

treat for me. Instead of going after it on the spot, I'll take a piece of steel wool and give the shaft a good rub, then have another look at the paper and check whether I have the strength to pull out the book and open it, and not until I decide I do have the strength will I pick it up, and even then it shakes in my hands like a bride's bouquet at the altar. That's the way it was in the old days, too, when I played soccer for the village club: I knew the lineup wasn't posted in the Lower Tavern until Thursday, but I would ride down on Wednesdays, my heart thumping, and stand there astride my bike scrutinizing the notice board itself—the lock, the glass case—unable to look directly at the notice, then I'd read out the name of our club, letter by letter, and only then glance at the lineup, but since it was Wednesday the lineup was still the previous week's, so off I rode, to return the next day, when again I would stand there astride my bike scrutinizing everything but the lineup, and once I took hold of myself, I would read slowly down the lineup of the first team, slowly down the lineup of the second team, and slowly down the lineup of the juniors, and not until I found my name among the substitutes was I happy again.

Standing in front of the gigantic press at Bubny, I had the same feeling, and once I was over the initial shock, I took hold of myself and glanced at the machine, which rose up to the glass roof like the gigantic altar at St. Nicholas in Prague. It was even bigger than I had expected, with a conveyor belt as long and wide as the one that slowly dumps coal under the grates at the Ho-

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For thirty-five years now I've compacted wastepaper in a hydraulic press, for thirty-five years I thought there was no other way, but then I began hearing about a new press over in Bubny, a gigantic press that did the work of twenty, and when eyewitnesses reported it made bales of seven and eight hundred pounds, bales delivered directly to the train by forklift, I said to myself, "This is something you've got to see, Haňtá, with your own eyes. It's time for a courtesy call." And when I got to Bubny and saw the enormous glass structure and heard the press booming away, I was so shaken I couldn't look at the machine, I just stood there and turned my head away, fumbled with my shoelaces—anything to keep from looking that machine in the face.

To peer into the mass of wastepaper and find the spine and boards of a rare book has always been a special

lešovice Power Station, but what was slowly moving along this belt was books, books put there by young workers in getups quite different from what I or others like me wore at work: they were wearing orange and baby-blue gloves and yellow American baseball caps, and overalls that went up to their chests, and suspenders that went over their shoulders and crossed on their backs and showed off the T-shirts and turtlenecks they had on underneath. And nowhere did I see a light bulb: sunlight streamed in through the glass walls and glass ceiling, and the ceiling had a ventilation system to boot. But it was the gloves that got my goat: I always worked with my bare hands, I loved the feel of the paper in my fingers, but nobody here had the slightest desire to experience the palpable charm of wastepaper, and the conveyor belt moved the books and some miscellaneous scraps of white paper just as the Wenceslas Square escalator moves people up into the street, and that paper went straight into an enormous drum, a drum as big as the cauldron used for brewing at the Smíchov Brewery, and when the drum was full, the conveyor belt turned itself off and a propellerlike contraption descended from the ceiling, forced its mammoth strength on the paper, and with a magnificent snort returned to the ceiling, whereupon the conveyor belt jerked new books into motion and on to the oval drum as big as the fountain in Charles Square. By now I had calmed down enough to realize that the machine compacted and baled whole runs of books, and through the glass wall I could see trucks pulling up with boxes of books piled to the brim, the entire printing of

a book going straight into the pulper before a single page could be sullied by the human eye, brain, or heart. Only now did I see the workers at the foot of the conveyor belt tearing open the boxes, taking the virgin books out of them, pulling the covers off, and tossing the naked insides on the belt, and it didn't matter what page they fell open to: nobody ever looked into them, nobody even dreamed of looking into them, because whereas I stopped my press all the time, they had to keep the belt full and moving. It was inhuman, the work they were doing in Bubny; it was like work on a trawler, when the nets are hauled in and the crew sort big fish from small, tossing them on belts that go directly to canning machines in the bowels of the ship: one fish after another, one book after another.

