

I

Corde, who led the life of an executive in America – wasn't a college dean a kind of executive? – found himself six or seven thousand miles from his base, in Bucharest, in winter, shut up in an old-fashioned apartment. Here everyone was kind – family and friends, warmhearted people – he liked them very much, to him they were 'old Europe.' But they had their own intense business. This was no ordinary visit. His wife's mother was dying. Corde had come to give support. But there was little he could do for Minna. Language was a problem. People spoke little French, less English. So Corde, the Dean, spent his days in Minna's old room sipping strong plum brandy, leafing through old books, staring out of the windows at earthquake-damaged buildings, winter skies, gray pigeons, pol-larded trees, squalid orange-rusty trams hissing under trolley cables.

Corde's mother-in-law, who had had first a heart attack and then a stroke, was in the hospital. Only the Party hospital had the machines to keep her alive, but the rules were rigid there. She was in intensive care, and visits were forbidden. Corde and Minna had flown a day and a night to be with her but in five days had seen her only twice – the first time by special dispensation, the second without official permission. The hospital superintendent, a colonel in the secret police, was greatly offended because his rules had been broken. He was a tough bureaucrat. The staff lived in terror of him. Minna and her aunt Gigi had decided (Corde took part in their discussions) that it would be polite to ask for an appointment. 'Let's try to have a sensible talk with him.'

On the telephone the Colonel had said, 'Yes, come.'

Minna, when she went to see him, brought her husband along – perhaps an American, a dean from Chicago, not quite elderly but getting there, would temper the Colonel's anger. No such thing happened. The Colonel was a lean, hollow-templed, tight-wrapped, braided-whip sort of man. Clearly, he wasn't going to give any satisfaction. An institution must keep its rules. Corde put in his two cents; he mentioned that he was an administrator himself – he had worked for many years on the *Paris Herald*, so he spoke French well enough. The Colonel politely let him speak his piece; he darkly, dryly listened, mouth compressed. He received, tolerated, the administrative comparison, despised it. He did not reply, and when the Dean was done he turned again to Minna.

There had been an impropriety. Under no circumstances could the administration tolerate that. Outraged, Minna was silent. What else could she be? Here only the Colonel had the right to be outraged. His high feeling – and he allowed it to go very high – was moderated in expression only by the depth of his voice. How sharp could a basso sound? Corde himself had a deep voice, deeper than the Colonel's, vibrating more. Where the Colonel was tight, Corde was inclined to be loose. The Colonel's sparse hair was slicked straight back, military style; Corde's baldness was more random, a broad bay, a straggling growth of back hair. From this enlarged face, the brown gaze of an intricate mind of an absent, probably dreamy tendency followed the conversation. You could not expect a Communist secret police colonel to take such a person seriously. He was only an American, a dean of students from somewhere in the middle of the country. Of these two visitors, Minna was by far the more distinguished. This beautiful woman, as the Colonel was sure to know, was a professor of astronomy, had an international reputation. A 'hard' scientist. It was important for the Colonel to establish that he was not moved by such considerations. He was in as hard a field as she. Harder.

Minna spoke emotionally about her mother. She was an only child. The hearing the Colonel gave her was perfectly correct. A daughter who had come such a distance; a mother in intensive care, half paralyzed. Without knowing the language, Corde could understand all

this easily enough, and interpreted the Colonel's position: Where you had hospitals, you had dying people, naturally. Because of the special circumstances an exception had been made for the *doamna* and her husband on their arrival. But there had been a second visit (here the incensed emphasis again), without permission.

Minna, in terse asides, translated for her husband. It wasn't really necessary. He loosely sat there in wrinkled woolen trousers and sports jacket, the image of the inappropriate American – in all circumstances inappropriate, incapable of learning the lessons of the twentieth century; spared, or scorned, by the forces of history or fate or whatever a European might want to call them. Corde was perfectly aware of this.

