protest a few days earlier! I'm sure they would've got their backs up and kept him inside!

STANEK: (*Pause. Stares at Vaneck. Then suddenly cordial.*) My dear fellow, you mustn't fret! There's always the risk that you can do more harm than good by your activities! Right? Heavens, if you should worry about this sort of thing, you'd never be able to do anything at all! Come, let me get you those saplings—

END

Fire in the Basement

a fiery farce

Pavel Kohout

translated by Peter Stenberg and Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz

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Klaus Herzog



FIRE IN THE BASEMENT
 [Stadttheater Aachen, Aachen, West Germany]
 Directed by Volker K. Bauer

Dark. A sudden scream, which gradually dies away. Quiet. A light cuts across the foot board of a large double bed. A pair of naked legs, obviously female, are hanging over it. Far off in the distance the whine of a fire truck siren.

HIS VOICE: Grrr!

HER VOICE: Miow!

HIS VOICE: Grrr, grrr!

HER VOICE: Miiiiow!

HIS VOICE: Grr, grr, grrr!

HER VOICE: *(Moaning.)* Miiowiiiooowwwwooo!

(The legs jerk up, give in, gradually sink and disappear behind the bedboard. The fire truck siren is much closer. A young man shows up behind the bedboard. Exhausted he leans his chest against the board and stretches out his hand. Light illuminates the whole set: a tiny basement room, a door on each side, in the back a window onto the street or courtyard, which lets in a little daylight. The room is very sparsely furnished; the walls are decorated with posters, and aside from the bed the only piece of furniture is a table. On it a glass and some empty soda and beer bottles as well as a pile of banana and orange peels. A bridal gown and a wedding suit are hanging on a clothes stand behind the bed. The young man rummages around in the banana peels until he finds a whole banana. He begins to peel it.)

HER VOICE: Mrrrrra!

(The young man stares at a fixed point; he is completely concerned with something behind the bedboard. But he continues to peel his banana.)

ENGL: Quaquaqua . . .

HER VOICE: Mrrra, mrrraaa!

ENGL: Quaquaquac . . .

HER VOICE: Mmmrrrrraaaaaa!

ENGL: Yauyauyauyauhooooo!

(He yells and disappears behind the bedboard. The siren wails again, this time very close by. The bed seems to be dancing to the craziest sounds, which come from it. This time two pairs of naked legs, remarkably intertwined, appear for a moment behind the bedboard just as the doorbell rings sharply. The legs freeze. The bell rings again. The legs plummet. His head and her head take their place above the bedboard. Both young people are about twenty. In contrast to the young man, who seems to be a small innocuous guy, she seems like a pretty big, tough girl; she has the banana in her mouth. The bell keeps ringing, though not continuously.)

ENGL: Who's that?

JARTCHI: *(Throws the rest of the banana on the table.)* It must be your dopey friends.

ENGL: Ah come on. Where did you get that idea? Why them?

JARTCHI: You said they'd probably try something or other.

ENGL: All I said was that we should have invited them.

JARTCHI: Especially the chorus girls, right?

(Pounding on the door.)

JARTCHI: Nice friends you've got there!

ENGL: How do you know who's there?

JARTCHI: You don't know? So go open up. You can invite them right into bed.

ENGL: Why should I invite them into bed?

JARTCHI: You did say, we should have invited them, didn't you?

ENGL: Yeah, but I didn't say anything about bed.

JARTCHI: But why not? I'm sure they'd enjoy a return visit to such a familiar spot.

ENGL: Okay, okay, I'll open up, and then you can see for yourself about these fabled girls from the theatre, who I never had anything to do with.

JARTCHI: So it is them. It didn't take them long to find you, did it?

ENGL: How am I supposed to know if it's them!

JARTCHI: I thought you said you were going to open up.

ENGL: I only said that because you said . . . Jartchi, how can you be jealous already?

JARTCHI: Me? Jealous? Are you kidding? *(Disappears behind the bedboard.)*

ENGL: *(Listening.)* They're gone . . . Jartchi. Why would I want anybody else

when I've got you?! You know? Grrrrr . . . ! Well? Grrrrrr . . . ! What about it?

JARTCHI: Grouuuuu!

(She drags him behind the bedboard. Her head and shoulders appear, this time from behind. Again meaningless noises, and the bed begins to shake. At this moment a metal pole sinks down through the basement window, and a fireman in full regalia comes sliding down. A powerful searchlight is attached to his helmet.)

JARTCHI: *(Terrified.)* Help!

(At the same time she pulls the covers out from under Engl, so abruptly that he flies on the floor. She throws the covers over her head and disappears behind the bedboard. Engl tries to cover up as quickly as possible and also hides behind the bedboard. The fireman runs around him to the door, and rattles the doorknob.)

VODICKA: Keep it calm! Don't panic! *(Bends over the lock and yells in the direction of the basement window.)* Hurnik!

HURNIK: I'm listening.

(Every time a fireman in the room speaks with one outside, he flips on the microphone, which is attached to the strap of his helmet at his throat. The voice is projected through a loudspeaker built into his helmet.)

HURNIK: *(Above.)* Yeah!

VODICKA: The door splitter!

HURNIK: Roger. Will do!

VODICKA: *(Turning to Engl.)* Is there a child in there?

ENGL: *(Speechless, shakes his head.)*

VODICKA: Brothers or sisters?

ENGL: *(Shakes his head.)*

VODICKA: Any old folks?

ENGL: *(Shakes his head.)*

(A gigantic fireman comes sliding down the pole. He is carrying a very large and very savage-looking axe.)

VODICKA: Hurry up, Hurnik!

HURNIK: Will do! *(Runs to the door.)*

VODICKA: Relatives or friends?

ENGL: *(Shakes his head.)*

VODICKA: Subletters? Anybody else? Let's go, man!

ENGL: *(Finally manages to blurt out something.)* No . . .

(While Hurnik fumbles around with the lock, another fireman comes sliding down the pole. His regalia is slightly less impressive than Vodicka's, and he is the only one who isn't wearing gloves. Instead he is holding between his teeth a roll of documents tied together with a string.)

VODICKA: *(Immediately starts reporting to him.)* Imperiled persons—two!

TVRZNIK: Roger. Notice taken. Janik!

JANIK: *(From above.)* I'm listening.

TVRZNIK: To UPOR! Imperiled persons—two!

JANIK: Roger. Will be reported.

(Hurnik smashes the axe into the door.)

ENGL: What are you doing?

VODICKA: Don't worry! We got here just in time.

TVRZNIK: *(Pushes aside the pile of banana and orange peels on the table, unrolls his documents and straightens them out. They consist of a series of forms attached to a clipboard.)* Do you have a dog in there?

ENGL: What? No.

TVRZNIK: A cat?

(Hurnik begins a rhythmical smashing of the door.)

ENGL: Wait a minute! *(Jumps up, but ducks back behind the bedboard in the nick of time.)*

TVRZNIK: A cat?

ENGL: The key is in the lock!

VODICKA: Well, why didn't you say so in the first place? *(Unlocks the door, we see a staircase, which leads from the basement to the upstairs.)* There's no fire here! *(Locks it again, and followed by Hurnik, races to the other door.)*

TVRZNIK: A cat??

ENGL: What?

TVRZNIK: Do you have a cat in there??

ENGL: No, for God's sake!

VODICKA: *(Examining the lock.)* Janik!

JANIK: *(From above.)* I'm listening.

VODICKA: Lock explosives!

JANIK: Right away!

TVRZNIK: Canary?

ENGL: No.

TVRZNIK: Goldfish?

ENGL: No. Listen here, what the hell is . . .

(A ladder is dropped down through the basement window. As Hurnik climbs up it, a young fireman with another savage-looking axe comes sliding down the pole. He and Hurnik have simple uniforms with a differing number of wires and helmets with searchlights.)

VODICKA: Let's go, Janik!

JANIK: All set.

TVRZNIK: Other animals?

(Janik smashes the second door with his axe.)

ENGL: But that one's not even locked!

VODICKA: Well, why didn't you say so right off? *(Opens the door a hair, slams it immediately, and blows on his fingers, although he is wearing gloves.)* Oh boy!

TVRZNIK: Other animals?

VODICKA: Hurnik!

HURNIK: *(From above.)* I'm listening.

VODICKA: The asbestos stuff!

HURNIK: Will do!

ENGL: *(Finally getting control of himself.)* Jesus Christ, Jartchi! There's a fire in here! *(Shakes her behind the bedboard.)* Please help me out with her!

TVRZNIK: First things first. Other animals?

ENGL: No we're alone . . . Jartchi!

VODICKA: *(Holds a thermometer up to the door, yells at the window.)* Hurnik!

HURNIK: I'm listening.

VODICKA: Put on the Fahrenheit defense system! With boots!