Plucking up my courage, I climbed the steps to the platform that ran around the oval drum, and as I walked along it, imagining myself in the brewing room at Smíchov, where they brew five hundred hectoliters of beer at once, or on the second-story scaffolding of a house under repair, I looked down and saw the control panel with all its colored buttons and the propeller mashing the contents of the drum the way you mash a ticket in your fingers when you're not thinking about it, and I was so scared I looked this way and that, and what I saw was workers bathed in glass-wall sun, their overalls and T-shirts and caps lost in a riot of color, like exotic birds they were, like kingfishers, Norwegian bullfinches, like parrots. But that wasn't what scared me; what scared me was that suddenly I knew for certain that the gigantic

press before me was sounding the knell of all smaller presses, I saw that all this meant a new era in my specialty, that these people were different and their habits different. Gone were the days of small joys, of finds, of books thrown away by mistake: these people represented a new way of thinking. Even if each of the workers took home one book from each printing as payment in kind, it wouldn't be the same, it would still be the end of us, the old guard, because we were all educated unwittingly: each of us had a decent home library of books we'd happened to rescue, and each of us read those books in the blissful hope of making a change in his life. But the biggest shock came when I saw the young workers shamelessly guzzling milk and soft drinks—legs spread wide, hand on hip—straight from the bottle. Then I knew the good old days had come to an end, the days when a worker shoveled in his own wastepaper, went down on his knees in one-on-one combat, and ended each day filthy and exhausted from the effort. This was a new era with new men and new methods—think of drinking *milk* at work, when everyone knows that even a cow would rather die of thirst than touch a drop of the stuff! I couldn't take any more, so I circled the press to have a look at the fruit of its labor, a single titanic bale the size of a rich family's mausoleum, the size of a Wertheim safe, and saw it descend onto the platform of the lizardlike forklift, which jerked its way around and out to a ramp leading straight to a freight car. I put my head in my hands—dirty human hands with fingers gnarled like vines by work—but soon

dropped them in disgust and watched my arms swing from the shoulders.

Just then the noon break began and the conveyor belt stopped and the workers sat down under a large board with all kinds of notices and announcements pinned on it, and each worker took out a bottle of milk and unpacked the lunch delivered by the lunch woman, and while they sat there laughing and chatting and slowly washing down their salami and cheese and buttered rolls with milk and soft drinks, I stood clinging to the railing, afraid of toppling over from the bits and pieces of conversation I overheard. It turned out that they were a Brigade of Socialist Labor, and every Friday the factory sent a bus to take them to the factory chalet in the Krkonoše Mountains, and last year they'd gone on a tour of France and Italy and this year they were going to Bulgaria and Greece. After watching them collect names for the Balkan tour and talk one another into signing up, I wasn't the least bit surprised to see them strip half naked to take advantage of the rays of the sun, now high in the sky, and hear them discuss how to make the most of that afternoon—whether to go for a swim in the river or have a game of soccer.

That Greek holiday of theirs gave me a real jolt: I had dreamed myself to Greece by reading Herder and Hegel, I had developed a Dionysian concept of the world by reading Friedrich Nietzsche, but I had never been on a holiday; I had to spend nearly all my time off making up days missed—my boss deducted two days for every unexcused absence—and if I did have a day left over,