He nodded, his brown eyes, bulging somewhat, in communion with the speckled activity of the floor, uniformly speckled over the entire hospital. The director's office was tall but not much roomier than a good-sized closet – a walk-in closet at home. The desk, too, was small. Nothing was big except the Colonel's authority. The electric fixture was hung very high, remote. Here, as everywhere in Bucharest, the light was inadequate. They were short on energy in Rumania – something about subnormal rainfall and low water in the dams. That's right, blame nature. December brown set in at about three in the afternoon. By four it had climbed down the stucco of old walls, the gray of Communist residential blocks: brown darkness took over the pavements, and then came back again from the pavements more thickly and isolated the street lamps. These were feebly yellow in the impure melancholy winter effluence. Air-sadness, Corde called this. In the final stage of dusk, a brown sediment seemed to encircle the lamps. Then there was a livid death moment. Night began. Night was very difficult here, thought Albert Corde. He sat slumped and heavy-headed, his wide head seeking the support it could not get from its stem. This brought his moody eyes forward all the more, the joined brows, the bridge of his spectacles out of level. It was his wife with her fine back, her neck, her handsome look, who made the positive impression. But that was nothing to the whiplash Colonel. Perhaps it only reminded him that this distinguished lady had defected twenty years ago, when she had been allowed out to

study in the West, was here only because her mother was dying, arriving under the protection of her husband, this American dean; landing without a visa, met by a US official (this meant a certain degree of influence). The Colonel would have all this information, of course. And Minna was not in a strong position; she had never formally renounced her Rumanian citizenship. If it had a mind to, the government could make trouble for her.

Valeria, the old woman, was not a Party member now, hadn't been one since, as Minister of Health, she fell in disgrace. That had happened thirty years ago. She was then denounced publicly by press and radio, expelled, threatened with prison, with death, too. Before he could come to trial, one of her colleagues who fell in the same shake-up had his head hacked off in his cell. This old militant who had survived Antonescu and also the Nazis was butchered with an ax or a meat cleaver. Dr Valeria somehow came through. Dr Valeria herself had founded this very hospital, the Party hospital. Three weeks ago, probably feeling the first touches of sickness (Corde thought of it as the advance death thrill, the final presage; each of us in peculiar communication with his own organs and their sick-signals), she began to make the rounds, out all day on the buses and trolley cars, said Gigi, calling on old acquaintances, arranging to be admitted. She had been rehabilitated late in the fifties, her pension restored, and she had quiet connections of her own among the old-timers of the bureaucracy.

So she was hooked in now to the respirator, scanner, monitor. The stroke had knocked out the respiratory center, her left side was paralyzed. She couldn't speak, couldn't open her eyes. She could hear, however, and work the fingers of her right hand. Her face was criss-crossed every which way with tapes, like the Union Jack. Or like window-panes in cities under bombardment. Corde, an old journalist before he became a dean, knew these wartime scenes – sandbags, window tapes. Never saw the criss-cross on a face like hers, though; too delicate for it. Still, the next step, a tracheotomy, was even worse. He was an experienced man. He knew the stages.

Before you were allowed to approach Valeria you had to put on a sterile gown and oversocks, huge and stiff. Also a surgical cap and

mask. Valeria understood that her daughter had come, and her eyes moved under the lids. Minna was there. And protected by her husband – further proof of his dependability. When Corde spoke to her, she answered by pressing his fingers. Her son-in-law then noticed for the first time a deformity of one of her knuckles. Had it been broken once, was it arthritic? It was discolored. He had never before seen her hair down, only braided and pinned. He would never have guessed this fine white hair to be so long. There was also her big belly. Beneath it her thin legs. That, too, was painful to see. Every bit of it moved him – more than that, it worked him up; more than that, it made him wild, drove him into savage fantasies. He wanted to cry, as his wife was doing. Tears did come, but also an eager violence, a kind of get-it-over ecstasy mingling pity and destructiveness. Part of him was a monster. What else could it be?

These reactions were caused by exhaustion, partly. They must have been. The trip had been long. He was fagged, dried out. His guts were strained. He felt plugged in the rear. Circulation to the face and scalp seemed insufficient. And a kind of demonic excitement rose up, for which no resolution seemed possible. Like evil forces, frantic, foul, working away. At the same time, his tears for the old woman were genuine, too. For the moment, he could suppress nothing, force nothing. Equally helpless before good and bad. On the electronic screen of the monitor, symbols and digits shimmied and whirled, he heard a faint scratching and ticking.

The Colonel, towards the last of the interview, put on a long, judicious look – cunning, twisting the knife – and said that if Valeria was removed from the intensive care unit, Minna might come as often as she liked. Unhooked from the machines, the old woman would die in fifteen minutes. This of course he did not spell out. But there was your choice, madam. This was the man's idea of a joke. You delivered it at the point of a knife.