HURNIK: Will do.

TVRZNIK: *(Has replaced the old form with a new one.)* Do you have any originals in here?

ENGL: What kind of . . .

TVRZNIK: a) paintings b) sculptures c) others?

ENGL: No, no we don't . . .

TVRZNIK: Objets d'art?

ENGL: No . . . Jartchi. I beg you to . . .

(Janik climbs up the ladder as Hurnik slides down the pole. He is wearing an asbestos suit over his head and body, an eyeshield and asbestos boots. Various objects are dangling from his armor—things like asbestos pouches, etc.)

TVRZNIK: Antiques?

ENGL: No.

TVRZNIK: Persian rugs or gobelins.

ENGL: Where would we get them? Can you hear me, Jartchi?
 VODICKA: Do you use gas in there?
 ENGL: Yes, I mean, no, not gas, we have . . .
 TVRZNIK: Manuscripts or inventions?
 ENGL: No.
 VODICKA: Kerosene oven?
 ENGL: No, but . . .
 TVRZNIK: Family jewels?
 ENGL: No.
 VODICKA: Propane-butane?
 ENGL: No, I mean, yes! We have a propane-butane!
 VODICKA: (*Whistling in surprise.*) Stove?
 ENGL: And an oven . . .
 VODICKA: Janik!
 JANIK: (*From above.*) I'm listening.
 VODICKA: Jock strap.
 JANIK: Will do.
 TVRZNIK: Gold or silver?
 ENGL: No, well—silverware.
 TVRZNIK: Where?
 ENGL: In the kitchen cabinet.
 VODICKA: (*Below the basement window. Takes the jock strap and puts it on Hurnik.*)
 Yell, Hurnik!
 HURNIK: (*Nods.*)
 TVRZNIK: Value?
 ENGL: Jartchi inherited it . . . Jartchi!
 VODICKA: Bombs?
 ENGL: What do you mean bombs?
 VODICKA: The propane-butane! Gas bottles!
 ENGL: Yes, Two! Jesus Christ . . .
 VODICKA: (*Bellowing.*) Janik!
 JANIK: (*From above.*) I'm listening.
 VODICKA: The armor shield too.
 JANIK: (*Whistles in disbelief.*) Right away.
 TVRZNIK: Savings books?
 ENGL: The bombs could go up any minute, couldn't they?
 TVRZNIK: Savings books?
 ENGL: (*Shaking the bedcovers.*) Jartchi, stop the baloney! We've got to get out of here!—She's out like a light . . .
 VODICKA: Listen, be glad. Somebody will turn her back on soon enough. Is it too tight, Hurnik?
 HURNIK: (*Shakes his head.*)

(*Janik comes sliding down the pole and gives Hurnik something which looks like a*

medieval shield.)

VODICKA: Ready, Hurnik?
 HURNIK: (*Gives the thumbs-up sign.*)
 TVRZNIK: Are there any savings books in there?
 ENGL: No, there aren't.
 VODICKA: Janik, the timing device! (*Janik takes a large alarm clock with a horn from his belt and hangs it on a hook next to the door.*) Timing device ready for action.
 ENGL: Can't you at least help me to carry her out!
 TVRZNIK: First things first. Other valuable items?
 VODICKA: Set it at thirty.
 JANIK: Set at thirty.
 VODICKA: Hurnik, if the butane goes off, get out fast!
 HURNIK: (*Nods.*)
 TVRZNIK: Other valuable items?
 ENGL: No, no . . .
 VODICKA: Ready! three,—two—
 JARTCHI: (*Bolts up behind the bedborad, and pokes her head out from under the bedcovers.*) What do you mean, no? All the money we have is in there!
 VODICKA: (*Stops counting.*)
 TVRZNIK: How much?
 JARTCHI: More than five thousand! (*To Engl.*) I can't even afford to faint around here! You won't take care of anything!
 TVRZNIK: Where?
 JARTCHI: In the clothes closet! There's a kind of handbag with a chain on it. Please, try and get it!
 VODICKA: Did you hear that, Hurnik. Try to fight your way through to the handbag!
 HURNIK: (*Nods and gives the thumbs-up sign.*)
 VODICKA: Ready! Three-two-one-now!

(*Janik presses the alarm, the horn sounds. Vodicka opens the door slightly, and with Janik's help, pushes Hurnik in, and slams the door behind him. Janik climbs back up the ladder.*)

JARTCHI: I told you to put the money in the bank! Didn't I say that?
 ENGL: Yeah sure, but how the hell was I supposed to know that . . .
 JARTCHI: What are you, a man or a mouse? What if it all goes up in smoke?
 TVRZNIK: (*Placing another form on the clipboard.*) Name?
 ENGL: What? Oh . . . Engl.
 TVRZNIK: Full name.
 ENGL: Engl Jaroslav.
 TVRZNIK: Papers!
 ENGL: Papers . . . (*Searches around on his naked body.*)

TVRZNIK: Do you have your papers?

ENGL: Of course. Just a second.

(Covers up with a pillow, gets out of bed and backs himself up to the clothes stand. With his free hand he rummages through the pockets of his wedding jacket.)

JARTCHI: He lets five thousand crowns just burn up!

ENGL: But—

JARTCHI: Will you please just shut up!—What is it that caught fire?

JANIK: *(From above.)* Janik here, sir.

VODICKA: I'm listening.

JANIK: UPOR wants to know if we'll need the roof winch?

VODICKA: They can keep it for the time being.

JANIK: Roger.

VODICKA: Also all the floor winches and stuff.

JANIK: Roger.

VODICKA: The basement winch will be enough, if it's working.

JANIK: In working order, sir.

VODICKA: Bon. In a few minutes I will give the positional announcement.

JANIK: Roger. Will be reported.

ENGL: I must have left it on the kitchen cabinet.

JARTCHI: You're just impossible!

TVRZNIK: This is getting serious.

JARTCHI: He lets his papers just burn up!

TVRZNIK: Who's going to vouch for your identity?

ENGL: She will, of course! Jartchi . . . !

TVRZNIK: Hold it. I'll ask the questions around here.

(The horn blows. Vodicka opens the door slightly. Hurnik, accompanied by a cloud of black smoke, stumbles out. Vodicka immediately slams the door behind him.)

VODICKA: How does it look?

HURNIK: *(Gives the thumbs-down sign and begins to mumble incomprehensively.)*

VODICKA: *(Puts his ear to the plexiglass shield, and listens attentively.)* Gotcha.

JARTCHI: Did he get the handbag?

TVRZNIK: First things first. *(To Engl.)* Start counting.

ENGL: What?

TVRZNIK: Start counting out loud, so you don't hear her. I want to check you over.

VODICKA: *(To Hurnik.)* Gotcha.

HURNIK: *(Mumbles on.)*

ENGL: Here, it's on my business card!

TVRZNIK: In so far as it's yours.

ENGL: Why shouldn't it be mine?

TVRZNIK: You're acting as if the fire were somewhere else. Keep counting.

ENGL: My God . . . *(Starts counting.)*

TVRZNIK: Louder!

ENGL: *(Counts more loudly.)*

VODICKA: Gotcha. Will be reported. Quiet here!

TVRZNIK: Quiet!!

ENGL: *(Stops counting.)*

JARTCHI: Did he find the handbag?

VODICKA: Janik!

JANIK: *(From above.)* I'm listening.

VODICKA: Communication for UPOR: Position report number one. Epicenter kitchen, steps six to seven, progressive tendency, visibility zero = zero, cause as yet undetermined, measures taken to localize. Commander Vodicka.

JANIK: Roger. Will be reported.

ENGL: What did that all mean?

VODICKA: That things are getting hot around here. Janik!

JANIK: I'm listening.

VODICKA: Hydrants and hoses. At least three rolls.

HURNIK: Will do.

(Three sets of hoses come unrolling through the window. Vodicka disentangles them and gives Hurnik the nozzles.)

JARTCHI: *(Leaps up. The bedsheet covers her like a toga.)* I hope you're not planning on shooting that thing around in here!

ENGL: They've got to put it out, Jartchi.

JARTCHI: *(Ignoring him.)* Listen, Commander, it's already so damp in here, we'll never get it dry. Isn't there any other way of putting it out?

VODICKA: Bon. *(Calls up.)* Come back, Hurnik! Take the Valkyrie!

JANIK: Will do.

(Slides down the pole wearing on his back an apparatus that looks like a flamethrower.)

VODICKA: Swiss invention. We don't like to use it much. Refills use up too much foreign currency. It smothers the flame, and finally you just sweep up the fire.

JARTCHI: You're a real pal. We'll repay you somehow.

VODICKA: I'm sure you will. We sure are pulling out all the stops for you!

JARTCHI: *(To Engl.)* Do you hear that? And you would have let them flood us out.