I'd work for the extra pay, because I was always behind, there were always mounds of paper in the cellar and in the courtyard, more paper than I could get to. So for thirty-five years I'd lived with, lived through, a daily Sisyphus complex, the kind so beautifully described for me by Messrs. Sartre and Camus, especially the latter: the more bales driven out of my courtyard, the more wastepaper filled my cellar, whereas the Brigade of Socialist Labor at Bubny was always on schedule. Now they were back at work, nicely tanned, the sun deepening the hue of their Grecian bodies even as they toiled, not at all upset at the thought of going to Hellas knowing next to nothing about Aristotle or Plato or even Goethe, that extension of ancient Greece, no, they just went on working, pulling covers off books and tossing the bristling, horrified pages on the conveyor belt with the utmost calm and indifference, with no feeling for what the book might mean, no thought that somebody had to write the book, somebody had to edit it, somebody had to design it, somebody had to set it, somebody had to proofread it, somebody had to make the corrections, somebody had to read the galley proofs, and somebody had to check the page proofs, print the book, and somebody had to bind the book, and somebody had to pack the books into boxes, and somebody had to do the accounts, and somebody had to decide that the book was unfit to read, and somebody had to order it pulped, and somebody had to put all the books in storage, and somebody had to load them onto the truck, and somebody had to drive the truck here, where workers wearing orange and baby-

blue gloves tore out the books' innards and tossed them onto the conveyor belt, which silently, inexorably jerked the bristling pages off to the gigantic press to turn them into bales, which went on to the paper mill to become innocent, white, immaculately letter-free paper, which eventually would be made into other, new, books.

And as I stood there, leaning on the railing and watching the work going on below me, a group of children with their teacher appeared in the sunlight, a school trip, I guessed, a chance for the children to see how wastepaper is recycled, and then the teacher picked up a book, called her pupils' attention to it, and demonstrated how it was torn apart, after which all her pupils, one after the other, picked up books, discarded the jackets, and started tearing them apart, and even though their fingers were small and the books put up a good deal of resistance, the fingers won out, and soon the children's foreheads smoothed over, and their work, encouraged by an occasional hand-wave from the Brigade, proceeded without a hitch. It reminded me of the time I visited the poultry farm in Libuš and saw young girls pulling out the innards of chickens hung up live on a conveyor belt, working with the same deft motions the children used to pull out the innards of the books, tossing livers, lungs, and hearts into the proper buckets, while the belt carried the twitching chickens off for further operations, and what struck me most as I looked on was that all those girls in Libuš could be cheerful and gay doing what they were doing and doing it in the midst of a thousand cages with ten half-dead chickens in each

cage plus a few escapees waddling around or pecking but never thinking to fly away from the hooks awaiting them on the conveyor belt. Anyway, the children being taught to tear apart books showed so much zeal that one little boy and one little girl sprained their little fingers struggling with the nasty covers of books that had rebelled, refused to capitulate, and while the children's teacher bandaged up their injuries, a few workers came to the rescue, spilling the insides of the recalcitrant books onto the conveyor belt with a flick of the wrist. The heavens may be far from humane, but I'd had about all I could take.

So I turned, went down the stairs, and was on my way out when I heard a voice call, "Hey, Haňtá, you old loner, you! How does the new press grab you?" I turned back and saw a young man in a yellow baseball cap standing in the sun by the railing and holding up a bottle of milk in a theatrical gesture, like the Statue of Liberty. He was laughing and waving his bottle, they were all laughing, and I realized they knew who I was and even liked me, and all the time I'd been wandering around feeling crushed they'd been watching me and wondering if I was impressed with them and their gigantic new machine, and now they were laughing and waving their orange and baby-blue gloves in the air. I put my head in my hands and ran out of the room, away from their rich and varied laughter, down a long corridor lined with thousands of boxes of books, a whole run of books racing back as I lurched forward. I stopped at the end of it, unable to resist tearing open one of the boxes,

and what I saw was that the book the children had been tearing apart, the book that took revenge on the fingers of the little boy and little girl, was a prewar, preteen adventure novel, and I pulled out one of the books and looked on the last page, and there I learned that eighty-five thousand copies had been printed, and since it was in three volumes, over a quarter of a million books would soon do vain battle with children's fingers. And as I walked down other corridors, thousands of silent, defenseless books passed before me like the chickens that had broken out of their cages at the slaughterhouse in Libuš, the chickens that waddled and pecked for a while but were always caught by the girls, who then hung them on the conveyor belt's hooks, thus condemning them, like these books stacked along the corridors, to an early grave.