That part of the conversation Corde had missed. Minna had told him about it. 'My homecoming,' she said after the interview, as they were going down the cement walk to the parking lot.

'Like tying a plastic bag over your face and telling you to breathe deep.'

'I could kill him.' Perhaps she could, from the set of her face – big eyes, intaken lips. 'What should I do now, Albert? She'll be expecting us, waiting for us.'

They were riding home in Petrescu's Russian compact, one of those strong dreary cars they drive in the satellite countries.

Mihai Petrescu had been *chef de cabinet* to Minna's father and to Valeria when she succeeded her late husband in the Ministry. He was attached to the family. Not himself a physician, he must have been the Party watchdog. He couldn't have had much to report. Dr Raresh had been naively ideological, a Christian and moral Communist, praying for God's help before he opened a patient's skull. The country's first neurosurgeon, trained in Boston by the famous Cushing, he had been too emotional, too good, too much the high-principled doctor to make a Communist official. Minna said she could never understand how he could have been taken in so completely. In the thirties he had brushed aside as bourgeois propaganda what he had read in the world press about the Great Terror, Stalin's labor camps, the Communists in Spain, the pact with Hitler. Enthusiastic when Russian troops reached Bucharest, he went into the streets with roses for the soldiers. Within a week they had taken the watch from his wrist, put him out of his little Mercedes and driven it away. But he made no complaints. He did not move into a villa like other ministers. His colleagues disliked this. His austerity was too conspicuous. Before he died, the regime had already decided the man was a fool and kicked him upstairs. He was named ambassador to the U.S.A. They didn't want him around protesting the disappearance of his medical friends one after another. He didn't live to go to Washington. He lasted only a year.

When he died Valeria was offered the Ministry. She probably thought it might be dangerous to refuse. Minna was then a small girl. Petrescu stayed on as *chef de cabinet*. Lower-echelon KGB was how Corde figured him. Mihai seemed to have converted the official connection into familial intimacy. He told Corde when they had a schnapps together, '*Elle a été une mère, une consolatrice pour moi.*' And for others, by the dozens. Valeria was a matriarch. Corde was well aware of that.

But sometimes Petrescu stayed away for years. He had not been seen for many months before Valeria's stroke. And even now he disappeared, reappeared unpredictably. Petrescu was squat, small-eyed; his fedora was unimpeded by hair so that the fuzz of the hat brim mingled with the growth of his ears in all-revealing daylight. In every conversation about Valeria his sentences had a way of creeping upwards, his pitch climbed as high as his voice could bring it, and then there was a steep drop, a crack of emotion. He was dramatically fervent about Valeria. Studying his face, Corde at the same time estimated that something like three-fourths of his creases were the creases of a very tough character, a man you could easily imagine slamming the table during an interrogation, capable perhaps of pulling a trigger. It wasn't just in Raymond Chandler novels that you met tough guys. All kinds of people are tough. But with the ladies Petrescu was wonderful, he behaved with gallantry, or else with saintly delicacy, he jumped up, moved chairs, tumbled out of the driver's seat to open the doors of his Soviet car. Today he was standing by, upstairs, with advice, telephoning, volunteering, murmuring, as silken with Minna and Tanti Gigi as the long fleshy lobes of his ears were silken. His underlip was full of a fervent desire to serve. Before he disappeared – for he soon did disappear – he played a leading part in the emotional composition whose theme was Valeria's last days. Great Valeria's end. For she was great – this was the conclusion Corde finally reached.

The apartment was shared by Valeria and Tanti Gigi. Corde and Minna were staying there. Visiting nieces, cousins, had to go to hotels. But under the special consanguinity regulations, the Cordes were permitted to move in with Gigi. Something of an invalid, Tanti Gigi managed the household with hysterical efficiency. She seemed to do it all in bathrobe and slippers and from her bed. When he knew the problems of the city better – the queues forming at day-break, the aged women with oilcloth shopping bags waiting throughout the day – Corde was able to appreciate Gigi's virtuosity. The flat was as tentatively heated as it was electrically dim. Radiators turned cold after breakfast. The faucets went dry at 8 A.M. and did not run again until evening. The bathtub had no stopper. You