TVRZNIK: Keep counting!

ENGL: (*Starts counting again.*)

TVRZNIK: (*To Jartchi.*) What's your name?

JARTCHI: Jaroslava Englova.

TVRZNIK: (*To Engl.*) That'll do.

ENGL: (*Stops counting.*)

TVRZNIK: (*Pointing to Jartchi.*) What's her name?

ENGL: Jaroslava Schoberova.

JARTCHI: How could you forget that we're married?

ENGL: Englova! Sorry, in all this . . . I'm just . . .

JARTCHI: You really are hopeless.

ENGL: We just got married.

TVRZNIK: Do you have a marriage certificate?

ENGL: Of course . . . (*Searches through his jacket pocket again.*)

VODICKA: (*With Janik's help he has fastened the apparatus on Hurnik's back and now hands him the nozzle.*) Janik, adjustments!

JANIK: (*Turns a nozzle on the tank.*) Adjustments concluded.

VODICKA: Ready, Hurnik?

HURNIK: (*Gives the thumbs-up sign.*)

VODICKA: Timing device at one hundred twenty.

JANIK: (*Sets the alarm.*) One hundred and twenty it is.

JARTCHI: Please the handbag. It has a kind of chain on it.

VODICKA: Did you hear that, Hurnik? Try to fight your way through to the handbag.

HURNIK: (*Nods and gives the thumbs-up sign.*)

VODICKA: Three, two, one, now!

(*Janik presses the alarm. The horn sounds. Vodicka opens the door slightly. Smoke pours out. Janik and Vodicka shove Hurnik in and slam the door behind him. Janik climbs back up.*)

ENGL: (*Suddenly remembering.*) You've got it in the handbag!

TVRZNIK: This is getting serious.

JARTCHI: Didn't I tell you to keep it yourself? Didn't I say that, huh?

ENGL: How was I supposed to know . . .

TVRZNIK: Sir!

VODICKA: I'm listening.

TVRZNIK: These people cannot produce any identification.

JARTCHI: He just lets the marriage certificate burn up!

VODICKA: Oh, oh, that looks bad.

JARTCHI: I can swear that he's really my husband.

TVRZNIK: In so far as you're his wife.

ENGL: But she is my wife.

TVRZNIK: In so far as you're her husband.

ENGL: But why should we want to lie to you?

VODICKA: No offense, Mister—okay what do I care—Engl. Have you ever heard of something called arson?

JARTCHI: Come on Commander. We wouldn't set fire to our own apartment!

TVRZNIK: In so far as it's your apartment!

ENGL: But of course it's our apartment!

TVRZNIK: Do you at least have the lease?

ENGL: Of course . . . Jartchi where's the lease?

JARTCHI: You had it!

ENGL: Then I gave it to you.

JARTCHI: To me?

ENGL: In your—in your handbag.

JARTCHI: Christ Almighty. Is there anything you didn't put in the handbag to burn up? He just . . .

TVRZNIK: First things first. Who's the apartment manager here?

ENGL & JARTCHI: (*To each other.*) Who's the apartment manager here?

TVRZNIK: Do you know any of the neighbors?

ENGL: We just moved in three days ago.

TVRZNIK: You must have run into somebody in three days.

ENGL: We haven't been out.

TVRZNIK: You were sick?

ENGL: No, we . . .

JARTCHI: (*To Vodicka.*) You must know by now what caught fire in there!

VODICKA: (*Listening at the door. Calls up.*) Janik!

JANIK: I'm listening.

VODICKA: Call UPOR. Tell them to send an ambulance fast in case the butane goes up.

JANIK: Will do. Will be reported.

ENGL: Shouldn't we get out of here?

TVRZNIK: Why haven't you been out in the last three days?

JARTCHI: (*Completely returned to normal.*) Is that so important right now? Why don't you help them put it out?

ENGL: Jartchi . . . !

VODICKA: My colleague Tvrznik is the fire damage inspector. He has nothing to do with the fires as such, just with their causes and consequences.

ENGL: Please, we didn't mean anything, it's just that it's all so . . .

VODICKA: Okay okay, we understand. It's not every day you have a fire.

JARTCHI: I'd like to know how the fire could break out in the kitchen! (*The sheet has slipped down over one of her shoulders.*)

TVRZNIK: Why don't you put some clothes on?

JARTCHI: Now just a second . . . Jarda!

TVRZNIK: You're her husband?

ENGL: That's right.

TVRZNIK: And you don't care if, and with strangers around, too . . .

VODICKA: My colleague Tvrzник just got married too. So you've got to be shown some understanding yourself.

ENGL: Please, put something on!

JARTCHI: What, may I ask? All my stuff is in the other room.

TVRZNIK: (*Pointing to the clothes stand.*) And who might this belong to?

JARTCHI: But that's my wedding dress!

VODICKA: If I were you, I'd put it on. Then at least you'll have something for the new start in case the butane goes up.

ENGL: Please, hurry up. (*Begins to get dressed himself.*)

JARTCHI: (*Getting unsteady; forces herself to the clothes stand, still wrapped up in the sheet.*) A great idea to put the clothes in the kitchen!

ENGL: But that was your . . .

JARTCHI: For Christ's sake, can't you stop talking. Why don't you tell me what could have caught fire in the kitchen!

JANIK: (*From above.*) Janik here, sir.

VODICKA: I'm listening.

JANIK: UPOR wants to know if we need lifesaving nets.

VODICKA: They can keep them.

JANIK: Roger.

VODICKA: And they can keep the chutes, too.

JANIK: Roger.

VODICKA: But we need all the outflow blockers and the sewer pipe rammer!

JANIK: Roger. Will be reported.

(*In the meantime Engl and Jartchi, squatting behind the bed, have put on their wedding clothes, which under the circumstances look pretty pathetic.*)

JARTCHI: Pull up my zipper at least!

ENGL: (*Doing it.*) Listen, shouldn't we get out of here?

TVRZNIK: Why didn't you go out for three days?

JARTCHI: Is that so difficult to figure out when we were married the day before yesterday.

TVRZNIK: In so far as you are married.

JARTCHI: Did you notice the clothes we're wearing?

TVRZNIK: In so far as they belong to you.

ENGL & JARTCHI: What?

TVRZNIK: In so far as the real groom and the real bride are not also . . . (*Points to the kitchen.*)

ENGL: But that's . . . that's really . . . Commander!

VODICKA: Mister—Okay, let's say—Engl, fire is the best detective because it often turns up at the right place at the right time. Once we had a case where a guy had knocked off his aunt, and just as he was pouring gas all over her,

there's Hurnik hanging in his window in order to tell him that the house was on fire underneath him.

(*While Engl and Jartchi are speechless, the horn sounds twice. Vodicka opens the door a crack. Hurnik staggers out, accompanied by a cloud of black smoke. Vodicka slams the door behind him and supports Hurnik.*)

VODICKA: How does it look?

HURNIK: (*Gives the thumbs-down sign and mumbles.*)

VODICKA: (*Puts his ear to the plexiglass and listens.*) Gotcha.

JARTCHI: Did he get the handbag?

TVRZNIK: First things first. Miss—okay let's say Mrs. Englova, in so far as you are Mrs. Englova—, you must know what's behind this door.

JARTCHI: The kitchen, of course.

VODICKA: Is that right, Hurnik?

HURNIK: (*Nods.*)

TVRZNIK: What's in the kitchen?

JARTCHI: Clothes cabinet, kitchen cabinet, refrigerator, and . . . the oven.

VODICKA: Hurnik?

HURNIK: (*Nods.*)

TVRZNIK: What's in the oven?

JARTCHI: Nothing.

TVRZNIK: And in the refrigerator?

JARTCHI: Vodka, beer and a roast duck.

VODICKA: This?

(*Hurnik lifts his hand. In it he is holding a charcoal object which might have been a bird at some point.*)

JARTCHI: Christ Almighty . . . is that what it's like in there . . . I thought you claimed you would just sweep it up . . . !

VODICKA: Where was this duck, Hurnik?

HURNIK: (*Mumbles.*)

VODICKA: Understood. Will be reported. Janik!

JANIK: (*From above.*) I'm listening.

VODICKA: To UPOR: Position report number two. Cause of fire: Oven with duck not turned off.

JANIK: Roger. Will be reported.

JARTCHI: (*Yelling.*) No! No! That's not . . .

VODICKA: Wait a second, Janik! Hold that report!

JANIK: Roger. I'm waiting.

JARTCHI: I'm absolutely sure that I turned off . . . that the duck . . .

(Hurnik again holds up the charcoal skeleton, and Jartchi breaks down in despair. Engl on the other hand takes the opportunity to show himself to be master of the house.)

ENGL: I told you to take the duck out. Did I tell you that or didn't I?