If I could go to Greece, I said to myself, I'd make a pilgrimage to Stagira, the birthplace of Aristotle, I'd run around the track at Olympia, run in my underwear, in long johns with shoelaces tied round the ankles, in honor of all Olympic champions, if I could go to Greece. If I could go to Greece with that Brigade of Socialist Labor, I'd lecture to them on more than just philosophy and architecture, I'd lecture to them on all the suicides, on Demosthenes, on Plato, on Socrates, if I could go to Greece with the Brigade of Socialist Labor. But they belonged to a new era, a new world, it would all go right over their heads, everything was too different nowadays. Thinking these thoughts, I walked down the back steps to my cellar and its murk and must, and began patting

the old drum's shiny, warped wood, when all at once I heard a scream, a mournful roar, and turned to find my boss glaring at me with bloodshot eyes, bellowing his rage over how long I'd been away and how both my cellar and his courtyard were clogged with wastepaper again, and although I didn't quite grasp everything he said, I felt how vile I was and how fed up with me he was, because he kept calling me a name no one had ever called me before—nitwit, nitwit, nitwit. First the gigantic press, then the Brigade of Socialist Labor and its summer tour of Greece, and finally me, in my world of moral contradictions, little me, the nitwit. So I worked the whole afternoon without a break, forked wastepaper into the drum as if it were the conveyor belt at Bubny, and much as the shiny book bindings flirted with me, I fought them off, repeating to myself, "No, no. You mustn't peek at a single book. Be as cold as a Korean hangman." I worked as though shoveling a pile of lifeless matter, and the machine worked with me, spluttering and twitching, its motor overheating, because it wasn't used to the tempo and had always been congested and rheumatic because of the cellar air. When I felt thirsty, I ran out and ran back across the courtyard with a bottle of milk, and even though each swallow was like a swallow of barbed wire, I didn't give up, I drank it a gulp at a time, the way I took cod-liver oil as a kid. Anyway, the milk was so awful that in two hours I'd cleared away enough paper to open up the hole in the ceiling again, which was important because it was Thursday, and every Thursday I waited with heart in mouth for the head of

the Comenius Library to make his visit, and sure enough he came and stood over the opening with his usual basket of philosophy rejects, but when he emptied it, I didn't pick up the books that had fallen at my feet, I shoveled them straight into the drum, and even though I couldn't help noticing—my heart broke when I saw it—the *Metaphysics of Morals*, in it went with the rubbish, and on and on I worked, making bale after bale, no Old Masters this time around, a bale is a bale is a bale, I did only what I was paid for, my artistic days were over, and I realized that if I did only what I was supposed to do, I could be a one-man Brigade of Socialist Labor, and if I increased my output by fifty percent I could have a chance at the factory chalet in the mountains and, more important, a holiday in fabulous Greece—in other words, a chance to put on my long johns and run around the track at Olympia and pay my respects to Aristotle in Stagira. So I kept slurping milk and working, working inhumanly, unfeelingly, the way they worked at the gigantic press in Bubny, and in the evening, when I had finished and proved I wasn't such a nitwit after all, my boss, who was having a shower in the facilities behind the office, yelled out to me from under the spray that he wasn't going to waste any more time on me and had sent a letter to the higher-ups telling them to do with me as they saw fit.