flushed the toilet with buckets of water. Corde was not a man to demand comforts. He merely observed all this – a hungry observer. The parlor, once the brain surgeon's waiting room, was furnished with aging corpulent overstuffed chairs of bald, peeling leather. There were openwork brass lamps which resembled minarets. It was all quality stuff from the bourgeois days. The Biedermeier cabinets were probably despised in the twenties by young revolutionists, but in old age they clung to these things as relics of former happiness. Very odd, thought Corde, how much feeling went into these sofas, old orange brocade and frames with mother-of-pearl inlay; and the bric-a-brac and thin carpets, gilt-framed pictures, fat editions of Larousse, antiquated medical books in German and English. After her disgrace and loss of pension, during the period of ostracism, Valeria sold off the best of the silver and china. The last of the Baccarat had been smashed in the recent earthquake. While they were lying on the floor Tanti Gigi had heard the crystal minutely crumbling and tinkling, dancing on the floor, she said. The objects that remained were of no terrific value, but they were obviously consecrated – they were the family's old things: Dr Raresh's worktable, Minna's bed, the pictures in her room, even her undergraduate notebooks.

Much better this old flat – it was a Balkan version of the Haussmann style – than the Intercontinental Hotel and the Plaza Athénée with their deluxe totalitarian comforts and the goings-on of the secret police – *securitate*: devices behind the draperies, tapes spinning in the insulated gloom. But you were bugged in the flat, too, probably with the latest American bugs. You name it, the manufacturing US would sell it. Or else the French, the Japanese, the Italians would sell it. So if you wanted to talk privately you went outside, and in the streets, too, Minna would nudge you, directing your attention to certain men lounging, walking slowly or chatting. 'Yup, I can spot 'em myself,' said Corde. The fat concierge, Ioanna, was in continual conversation with these loungers. She reported to them. But she was also a friend of the family. That was how it went. Valeria and Tanti Gigi had more than once explained matters to him.

Corde knew the old girls very well. Valeria had visited the States,

and he and Minna had often met them both abroad. When they were eligible for visas, the old sisters flew to Paris, Frankfurt, London. Of course they had to be sent for – no dollars, no passports – and they came out of the country without a penny, not even cab fare. Only last spring Valeria had joined Corde and Minna in England.

Valeria studied people closely, but she may not have been aware of the important place she held in Corde's feelings. How could she be? The deep-voiced slouching Dean would sit with his legs stretched out and his neck resting on the back of his chair like a reporter on a story, killing time patiently in a waiting room. His nonchalant way of looking at you, the extruded brown eyes, that drowned-in-dreams look, was probably the source of his reputation as a swinger, a chaser. Minna and Valeria had been warned against him. Erotic instability, womanizing, was the charge. Judged by the standards of perfect respectability, Corde had not been a good prospect for marriage. 'It's true he's been married before, but so have I,' said Minna to her mother. Valeria's influence was great, but in this instance Minna made her own decision. It was a sound decision. There was no instability. Corde proved to be entirely straight. After several years of observation Valeria gave him a clearance. She said to her daughter, 'You were perfectly right about Albert.' She was not after all one of your parochial Balkan ladies. She had studied Freud, Ferenczi, she was a psychiatrist – Corde forgave her the psychiatry; maybe psychiatry was different in the Balkans. He certainly wasn't kinky enough to be written up as a case history.

So there they were, in Minna's old room. It was still a schoolgirl's room. Valeria had kept it that way. There were textbooks, diplomas, group photographs. This was obviously Valeria's favorite place, where she read, sewed, wrote letters. Corde was curious about the books that crammed the shelves. Many were English and French. He found an old collection of Oscar Wilde published by some British reader's society in red cardboard, faded to weeping pink, and looked up some of the poems he had learned by heart as an adolescent, melodramatic pieces like 'The Harlot's House,' the puppet prostitute and the clockwork lover, the scandals of Greek love, the agonies of young men who had done so well at school but woke up

beside their murdered mistresses in London with blood and wine upon their hands. Why had they killed them? That's what love does to you. An unsatisfactory proposition. Corde particularly wanted to find the lines about the red hell to which a man's sightless soul might stray. He found it, it amused him – the earth reeling underfoot, and the weary sunflowers – but not for long. He put down the not-so-amusing book. He found the street more interesting.