JARTCHI: *(Breaks into tears.)*

ENGL: And then she asks how the fire started!!

VODICKA: Oh don't blame the little woman too much, Mr. Engl. Things like this happen to people with more experience, too, you know. Once we had a case where a lady forgot to turn off the oven. She erred, she confessed and promised it'll never happen again. Right, young lady?

JARTCHI: *(Cries even more.)*

TVRZNIK: *(In the meantime he has filled out a sheet and hands it to Engl on the clipboard.)* Bottom left.

ENGL: Yes . . . *(Takes the pen from him and wants to sign.)*

TVRZNIK: Don't you want to read it through?

ENGL: No, what's the point . . . ?

VODICKA: Read it out loud, Tvrzник. You see how excited the two of them are.

TVRZNIK: Roger. *(Reads.)* "The fire was caused by reckless neglect of the female renter of the apartment in failing to switch off duck in oven."—Right?

ENGL: But that's pretty . . . Couldn't you somehow . . .

VODICKA: Somehow what?

ENGL: Somehow tone it down. For Jartchi's sake . . .

VODICKA: I like that, Mr. Engl. I like it when a family sticks together. Tvrzник, cut out "in oven." It's not necessary.

TVRZNIK: Roger. *(Crosses something out.)*

VODICKA: How does it read now?

TVRZNIK: *(Reads.)* "The fire was caused by reckless neglect of the female renter of the apartment in failing to switch off duck."

VODICKA: Okay. Satisfied, Mr. Engl?

ENGL: Yeah, sure, but . . . Does Jartchi have to be . . . I mean so directly . . .

VODICKA: I really like you for that, Mr. Engl. I wouldn't leave my wife in the lurch either. Tvrzник, cross out "female renter of apartment." We don't have to know that.

TVRZNIK: Roger. *(Crosses something out.)*

VODICKA: How does it read now?

TVRZNIK: *(Reads.)* "The fire was caused by reckless neglect in failing to switch off duck."

VODICKA: Well, see. Everything's okay now, right?

ENGL: Yeah, sure . . . only . . .

VODICKA: Come on, out with it! Only what?

ENGL: Only if it wasn't so clearly stated that . . . that somebody was

negligent.

VODICKA: I see. You know, Mr. Engl, our motto is: live and let live. We don't want to be harder on you than the fire was. If it will make you happy—Tvrzник, cross out "reckless neglect in failing to switch off."

TVRZNIK: Roger. *(Crosses something out.)*

VODICKA: And how does it read now?

TVRZNIK: *(Reads.)* "The fire was caused by duck"

VODICKA: Good. Let them try and figure that out!

ENGL: That's really nice of you.

TVRZNIK: *(Again hands him the paper with the clipboard.)* Bottom left, Mr . . . You are really Mr. Engl?

ENGL: *(Intently.)* I swear it! I wouldn't lie to you when you've been so decent to us! *(Signs.)*

TVRZNIK: I believe you. *(Handing the paper to Jartchi.)* Bottom left, Mrs . . . you are Mrs. Englova, aren't you?

JARTCHI: *(Nods while crying.)*

TVRZNIK: I believe you.

(Jartchi signs. Vodicka tries the light switch on the wall. A light goes on and illuminates the whole mess.)

VODICKA: You've got lights! Why didn't you say so right away?

(Janik slides down the pole and helps Hurnik to take off his asbestos suit. Then the two of them begin to roll up the hoses.)

ENGL: Could you please tell us how the clothes cabinet looks?

VODICKA: Hurnik?

HURNIK: I'm listening.

VODICKA: The clothes cabinet?

HURNIK: Kindling wood.

ENGL: And the kitchen cabinet?

HURNIK: Ashes.

JARTCHI: *(Holding back tears.)* And my handbag?

(Hurnik gives Vodicka a piece of blackened chain, which he hands on to Jartchi. She starts crying again.)

VODICKA: Don't cry, little lady . . . the insurance company will pay off for those few crowns and the other junk without a second look.

JARTCHI: *(Sobbing, to Engl.)* I told you to take care of the . . .

VODICKA: *(Whistling in amazement.)* What? You're not . . . ohohoh!

(Hurnik and Janik are alternatively sliding down the pole and climbing up the ladder. Gradually they clear the room of all the paraphernalia which they had previously brought in.)

ENGL: *(Again deflated.)* We had nothing worth . . .

JARTCHI: And for two years we saved up for this nothing! *(Starts crying again.)*

VODICKA: Tvrznik!

TVRZNIK: I'm listening.

VODICKA: Could we ah . . .

TVRZNIK: You're the boss, sir.

VODICKA: I think so. They're nice young people. We should try and help them out.

TVRZNIK: *(Bows, takes another form from his file, fastens it to the clipboard and hands it to Engl.)* Bottom right.

ENGL: *(Not believing his eyes.)* But that's a . . . Jartchi, it's an insurance policy!

JARTCHI: *(Stops crying, takes the form.)* Let me see that!

VODICKA: My colleague Tvrznik also moonlights for the insurance company as an assessor. It's only reasonable. One can't live by fires alone.

ENGL: But you can't do that—after the fact . . .

VODICKA: Who said anything about after the fact? Only the date is given, not the hour. You could have taken out the policy just before the fire broke out!

Once we had a case where lightning struck during the actual signing.

JARTCHI: And they recognized the validity?

VODICKA: And how. My colleague Tvrznik enjoys complete confidence. And we testified as well.

ENGL: Only . . . this didn't happen before the fire . . .

VODICKA: Okay, if that's the way you want it, Mr. Engl. *(To Jartchi.)* Is he really your husband?

JARTCHI: Jarda, if you don't accept this offer . . .

VODICKA: Cool off—be glad that Mr. Engl has principles, young lady. Of course nobody would notice anything, but the more expensive the principles, the more you can enjoy them.

(Tvrznik starts to put the form away, but Jartchi stops his hand, takes the form from him and hands it to Engl.)

JARTCHI: I told you I'd only marry you if you stopped acting like an idiot. And you promised you would. Did you promise or not?

TVRZNIK: Bottom right.

ENGL: *(Signs.)*

JARTCHI: Me too?

VODICKA: The head of the family is sufficient—and I assume that that is Mr. Engl. The main thing is that you don't forget to pay the first premium,

which is due today, and comes to . . .

TVRZNIK: Three hundred and twelve crowns.

ENGL: And where are we supposed to get that?

JARTCHI: I told you to put the money in the bank. I told you . . .

VODICKA: But listen kids. You're already burned out. What's the sense of fighting about it? Somebody will lend you the few crowns.

ENGL: If you hadn't chased away all my friends . . .

VODICKA: Wait a minute, wait a minute! Where there's smoke there doesn't have to be fire!

JARTCHI: Don't worry. I'll get the money somewhere, even if I have to start walking the streets. I'm just sorry the fire didn't reach this room. At least we could have bought a bed that hadn't been used!

VODICKA: Young lady, you know, I like you. That's why I want to tell you the following: You've been here for only three days, and nobody has even visited you. So we're the only ones who know what actually burned up.

JARTCHI: What do you mean?

VODICKA: Tvrznik . . .

TVRZNIK: I'm listening.

VODICKA: Could we . . .

TVRZNIK: You're the boss, sir.

VODICKA: Well, I just want the best for these two, because they're so nice and decent. It's actually surprising that you two don't own anything other than a refrigerator, a kitchen cabinet, a clothes cabinet and an oven with duck. We saw a bunch of other things here.

ENGL: What kind of things.

VODICKA: For example—Tvrznik!

TVRZNIK: *(Placing another form on the clipboard and reading aloud.)* An Empire trumeau.

ENGL: What's that?

TVRZNIK: *(Reads.)* A small antique table with mirror. Value about 8000 crowns.

VODICKA: It was over there next to the door, right? Hurnik!

HURNIK: I'm listening. *(Opens a pouch.)*

VODICKA: What's left of it?

HURNIK: The fittings. *(Takes out a piece of blackened metal.)*

VODICKA: *(Looking at it.)* That's really too bad. Go on!

TVRZNIK: *(Reads.)* The Portrait of a Lady by the academy painter Chily. Approximate value 10,000 crowns.

VODICKA: Grandma, I suppose. Hurnik!

HURNIK: *(Hands him a scorched piece of wood.)* A piece of the frame.

VODICKA: *(Looks at it.)* It's enough to make you cry, no?

TVRZNIK: *(Reads.)* One three quarter length fur coat, chinchilla, purchase price 6021 crowns.

HURNIK: Here are the buttons.

VODICKA: And so forth, etc. You'll read through it later, right?

HURNIK: (*Shakes out a pile of burned objects on the table.*) Here's the rest of it.

TVRZNIK: (Reads.) The total damage comes to 57,344 point 20 crowns.