I sat there for a while, listening to the boss drying himself off with his terry towel, and all of a sudden I felt a wave of nostalgia for Manča, who had written to me several times inviting me to nearby Klánovice, where

she now lived, so I pulled a pair of socks over my dirty feet and ran out to catch the bus, and even though it was nearly dark by the time the bus let me off, I found someone who told me her address, and soon I was standing before a cottage in the woods with the sun going down behind it. But when I opened the door, I found nobody in the hall or the kitchen or any of the other rooms, so I went out into the back garden, and there I had even more of a shock than in Bubny. For there, against a backdrop of spreading pine and amber sky, stood a huge statue of an angel, as large as the Čech monument in Prague, and against the statue stood a ladder, and on the ladder stood an old man in a light-blue smock, white ducks, and white bucks, fashioning a beautiful woman's head out of the stone with his hammer, or rather fashioning a head that was neither male nor female, the androgynous face of a member of the heavenly host, and I saw him look down now and then at a woman sitting in a chair and sniffing a rose, I watched him transfer her features to stone with a chisel and a few light taps of the hammer, and that woman was my Maňa. Maňa had gray hair now, but she wore it in a kind of reformatory cut, a crew cut, like an athlete with a touch of spirituality; one of her eyes was lower than the other, which gave her a distinguished look, and if she seemed to squint a little, it was not because she had bad vision but because one of her eyes had simply got stuck while staring beyond the threshold of the infinite into the very center of an equilateral triangle, into the very heart of being, or, as a Catholic existentialist

once put it, her defective eye symbolized the diamond's eternal blemish. Anyway, I stood there thunderstruck, and what struck me most of all was the statue's two big white wings, which looked like two giant white cupboards, and seemed to be in motion, feathers and all, as if Maňa were flapping them lightly before soaring or after landing, and I could see with my own eyes that Maňa, who had always hated books, who had never in her life read a book through except to lull herself to sleep, was ending her earthly days as a saint.

Meanwhile, twilight had given way to night, and while the old artist stood balanced on the ladder as if suspended from the sky, Maňa gave me her hand and told me that the old man was her last lover, the last link in the chain of men she had known, and that since he could now love her only in spirit he had decided to compensate by building her a monument she could enjoy in the garden as long as she lived and place on her grave as a kind of coffinweight when she died. And while he worked on, perfecting the expression on the angel's face by the light of the rising moon, Maňa showed me around the cottage, from basement to attic, explaining in hushed tones how an angel had come to her and she had obeyed him and taken up with a ditchdigger and spent all her savings on a plot in the woods, and the ditchdigger dug the foundation and slept in a tent with her, but then she threw him over for a bricklayer, and the bricklayer made love to her in the tent and put up all the walls, and then Maňa took up with a carpenter and he did all the carpentry work and shared her bed, but then she threw

him over for a plumber, who slept in the same bed as the carpenter but did all the plumbing, only to be replaced by a roofer, who both made love to her and laid her roof with concrete tile but was eventually replaced by a mason, who roughcast all her walls and ceilings by day and slept in her bed by night, until she took up with a cabinetmaker, who made all new furniture in return for her bed, and so it was that Manča, with nothing but a bed and a clear-cut goal, built herself a house. And now she had taken up with an artist, whose love, though platonic, was such that he had undertaken a statue of her in the form of an angel, which brought us back to where we began and completed the circle of Manča's life just in time to see the white bucks and ducks—the light-blue smock, having blended with the moonlight, was invisible—descend the ladder as if from heaven, and when his shoes touched ground, the hoary old man gave me his hand and said that Manča had told him all about me, that Manča was his muse, that Manča had rendered him so productive that he was now ready to continue the Almighty's work and make her an angel.

I returned to Prague on the last train, went home, and stretched out drunk and fully dressed under my two-ton canopy of books, and as I lay there thinking, I realized that Manča had unwittingly become what she never dreamed of becoming, that she had gone farther than anyone I'd ever known. I, who had constantly read books in search of a sign, never received a word from the heavens, while she, who had always hated books, became what she was meant to be, the kind of person

people write about, and, more important, she had reached her full height. As I left, her wings shone in the night like two brightly lit windows in an Empire châteaueau; they had taken her far beyond our love story, beyond its ribbons and the turd she had brought back on her skis and promenaded in front of the Hotel Renner in the foothills of Golden Peak.