Earthquake damage was still being repaired. A machine, a wheeled crane, worked its way down the block. A crew of two stood in the large bucket to patch cracks in stucco, working around the open porches. Women in kerchiefs whacked their carpets in the morning. From all sides one heard the percussion of carpet beaters. Give it to them! The dust went off in the sunlight. A dog barked, whined as if a beater had given him a whack, then barked again. The barking of the dog, a protest against the limits of dog experience (for God's sake, open the universe a little more!) – so Corde felt, being shut in. He might have gone rambling about the city, but Minna was afraid the *securitate* would pick him up. What if he were accused of selling dollars illegally? She had heard stories about this. Friends warned her. All right, she had worries enough, and he stayed put.

She was busy in the parlor. Friends she hadn't seen in twenty years came to call – Viorica, Doina, Cornelia. Corde was asked to present himself in the parlor, the American husband. The telephone rang all the time. As soon as possible he went back to the room, his retreat. For three days he thought how much good it would do him to go out and walk off the tensions he had brought from Chicago (cramps in his legs), then he stopped thinking about it.

Back to the shelves. He pulled away the beds to see what titles they concealed. Pedagogy was one of Valeria's interests. He found an unpublished primer with pictures of cows, piglets, ponies. Curious about Minna's adolescence, he leafed through albums, studying snapshots. In the drawers he turned up coins from former regimes, embossed buttons, documents from the time of the monarchy, stopped watches, Byzantine crosses on thin silver chains, newspaper clippings, letters from Dr Cushing to Raresh, one of his best pupils.

There were also items about Corde – installed as dean, receiving an honorary degree from Grinnell. Minna had sent her mother a copy of the first installment of his long article on Chicago, the one that had stirred up so much trouble. Trouble was still raging. That was some of what he had brought with him. Valeria had obviously read his piece closely, making check marks in the margin where he had described the crazy state of the prisoners in County Jail – the rule of the barn bosses, the rackets, beatings, sodomizings and stabbings in the worst of the tiers: in ‘Dodge City,’ ‘H-I’; the prisoners who tucked trouser bottoms into socks to keep the rats from running up their legs in the night. Now there *was* a red hell for the soul to stray into.

Obviously it intrigued Valeria the psychiatrist to study the personality of her son-in-law as it was revealed in his choice of topics; his accounts of beatings and buggings, of a murder with the sharp-honed metal of a bed leg, were underscored in red. He pored over these passages, hunched under his coat, noting how often he had mentioned the TV in each dayroom, the soaps and the sporting events, ‘society’s alternatives continually in view,’ and ‘how strangely the mind of the criminal is stocked with images from that other anarchy, the legitimate one.’ Valeria had circled these sentences. She hadn’t received the second installment. Mainly about the Rufus Ridpath scandal, the Spofford Mitchell case, it was filled with disobliging remarks about City Hall, the press, the sheriff, the governor. Corde had let himself go, indignant, cutting, reckless. He had made the college unhappy. One of its deans taking everybody on? A bad scene, an embarrassment. The administration behaved with restraint, but it was jittery. It was especially upset by Part Two. What would Valeria have thought of Part Two?

Valeria had never made Corde feel that she objected to the marriage; she had too much breeding for that, she was too tactful to antagonize him. She did study him, yes, but without apparent prejudice. Really, she was fair-minded. Although he hadn’t much liked being under observation, he conceded that it wasn’t unreasonable. ‘But Christ, do I need a parole officer?’ Of course he was uncomfortable, and when he was uncomfortable he grew more silent, speaking

only in a brief rumble. What was most distressing about being watched was that it made him see himself – a dish-faced man, long in the mouth. You could hardly blame him for being sensitive to close scrutiny. In giving his order to a waiter once, asking for an *omelette fines herbes*, he was pointedly corrected by Valeria. ‘The s is sounded – *feenzerbes*.’ He was stunned, the abyss of pettiness opened. It was an abyss.

Nevertheless he was strongly drawn to the old woman. Last spring the three of them had stayed together at Durrants in George Street, and he was always in their company, didn’t care to go off by himself. He tagged along to Liberty’s, Jaeger’s, Harrods. He enjoyed that. And last April great London had been wide open and the holiday gave him the kind of human ‘agreement’ (he could find no other term for it) he very badly needed, was evidently looking for continually. He gladly followed the two ladies through Harrods (‘Harrods of Jewry’ to him, but now filled with Arabs). The parcels were heaped up in Valeria’s room. He said to Minna, ‘Why not buy her something she can’t give away, for herself only?’