(*Hands the list and the pen to Engl.*) Upper left.

JARTCHI: (*As if in a dream.*) Fifty-seven thousand . . .

VODICKA: Well, do you want it?

ENGL: But it's . . .

VODICKA: What?

ENGL: But it's just . . .

VODICKA: Well, what's the matter, Mr. Engl? Did you want to say: fraud?

You did, didn't you? And you'd be surprised: of course it's fraud! But the insurance itself is a hundred times as big a fraud. My colleague Tvrznic could tell you how many people stuff it like a piggy bank for as long as they live and never get even a single fire out of it. One pensioner has figured out that with all that insurance money, he could have . . . what was it he could have done?

TVRZNIK: Made a trip around the world.

VODICKA: And?

TVRZNIK: He went crazy.

VODICKA: You see, thanks to our efforts there are so few real fires that getting insurance is like throwing your money down the drain. We work ourselves to the bone and they pocket the premiums. So you shouldn't be surprised if we try and double-cross them once in a while. Of course, if you're not interested . . .

(*Tvrznic starts to put the form away, and Hurnik shoves the burned stuff back in his pouch. Jartchi lays her hand on the paper.*)

JARTCHI: Wait a minute. (*To Engl.*) Go count for a while! (*To Vodicka.*) Just so we understand each other, Commander, can we do anything for you in return?

VODICKA: Why, of course you can, young lady. We should all get a piece of the pie.

JARTCHI: And how big might the slices be?

VODICKA: Ah, that's a good woman for you. You've made a fine choice, Mr.

Engl.—Just like we were home, right? Everyone gets the same size slice.

There are four of us and two of you. So—one third for you. That makes

TVRZNIK: 19,114 point 73 crowns.

JARTCHI: That doesn't seem fair to me.

VODICKA: What? Why not?

JARTCHI: You delivered the goods, but we cooked it up right here.

VODICKA: Very good. I like that. You should really get half.

TVRZNIK: 28,672 point 10 crowns.

JARTCHI: (*Shakes her head.*)

VODICKA: Still too little? How come?

JARTCHI: Everyday can be a holiday for you, but for us it comes only once a lifetime.

VODICKA: Isn't she adorable? You don't know how lucky you are, Mr. Engl, that I'm no longer as combustible as I once was. Okay. Keep two thirds.

That makes . . .

TVRZNIK: 38,229 point 46 crowns.

VODICKA: No, no, no, that will have to do. I've got expenses, and then my boys here might go off and take a better offer, probably right from the insurance people. Right, Hurnik?

HURNIK: Right, sir.

VODICKA: Okay, agreed?

JARTCHI: And the five thousand?

VODICKA: What five thousand?

JARTCHI: The ones that burned. You can't slice that up.

VODICKA: You win. Tvrznic. Add that to it.

TVRZNIK: 43,229 point 46 crowns.

JARTCHI: Did you hear that, Jarda? Think about it: we'd have to save for eight years to get that much together.

ENGL: (*Stubbornly.*) Four . . . !

TVRZNIK: (*Ceremoniously hands the form to Vodicka.*) Commander, the registry of the damages.

JARTCHI: But we'd be eating pork and beans for four years, too.

ENGL: (*Stubbornly.*) I like them.

VODICKA: Let's see . . . (*Goes through the list.*) Trumeau, Chily, chinchilla . . . (*Reads incomprehensibly.*)

JARTCHI: Jarda, don't be an idiot! Almost everybody does it!

ENGL: Well, I'm sorry, but maybe I'm not just everybody . . .

VODICKA: He agrees. (*Signs.*) Hurnik! Janik!

HURNIK: (*Below.*) I'm listening.

JANIK: (*Above.*) I'm listening.

VODICKA: Sign here!

(*Janik slides down, both step simultaneously to the table.*)

BOTH: Right. (*They sign.*)

JARTCHI: So you're not everybody! And just who do you think you are? Onassis?

ENGL: You married me. So you must know . . .

JARTCHI: I don't care if you're just a chauffeur, but when you break your

word . . . you swore you would do anything for me. Did you say that or not?

ENGL: But not fraud . . .

JARTCHI: Then you should have said that. You should have said: sweetheart, I'll do anything for you, except commit fraud. But you didn't say that. You were even ready to kill somebody.

ENGL: Me?

JARTCHI: Didn't you say you'd kill Kubr if he didn't stop calling me?

ENGL: (*Spreading his hands helplessly.*) But that's the kind of thing you just say . . .

JARTCHI: You just say everything!

VODICKA: Come on, kids, what's the matter? In that case just forget it. The money involved isn't worth it if it ruins your honeymoon.

JARTCHI: We're not talking about the money, we're talking about the principle of it.

VODICKA: I'd be careful if I were in your place. Once we had a case where a school burned down because the principal on principle wouldn't let us in with street shoes on.

JARTCHI: Is it valid if I sign it by myself?

ENGL: Jartchi!

VODICKA: Your signatures are only a formality anyhow. Fire victims aren't taken seriously. They're always asking for the moon. What counts is the signature of the official authorities—and that's us.

JARTCHI: May I? (*Tvrznic hands her pen and paper.*)

TVRZNIK: Upper left.

ENGL: If you do that . . .

JARTCHI: (*Belligerent, but somewhat uncertain.*) What then??

ENGL: Then I don't want to know anything about it.

JARTCHI: (*Turns away in disdain and signs.*)

TVRZNIK: (*Takes the form from her and hands it to Vodicka.*) The forms, Commander.

VODICKA: (*Tears out the carbon copy, and bowing, gives it to Jartchi, while Tvrznic replaces the original with another form.*) If you please, young lady . . . (*But when the carbon copy is at the tip of her fingers, he grabs it back and gives her the other paper with his other hand.*) Pardon me, this here too . . .

JARTCHI: What's this?

VODICKA: Confirmation that you have received a private loan from the four of us in the amount of 14,114 point 74 crowns. To be paid back immediately upon receipt of 57,344 point 20 crowns from the insurance company. The rest—43,229 point 46 crowns belongs to you. In order, young lady?

JARTCHI: (*Studies the paper.*) Yes, I think so . . .

TVRZNIK: In the middle.

JARTCHI: (*Signs, exchanges the paper for the other ones, which she stares at as if it were a*

valuable prize.) We should drink to that, shouldn't we? If it weren't for the fire, I could offer you something . . . (*She looks and notices for the first time that almost all the fire-fighting equipment has disappeared.*) Is the fire already out?

VODICKA: But, young lady, that's what the fire department is for! You know what we say: "Does your fire need some aid?"

JANIK & HURNIK: Call on Vodicka's Brigade!"

VODICKA: My colleague Tvrznic wrote that himself.

TVRZNIK: (*Bows.*)

JARTCHI: I'm so happy! (*Kisses Vodicka on the cheek.*)

VODICKA: You certainly are fiery, young lady. You should have married a fireman.

JARTCHI: The least you can do is thank them, Jarda!

ENGL: (*Stubborn.*) I didn't set any fire.

JARTCHI: What's that supposed to mean? You should thank them and me as well. Otherwise you'd be getting pretty desperate for cigarettes and beer after eight years. (*Notices that Janik and Hurnik are gnawing at the banana peels, and Vodicka is sucking out the last drop from the glass.*) My God, you must be hungry and thirsty . . . maybe something survived in the refrigerator!

(*She runs to the kitchen. Hurnik gets in her way. At first it looks like a clumsy accident, but then Janik cuts her off, too.*)

VODICKA: Leave that to my boys, young lady. They're equipped for it. After you use the Valkyre, it hangs in the air of an hour. Your dress would look like a Swiss cheese. Janik!

JANIK: I'm listening.

VODICKA: Go get some . . . didn't somebody say something about vodka?

JARTCHI: Tell him to take anything he can get his hands on.

JANIK: (*Unlocks the kitchen door and reaches for the door knob.*)

VODICKA: Janik!

JANIK: I'm listening.

VODICKA: (*Reprimanding.*) At least take the armor shield!

JANIK: Roger. Will do.

(*Hurnik lets him and his armor shield in. A thin waft of smoke comes out. In the meantime Engl has sat down on the bed. Overjoyed Jartchi kneels at his feet and attempts a reconciliation.*)

JARTCHI: Jarda! (*Gives him a kiss.*) Are you really mad?

ENGL: Oh no . . .

JARTCHI: Don't get angry. Be happy! With forty-three thousand we can turn this dump into a palace and . . . You know what else? We'll be able to afford a . . . (*Whispers in his ear.*) What do you think?

VODICKA: See? Fire is a stern master but an obedient servant. I hope you'll take us for a ride too some day.

JARTCHI: I didn't mean a car . . .

VODICKA: No, well what then?