‘She doesn’t seem to need . . .’ Minna began. ‘It’s enough for her to be with – with us. And especially here, in London. She adores London.’

No one understood better than the English how to build coziness in a meager setting. You polished up old tables, you framed dinginess in margins of gilt; without apology, you dignified worn corners, brushed up the bald nap of your velours – these were the Dickensian touches that Corde approved. He wasn’t quite sure how Valeria viewed this less than luxurious hotel. Couldn’t her American son-in-law do better? Coming out of Bucharest, you probably would have preferred the Ritz. But he was a dean, merely, not the governor of Texas – no, the governor wouldn’t have been good enough for Minna, nor a member of the board of Chase Manhattan. Still, the feeling of human ‘agreement’ would not have been possible without the old woman’s acceptance. She accepted him, soon enough. He was all right. They were both all right. If his manner was quiet (the parolee on good behavior), hers was undemonstratively accommodating. In the morning she went down early to buy the *Times* for

Corde (by half past eight the porter was likely to tell him, 'Sorry, sir, sold out'). She made sure that there was a copy of the paper on her son-in-law's chair. Then she sat in her neat suit, waiting in the breakfast room, the green silk scarf about her neck – lovely blue-green. Until Minna joined her, Valeria did not accept so much as a cup of tea from the Spanish waiters. As breakfast drew to an end, Corde turned his chair aside slightly. The Dean, drawing back his head peculiarly – his neck was thin – focused his gaze on the *Times* (a foreign paper printed in his own language). Reading, he omitted no item of politics, the experienced newspaperman making his own swift observations. 'I know these guys,' was his attitude. As the ladies discussed their plans for the day, the Dean glanced also at the currency rates, the obituaries of civil servants and retired soldiers, the Court Calendar, items from Wimbledon – matters of minimal interest. He experienced alternate waves of bleakness and of warmth towards Valeria for her admirable control over such a diversity of factors – doubts (about him), love for her daughter, embarrassment at being without a penny of her own. Of course the daughter had a good income. But the son-in-law wanted very much to buy her coats, dresses, hats, purses, tickets, excursions, dinners, music, airline tickets. Then he would note her level look. She was wondering quietly about him. What sort of man is Albert – what is his quality? When he and Minna returned to their tight, small, neat Durrants room after breakfast, he said, 'Here's a hundred pounds. Buy the old girl some kid gloves. Take her to Bond Street.' Minna laughed at him.

Then he made an independent discovery, one it was impossible for Minna to make.

Minna, you see, had her astrophysical, mathematical preoccupations. Minna, in Corde's metaphor, was bringing together a needle from one end of the universe with a thread from the opposite end. Once this was accomplished, Corde couldn't say what there was to be sewn – this was his own way of concentrating his mind on the *mysterium tremendum*. Face it, the cosmos was beyond him. His own special ability was to put together for the general reader such pieces as this one from *Harper's*. Its topics (in Minna's schoolgirl room, he turned the pages) were the torments and wildness of black prisoners

under the jurisdiction of the disabled sheriff of Cook County, who had himself broken his neck in a patriotic street brawl with rampaging Weathermen in the Loop, when he missed a flying tackle; and . . . no, there the Dean checked it, cooled it. He would stop with his ability to describe a scene for the common reader; or to deal with undergraduates – he did that fairly well, too. Or with his more important ability to engage (inexplicably) the affections of a woman like his wife, who had chosen him to share her planetary life. (Forgiving him his defects, his sins. But she would never regret it.) The county sheriff who campaigned from his wheelchair was, for the moment, set aside.

Corde's discovery in London was that Valeria no longer had the strength to travel, to fly back and forth. She was too old. The diagnosis was sudden but it was complete: 'She can't hack it.' She was sick, she doctored herself (he had seen pill bottles when she opened her pocketbook). Pushing eighty, she flew to England. Unless Minna formally renounced her Rumanian citizenship, she couldn't go to see her mother. It might not be safe. Hard to say why Minna balked at this formal renunciation. She found excuses. 'I can't stand those people. I can't bear to correspond with them. Yes, I will go through with it. I've already got the forms filled in.' True, she concentrated mostly on her science, couldn't be bothered with government papers, but that was a superficial explanation, considering the strength of her feeling for Valeria. But she preferred to assume that her mother was strong and well. That Valeria should be too sick to go abroad was inadmissible. As for Valeria, she would rather die in an airport than tell her daughter, 'My dear, I'm too weak for suitcases, and I can't manage taxis, and I can't stand in line for customs, I'm too old for the jets.' No, she came to London, her head full of lists – and every day she told Minna, 'I have to bring dress material for Floara. I promised to get computer manuals for Ionel.' And so with boots for Doina, tea from Fortnum's for Gigi. For herself she bought colored postcards of Westminster Abbey.

Corde was called upstairs to strap her boxy rawhide valises. To squeeze them shut took some doing. How did the old woman manage to haul these two fat trunks? – they *were* almost trunks.

'It must take plenty of wangling to get these damn things through customs.'

'She's got what it takes,' said Minna. She shrugged.

She had to read a paper before a scientific meeting in Copenhagen, and for two days Corde was in charge of Valeria. He entertained her at the Étoile on Charlotte Street. She loved the Étoile. He took her to a Rowlandson exhibition at Burlington House. That meant standing in a queue outside, and then making your way through crowded halls. The old woman smiled calmly at the stout, rosy, frilling ladies of fashion, at the fops, but Corde soon saw that the outing was too much for her. Strange to watch, troubling. He was upset for her. She couldn't keep her balance; she was tipping, listing, seemed unable to coordinate the movements of her feet. He said, 'I've had enough Rowlandson, do you mind?' As he led her down the large staircase, the lightness and the largeness of her elbow surprised him. Why was the joint so big? It felt like dry sponge. She removed his hand. They emerged in the Piccadilly jam of vehicles and people. She said, 'You have things to do, Albert. I'm going back to the hotel.' He doubted even that she could hail a cab. He flagged one down and got in with her, saying, 'I left my appointment book at the hotel; I don't remember where I'm supposed to go next.' She made a place for him on the buttoned black leather seat and sat in the corner silent, even severe.

Corde's father had been an old-fashioned American, comfortable, calm, a 'Pullman car type,' his son called him. (The old guy had been a sort of playboy too, a man about town, but that was something else again.) Corde could reproduce his manner. That obtuse style was helpful now. He gave Valeria no sign that he had found her out. When he took her that night to a Turkish dinner in Wardour Street, she seemed stronger, she said how pleasant London was; she talked Communist politics, reminisced about Ana Pauker, in whose government she had served. He told her a little about life in Chicago. With red meat and a bottle of wine, she picked up somewhat. She said she had been tired that afternoon. Between three o'clock and five the body ran out of blood sugar.

'Yes, I go into an afternoon slump myself. Often.'

But he said quietly to Minna when they had seen Valeria off at Heathrow, 'Did the old girl say how good a time she had? I don't think she can make the trip again.'

'You're not serious. Her only pleasure is coming out. These holidays in a civilized place. And seeing us. She lives for it.'

He did not pursue the subject. He had gone on record. Minna would have to follow up in her own way.

II

It was an instinct with Corde – maybe it was a weakness – always to fix attention on certain particulars, in every situation to grasp the details. If he took Valeria to dine at the *Étoile*, he brought away with him a clear picture of the wine waiter. That a bald man had triple creases at the back of his skull could not be left out of account, nor could the shape of his thumbs, the health of his face, the spread of his nose, the strength of his stout Italian body in the waiter's suit. Corde's eyes took in also the dishes on the *hors d'oeuvre* cart, the slices of *champignons à la Grecque*, the brown sauce, the pattern of the table silver. With him, exclusively mental acts seldom occurred. He was temperamentally an image man. To observe so much was not practical, sometimes it was disabling, often downright painful, but actualities could not be left out.