(Janik comes out of the kitchen. He's carrying bottles on his shield as if it were a tray. Hurnik locks the door behind him.)

VODICKA: Well, Janik?

JANIK: Contents of the refrigerator not damaged, Commander. Vodka, beer and . . . *(as he puts the shield on the table he turns it around. Behind the bottles is a pan)* a duck. *(Engl and Jartchi stare at the duck as if they had seen a ghost.)*

VODICKA: Congratulations! I can see you're not overburdened with chairs. It's about time you got burned out. Hurnik!

HURNIK: I'm listening.

VODICKA: Turn the bed sideways!

HURNIK: Will do.

VODICKA: You'll have to excuse us, Mr. Engl . . .

(Engl gets up mechanically, Hurnik leans against the bed and turns it sideways, until it stands next to the table like a long bench.)

VODICKA: Let's go boys. Sit down.

(All the firemen sit down next to each other on the bed. Janik and Hurnik on the ends, Tvrzник and Vodicka in the middle. Vodicka takes the duck, rips it to pieces, and passes it around.)

VODICKA: All work makes Jack a dull boy. It's lucky that a refrigerator like that is a *de facto* fireproof safe. Once we had a case—I hope it's all right, young lady, for us to eat with our fingers like we do at home—where all the personnel and the customers at a meat outlet had saved themselves in a big freezer like this, a total of—

TVRZNIK: Three men and eighteen women.

VODICKA: And not a single one of them had gotten so much as a blister. It was just too bad for them that we didn't find them until a month later. But who could have expected them to be in there, huh? A delicious duck! *(To Engl.)* Don't you want some?

ENGL: *(Beaten down.)* Okay . . .

VODICKA: Well then sit down with us!

(Engl starts to obey, but Jartchi holds him back and finally says something.)

JARTCHI: Hold it!

VODICKA: And just take what you want, young lady. Do you want a piece of the tail?

JARTCHI: I want to look in the kitchen.

(The firemen continue eating and drinking good-naturedly. But Engl is very nervous.)

ENGL: What do you want to see in there?

VODICKA: Come on, young lady, don't spoil the meal. First it's got to die out completely in any case.

JARTCHI: I'll put on the asbestos!

VODICKA: That wouldn't do you any good. No, no, young lady. It's a man's job.

JARTCHI: *(To Engl.)* Then you go look!

ENGL: Me? Why?

JARTCHI: You're a man, aren't you. I want you to go and look.

ENGL: But I . . .

VODICKA: Tvrzник!

TVRZNIK: I'm listening.

VODICKA: Couldn't we—

TVRZNIK: Whatever you say, Commander.

VODICKA: I'm very much for it. Mr. Engl is a grown-up, he's rational, and he has principles, he loves his wife—Why shouldn't he take a look in? I think we'll make an exception and look the other way.

ENGL: Not for my sake . . .

VODICKA: Just to satisfy the little lady, Mr. Engl. She is your wife, isn't she?

ENGL: Yes, but—

VODICKA: Well then. Why not take a look in if it will make her happy? That would make you happy, young lady, wouldn't it?

JARTCHI: *(Becomes uncertain.)* Yes . . .

ENGL: I don't want to!

VODICKA: But, but what is that supposed to mean, Mr. Engl? We have to hold the little lady back by force, and you're afraid to go in at all? That's a great prospectus for your marriage.

ENGL: I'm not afraid.

VODICKA: Well, congratulations. Janik!

JANIK: I'm listening.

VODICKA: Give him the asbestos stuff and the boots. And Hurnik!

HURNIK: I'm listening.

VODICKA: Go with him, and take care of him.

JANIK & HURNIK: Will do.

VODICKA: *(While Engl is being dressed.)* Don't stay in there too long, Hurnik. Just long enough for Mr. Engl to look around.

HURNIK: Roger.

VODICKA: As for you, Mr. Engl, chin up! Thanks to your little wife you'll look

back on this calamity as if it was Christmas. Ready, Mr. Engl?

HURNIK: (*Indicating to Engl that he should put his thumbs up.*)

ENGL: (*Already wearing the equipment, hesitatingly puts his thumbs up.*)

VODICKA: Okay, then—Off you go!

(*He opens the door, and with Janik's help, pushes Engl in. Hurnik follows with the axe. Vodicka slams the door and blows away some smoke with his hand. Jartchi makes a motion in the direction of the kitchen.*)

JARTCHI: Jarda!

VODICKA: (*Steps in her way.*) Don't worry, young lady. Hurnik will make sure that he doesn't roast.

JARTCHI: Let me by!

VODICKA: (*Scolding.*) Not like that, young lady. I don't like you at all like this.

We come to you as friends and you treat us like strangers.

(*The door opens and Engl comes out, accompanied by Hurnik: Janik locks it behind them.*)

VODICKA: Now see. Nothing happened to us. We're back already. Janik,

Hurnik, quick, get that stuff off him before he collapses on us!

BOTH: Will do. (*Takes off his helmet, chest protector, and boots.*)

ENGL: (*Smooths out his hair, is very upset.*)

JARTCHI: Well??

VODICKA: A real mess, eh, Mr. Engl?

JARTCHI: How does it look?

VODICKA: Not a nice sight, eh?

JARTCHI: Say something, Jarda!

ENGL: It's like this, Jartchi . . .

JARTCHI: Like what??

ENGL: The clothes cabinet is . . .

VODICKA: . . . Kindling.

ENGL: (*Nods.*)

JARTCHI: And the kitchen cabinet?

ENGL: Ashes. Everything is . . .

VODICKA: Well, what do you say, Mr. Engl? Were you lucky or not?

ENGL: Yeah. (*Sinks heavily onto the bed.*)

(*All the firemen sit down again. Engl sits between Vodicka and Turzник. They have great difficulty all fitting on the bed. The firemen fish out their portions from the pan and continue eating.*)

VODICKA: Well, you see? Don't think about it anymore. Have a bite to eat in-

stead. I saved a wing for you. (*Hands him a portion.*) Just so you can fly away in case the little lady tries to beat you up.

(*All the firemen laugh. Engl begins to gnaw mechanically; Jartchi is the only one still standing. She is thinking things through.*)

VODICKA: Sit down with us, young lady. At least you'll get warm. Come on, boys. Shove over!

JARTCHI: Wait a minute.

VODICKA: Now what?

JARTCHI: If the duck got all burned up, what's this thing here? (*Vodicka and the other firemen stop chewing.*)

VODICKA: (*Harshly.*) Well, Mr. Engl, can you clear this up for us?

ENGL: I . . .

VODICKA: Just among us women folk: isn't it likely that there were two ducks?

JARTCHI: Two?

VODICKA: Didn't you just happen to roast the second one yourself as a little surprise for the little lady? Huh?

ENGL: Yes . . .

JARTCHI: When for heaven's sake? I would have known that!

VODICKA: Didn't it just happen to be in the middle of the night?

ENGL: That's right . . .

JARTCHI: . . . But why didn't you say anything to me about it?

VODICKA: Well? Why didn't you inform the little lady, Mr. Engl?

ENGL: I forgot . . .

VODICKA: Come on, come on. At your age? You better watch out, young lady—Once we had a case where some clown like this forgot to save his mother-in-law, his wife and his two kids from a fire. (*All the firemen laugh loudly and continue chewing.*)

JARTCHI: I was sure I had turned off the oven and put the duck in the refrigerator . . . But that means . . .

VODICKA: (*His mouth full.*) You're getting warmer, young lady.

JARTCHI: That means—that you're the one who didn't turn off the oven!

VODICKA: Now it's getting really hot, eh Mr. Engl?

ENGL: Prabably . . .

JARTCHI: And you were going to just sit there and let me take the blame?

VODICKA: That's not true either, I'm on Mr. Engl's side here. Don't you remember how stoutly he defended you when we made up the official report? He has no cause to have a guilty conscience. And furthermore if you want to be fair: now the one who really earned this . . .

TVRZNIK: 43,289 point 46 crowns.

VODICKA: . . . is him. Right?

JARTCHI: That was just sheer luck!—And now tell me why you're roasting a

duck in the middle of the night when there's already one in the fridge?

ENGL: I . . .

VODICKA: Didn't you happen to want to have some friends over in private, Mr. Engl?

JARTCHI: (*Understanding.*) Jarda! You were . . . (*As if spellbound she looks at each of the firemen in turn.*) Wait a second!

(*She starts moving and the others notice too late that she's headed for the kitchen. All but Engl jump up, their hands and mouths full of duck, but Jartchi reaches the door with a jump, turns the key and opens it. The scene freezes for a second. Then Jartchi goes into the kitchen. Engl closes his eyes. Pause. Jartchi comes back out, carrying in her hand a metal canister, which is still sending out a bit of smoke: a smoke bomb. She starts laughing. She laughs so hard that she has to lean on the door. Vodicka joins in laughing. Then the other firemen. The room echoes with laughter.*)

JARTCHI: (*Finally catching her breath.*) Well, you really put me on! You know you really put the fear of God in me for a while.

VODICKA: Oh no, really?

JARTCHI: I even cry at the movies, when I know they're just acting. How was I supposed to guess here in my own place that you guys get all this (*pointing to their uniforms*) from the theatre?

VODICKA: Yeah sure!

JARTCHI: Jarda was always saying: If you don't let me keep on acting in the theatre group, they'll pay you back. But as soon as somebody yells "Fire," everybody goes crazy!

VODICKA: Yeah sure!

JARTCHI: You know I think I'll let him go back to it. He's a better actor than I thought.

VODICKA: So you see . . .

JARTCHI: Sit down, don't stand around. Please just make yourselves at home.

(*The firemen sit down and begin eating again. They drink freely from the bottles.*)

JARTCHI: But there's one thing I won't forgive you for. I could already smell the money. That's right, love, you'll feel sorry about the beautiful fire, too, when you're eating pork and beans for the third straight year! (*The firemen roar with laughter.*) Forty-three thousand . . . You really pushed it to the limit! (*To Engl.*) Wouldn't you like to introduce me to your friends?

ENGL: (*Softly.*) I've never seen them before in my life.

(*The firemen stop chewing. Once again the scene freezes.*)

JARTCHI: Come on, enough's enough. Or I might get really scared!

ENGL: They're not from the theatre group . . .

(*Hurnik and Janik stand up. Jartchi, terrified, moves back, but Hurnik just goes to the door to the stairway, and Janik to the basement window. They take up positions there as if they were standing guard. Vodicka and Turznic wipe off their hands.*)

JARTCHI: (*Anxiously.*) Who are you?

VODICKA: Don't be so nervous, young lady. We're the firemen!

JARTCHI: And . . . what do you want here?

VODICKA: What do we want? We've just been doing our duty.

JARTCHI: But there wasn't any fire here!

VODICKA: What! No? Come on, young lady! Women certainly tend to be forgetful, don't they, Mr. Engl?

JARTCHI: Let him alone. He's just as normal as I am!

VODICKA: Well, I'll grant you that, young lady!

JARTCHI: Who do you want to convince that there was a fire here??

VODICKA: Why should we want to convince anyone of anything? You're both normal people, and we've got your signed statements. That'll do.

TVRZNIK: (*Opens his file, and reads.*) The fire was caused by us. Jaroslav Engl, Jaroslava Englova.

JARTCHI: What a lie!

ENGL: (*Particularly harassed, since he is still squeezed in between Vodicka and Turznic.*) Jartchi . . .

JARTCHI: But what we signed said: "The fire was caused by duck!"

VODICKA: But young lady, you can't have something that stupid in an official statement! Look for yourself, Mr. Engl.

TVRZNIK: (*Shows him the statement.*)

JARTCHI: What you quoted wasn't what we signed!

VODICKA: Let's not quibble about words, young lady. The fact is that you signed this statement about a fire. Or didn't you?

JARTCHI: But that's not worth anything! That's fraud!

ENGL: Just a second, Jartchi . . . Gentlemen, would you mind telling us what you actually—

JARTCHI: Will you please be quiet! You've already let them make an ass of you! How can you be so thick? Can't you see that they're trying to blackmail us!

VODICKA: We blackmail you? That's really too much, young lady.

JARTCHI: But you won't get away with it. That promissory note isn't valid, either.

VODICKA: Which one?

JARTCHI: The one for fourteen thousand.

VODICKA: Fourteen thousand? Oh you mean the one for—

TVRZNIK: 14,114 point 74 crowns.

JARTCHI: Yeah, that one.

VODICKA: And why do you think it's not valid?

JARTCHI: Because nothing burned down here, not to kindling and not to ashes. Absolutely nothing. Not even the duck!

VODICKA: Really? What about the—

TVRZNIK: *(Takes out another form and reads.)* Empire trumeau.

JARTCHI: I don't even know what that is!

TVRZNIK: Portrait of a Lady by the academic painter Chily.

JARTCHI: We never had anything like that on our walls!

TVRZNIK: One three quarter length fur coat, chinchilla.

JARTCHI: How could we afford that?

VODICKA: Well, in that case why did you sign this statement which claims that everything was there this morning? I hope it wasn't in order to collect . . .

TVRZNIK: 57,344 point 20 crowns.

VODICKA: . . . from the insurance company?

JARTCHI: That was your idea!

VODICKA: Better be careful, young lady, don't do anything too drastic. That is after all a serious charge. How do you propose to go about substantiating it?

JARTCHI: Jarda . . .

VODICKA: This document containing your signatures states that the items were here. If they were not here, that certainly would be fraud—on your part, of course. A case of fraud, which according to—

TVRZNIK: Paragraph 132, section 1, letters a through c.

VODICKA: —is punishable with . . .

TVRZNIK: Imprisonment for no less than two years nor more than five.

VODICKA: Which I really would not like to believe, young lady. *(Brightening up.)* But—if the things really were here, that's proof enough that there really was a fire. Right? *(Quiet. Tvrznik carefully ties his file back up.)*

JARTCHI: For God's sake, Jarda. Say something!

ENGL: What am I supposed to say?

JARTCHI: Christ Almighty! What kind of man are you? Call somebody or just throw them out. If we tell them what really happened, nobody could blame us.

ENGL: Maybe we'd better come to some kind of agreement, Jartchi.

VODICKA: I like that, Mr. Engl. There's nothing you couldn't learn how to swallow. Right?

JARTCHI: Do you know what I think you are? *(Goes behind the back of the bed.)* A great big zero. And do you know what I'm going to do now? *(With a leap she is at the bed, rips the file out of Tvrznik's hands, runs under the basement window, through which Janik has just climbed, and starts to yell.)* Help! Help!

ENGL: *(Jumps up.)* Jartchi, for God's sake!

(Vodicka and Tvrznik remain calmly seated. Then we hear Janik's voice over the

loudspeaker.)

JANIK: Sir, UPOR is calling.

JARTCHI: *(Stops yelling.)*

VODICKA: Go ahead.

JANIK: UPOR wants to know if we still need the ambulance.

VODICKA: No, they can keep it.

JANIK: Roger.

JARTCHI: Heeeelp!

VODICKA: But tell them to send the hearse. We probably won't be able to force our way through to the people in time. I can hear them screaming.

JANIK: Roger. Will do.

(Jartchi has stopped screaming and, terrified, is looking at Vodicka.)

VODICKA: Hurnik!

HURNIK: I'm listening.

VODICKA: The Valkyrie.

HURNIK: Will do.

(Janik comes sliding down the pole again and helps Hurnik put the familiar apparatus on his back.)

VODICKA: Were you in the military, Mr. Engl?

ENGL: Yes.

VODICKA: Rank?

ENGL: Private first class.

VODICKA: So, now that the excitement has died down, you will surely be able to tell us what the Valkyrie *de facto* is.

ENGL: A flame-thrower.

VODICKA: Very good, private. *(To Tvrznik.)* Take his name down, Tvrznik.—I'll make sure you'll be a Corporal any day now. I assume you know what a flame-thrower is used for?

ENGL: *(Shakes his head.)*

VODICKA: Sometimes we have cases where the people are gradually suffocating, and we can't get to them. Or they panic and are threatening the others. During a really big fire, Private, martial law goes into effect, and what is best for the majority is by definition the most humane course of action. Since the little lady claims that there hasn't been any fire here . . . Hurnik!

HURNIK: Will do.

(Steps into the middle of the room and aims the nozzle at Jartchi. Vodicka and Tvrznik have finally stood up and move as far as possible behind the bed, as does Janik.)

VODICKA: You better come back here, Private. There's an average of two deaths per basement holocaust, but we grieve for every single life.

ENGL: *(Pulls himself together, jumps up, and yells.)* Wait!

VODICKA: Yes? I'm waiting, Private.

ENGL: *(Goes to Jartchi, who is frozen with fear, and takes the documents from her.)* Will you spare us if I give this back to you?

VODICKA: Why not?

ENGL: What's our guarantee?

VODICKA: The best one you could hope for. After all you owe us . . .

TVRZNIK: 14,114 point 73 crowns.

VODICKA: Of course, that's only after you receive your—

TVRZNIK: 57,344 point 20 crowns.

VODICKA: We're fair people to deal with, Private. And naturally we don't intend to harm ourselves either.

ENGL: Why are you doing it?

VODICKA: *(Stretching out his hand.)* The papers!

(Engl goes and gives them to him. Vodicka hands them to Turzник. Hurnik lowers the nozzle. Janik takes the apparatus from him.)

VODICKA: I'll tell you why, Corporal. Everybody's got to live, right? We firemen live off fires. The more fires, the more firemen, the better the positions, higher salaries, improved equipment. But—the more firemen and the more effective the equipment, the fewer the fires . . . You understand?

ENGL: *(Nods numbly.)*

VODICKA: So what choice do we have left to us if the only thing we know how to do is put out fires. When your business is putting out fires, you may find that you have to start up a holocaust or two now and then. Right, boys?

HURNIK & JANIK: Will do. *(They start carrying things up the ladder again.)*

VODICKA: But we take care of the others too—, as long as they don't spoil the fun. The young lady got it straight, even if she got her wires crossed later on. But we'll consider that over and done with, right, young lady? We have a successful mission and you have a dowry.

JARTCHI: *(Goes to the bed, sits down exhausted and leans her head on the bedboard.)*

VODICKA: Bon. The main thing is you stood by her when it counted. But that's why people get married. So there's only one detail left: when there's a fire, and we are not quite sure how it started, and afterwards the victims seem to be upset, the rule is that we leave a fire-guard behind at the burned location. Not necessarily forever, but for as long as is needed to make sure that everything is nice and quiet again. Hurnik and Janik are the most logical candidates. Pick out which one you like the best.

(Hurnik and Janik come sliding down the pole with a folding cot and other equipment.

They stand at attention next to each other. Jartchi's shoulders begin to quiver.)

VODICKA: Little lady, you don't have to worry. The guard will stay in the kitchen and be quiet as a mouse. That has the advantage that if you roast a duck again . . . oh, let's forget it.

ENGL: Commander, Sir.

VODICKA: I'm listening, Corporal.

ENGL: Maybe you could come up with another suggestion?

VODICKA: *(Turns to the firemen.)* Did you hear that? Bravo, Corporal. I think I'll promote you to Platoon Leader!

TVRZNIK: *(Opens the papers and notes it down.)*

VODICKA: As a Platoon Leader, you see, you could stay here by yourself.

ENGL: I'm—

VODICKA: A Platoon Leader of the fire department can fulfill the function of fire guard without assistance.

ENGL: But I'm not . . .

VODICKA: Everybody—Attention!

(Janik and Hurnik stand at attention. Turzник opens the file and hands it to Vodicka. Instinctively Engl also snaps to attention.)

VODICKA: Corporal Engl Jaroslav, I herewith promote you to the position of Platoon Leader of the fire department. At ease! *(Gives the file back to Turzник.)*

TVRZNIK: *(Hands Engl the file and a pen.)* Anywhere.

VODICKA: We're making an exception, mainly to calm down the young lady. By the way she'll have to stand guard herself, of course, when you're at work. From now on you'll receive an additional salary of 2000 crowns every month.

JARTCHI: *(Stops crying and dazed, lifts her head.)*

VODICKA: Well, Mr. Engl?

ENGL: *(Without saying a word, he signs.)*

VODICKA: My congratulations, Platoon Leader. *(Shakes his hand, embraces him and kisses him.)*

(After that Janik, Hurnik, and Turzник shake his hand. Then Janik takes the folding cot back out.)

VODICKA: With this signature you have formally recognized your obligations. And now as for your rights . . .

TVRZNIK: *(Hands him various vouchers from his file.)* Voucher for the helmet . . . For the uniform . . . For the equipment . . . As well as a cash advance of 312 crowns. *(Pays him in bills and coins.)*

VODICKA: Well, look at that! That happens to be just enough for the insurance premium.

JANIK: *(From above.)* Commander, UPOR is calling.

VODICKA: I'm listening.

JANIK: UPOR wants to know why we've been here so long.

VODICKA: Why? Is there a fire somewhere?

JANIK: No.

VODICKA: Report to UPOR. Action successfully concluded. Departure shortly. Receiver remains on.

JANIK: Roger. Will be reported.

VODICKA: We will proceed according to plan.

JANIK: Roger. Will not be reported. *(Outside a motor starts turning over. It starts up.)*

VODICKA: Everyone—Forward march!

FIREMEN: Roger. Will do.

TVRZNIK: *(Ties up the papers, takes them between his teeth and climbs up.)*

VODICKA: Platoon Leader Engl!

ENGL: *(Standing at attention.)* I'm listening.

VODICKA: You take over the fire watch.

ENGL: Will do.

VODICKA: Best of luck in your new job and marriage.

ENGL: Roger.

(Vodicka climbs out. Hurnik, who is carrying the flame thrower on his back again, aims the nozzle at Engl and Jartchi, makes a hissing noise, and then makes believe he is setting the whole room on fire like a kid playing soldier. Then he too climbs out. Right after that the ladder and pole are pulled up. The truck starts away. The fire siren sounds and moves away quickly. Engl has been standing at attention until this point. Now he rushes desperately to the stairway door. It is locked, and the key has disappeared. He runs to the basement window and tries to jump up and pull himself up in vain.)

ENGL: *(Screams.)* Jartchi! Come and help!

(Desperately he tries to shove the clothes stand through the window, and see if he can climb out like that. That also doesn't work. Jartchi doesn't move. He drops everything and runs to her.)

ENGL: Do you hear? We've got to go to the police right away!

JARTCHI: *(Lost in thought, she just shakes her head.)*

ENGL: You were right. They'll understand that we had no choice. They were capable of anything . . . So hurry up!

JARTCHI: *(Without saying a word, she takes off her wedding dress.)*

ENGL: What are you doing?

JARTCHI: *(Wearing only panties and bra, she takes a bucket, a broom, and some rags from the corner.)*

ENGL: What are you doing now?

JARTCHI: Cleaning up.

ENGL: What . . . ? For God's sake!

JARTCHI: What do you mean . . . ! The clothes cabinet is kindling . . . the kitchen cabinet is ashes . . .

ENGL: Jartchi, have you gone crazy?

JARTCHI: *(Begins to clean up.)* On the contrary.

ENGL: What do you mean, on the contrary? Stop it. *(Tries to grab the broom.)* I'm telling you, we've got to go to the police!

JARTCHI: *(Defending herself.)* Let me go!

ENGL: Jartchi . . .

JARTCHI: *(Pulls away from him, sharply.)* Did you get three hundred and twelve crowns from them?

ENGL: Yes, but—

JARTCHI: So what do you want the police for? Hurry up and pay the insurance premium, so that you get today's date on it!

ENGL: But we're not going to accept this money!

JARTCHI: Forty three thousand? And why not? Can you tell me that?

ENGL: So that we'll be completely in their power?

JARTCHI: You idiot! You idiot! You should get down on your knees and thank me. They had us so completely in their power that if it weren't for their fear they would calmly have burned down the whole damned place, everything, us included, just to chalk up Brownie points with the authorities. Come on! We got off easy!

ENGL: Now you probably expect me to stand guard?

JARTCHI: And why not? They probably won't bother you if you're one of them.

ENGL: Jartchi, be reasonable! Think what you're asking me to do! Come on . . .

JARTCHI: Why don't you try and be reasonable. You're not a little baby. You have a wife, you want to have a family . . . Well, do something for them. What good are the police, if the firemen come back?

(The fire truck signal is heard in the distance. Terrified Jartchi immediately leaps into the bed and covers herself with the sheet. The siren dies away. Engl stands next to the bed, unsure of what to do next. Then he kneels down in front of her.)

ENGL: Jartchi . . . I love you . . . I don't want you to have to be afraid . . . Are you listening? . . . I'll do whatever you think is right. Do you hear me? I'll pay the insurance. I'll put our money in the bank, and then everything will be like before.

JARTCHI: (*Under the covers.*) Then get going! Hurry up!

(*Engl stands up, goes quickly into the kitchen. Pause. Then he laughs shrilly. He comes to the doorway and laughs like a crazy man. In one hand he's holding an empty silverware-chest, in the other an open handbag with a chain.*)

JARTCHI: (*Can't stand it any longer and looks out from under the covers.*) What's the matter with you?

ENGL: The money—the silverware—everything gone! They were . . . just thieves!

(*Stunned she stands up in the bed, then he grabs her and whirls her madly around the room, until she is caught up in the feeling of relief, and joins in enthusiastically in the romp. Then they both fall on the bed, and the laughter changes into sudden passion.*)

JARTCHI: (*Hisses like a tigress.*)

ENGL: (*Hisses like a lion.*)

JARTCHI: (*Hisses more strongly and rips off his jacket.*)

ENGL: (*Hisses even more strongly, rips off her bra and stops short.*) And what if they're not really thieves?

JARTCHI: (*Uneasy again.*) What if it's just as a bonus that they . . .

BOTH: (*Unison.*) —steal?

END

A Blue Angel

Milan Uhde

translated by Vera Pech

adapted to the American idiom by Peter Stenberg

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