So when he left Chicago, it had to be remembered that he packed his dusty black zippered garment bag. As he carried it, it rubbed against his leg with a slithering sound (the synthetic material expressing itself). In the bag, his undistinguished clothing – shirts spotted and scorched in the hand laundry, trousers that should have gone to the cleaner (he could shut his eyes and locate those spots exactly). Another item: in the fever of departure, he saw the floating ice blocks in Lake Michigan, gray-white and tan, the top layer of snow stained with sand blown from the beaches by the prevailing wind. Item: the red thermal undershirt he removed from his luggage because he imagined that Bucharest would be a Mediterranean sort

of place, a light city not a heavy one; rococo. Rococo! It was mass after mass of socialist tenements and government office buildings. Now he regretted that thermal shirt. Item: the tube of salve he needed for the rash about his ankles was squeezed dry, rolled up to the neck – he should have ordered another before leaving. Item: his pots of African violets. What good would it do to let the rods of ultra-violet light burn on? A crisis – how to save his plants! He had heard that if you put one end of a rope in a bucket of water, the other end would deliver sufficient moisture, but there was no time to set this up. Item: the can of Earl Grey tea on the kitchen counter, and the bananas. He took those with him to Europe. Essential documents were left on his desk. He hadn't been able to find his address book; he had most likely hidden it from himself. He wouldn't be writing letters anyway. His instinct was to cut, to drop everything and fly away unencumbered. It was only the violets he regretted leaving. Item: Minna packed her valise with astronomical papers, giving them priority over dresses. On the trip she couldn't be separated from these books and reprints. They weren't checked through but had to be carried as cabin luggage. Her eyes seemed to have been displaced by stress; they looked like the fruit in an eccentric still life. As soon as Gigi's wire came she stopped eating. In a matter of hours she was looking gaunt, and sallow; her face had a kind of negative color. Her underlip was retracted, and her chin filled with pressure marks. Corde was a close watcher of his wife. Item: the cab to the airport ran between levees of snow. Winter's first blizzard had struck Chicago. The cab was overheated and stank of excrement. Of dogs? Of people? It was torrid, also freezing; Arctic and Sahara, mixed. Also, the driver was sloshed with eau de cologne. The ribbed rubber floor was all filth and grit. Corde said, 'People have even stopped wiping themselves.' He took the precaution of saying this in French, and there was something false about that – raunchy gaiety (and disgust) in a foreign language. Anyhow it fell flat, as Minna scarcely heard him.

More items were checked on the way to O'Hare. The alarm system? The keys? The windows? Instructions to the super to remove the mail from the box, the newspapers from the front door? Had he

gone to the bank for dollars? Talked to de Prima, the lawyer? Left Valeria's telephone number with Miss Porson at the office? The college might need to reach them. Minna was thinking not of the Dean's special problems but of the time reserved for her on the telescope at Mount Palomar. She had been due there Christmas week, but that was now canceled, of course. 'Yes, they know where to find us,' he said. With his dense eyebrows, the plain length of his mouth, his low voice, his usual posture was one of composure, and now and then students told him that it was wonderful how 'laid back' he was. A handsome compliment but undeserved. He was engaged in a sharp rearguard action against the forces of agitation. When they took off from O'Hare, he felt that all the Chicago perplexities were injected into his nerves. Yet when he went into the lavatory of the Lufthansa 747 and the light went on, he seemed well enough to himself, with a mouth like a simple declarative sentence, although there were so many complex-compound things to be said.

Then, after making an air loop of thousands of miles, he found himself stuck. But alien as they were, his surroundings offered him intimacy, the instant intimacy of Minna's old room. For much of the day he lounged among Rumanian cushions on a divan, drinking peasant brandy and eating grapes, brownish green and heavy on the seeds, brought from the country by Tanti Gigi's far-flung agents. Because Gigi's heart was irregular, she was in bed much of the time, but women were coming and going all day, reporting to her, taking instructions. Corde was on her mind. He could drink only real coffee and, deprived of whiskey, he needed *pálinca*, at least. He was used to having meat (meat was virtually unobtainable), and a bottle of wine with it (you *could* get inferior wine on the black market). He had sacrificed his comforts to bring Minna here, and Gigi was therefore determined that he should have the best. ('What a rich, wonderful country we are,' she said. 'If only you could see the real Rumania.')

Despite doorbells and telephones, conferences, despite the developing struggle with the Colonel, despite the weight of a large totalitarian mass of life on the outside (the city was terrible!), he was quiet. No urgent calls, decisions, no hateful letters, no awkward conferences, infighting, or backbiting – people getting at him one way

or another. After lunch he took off his clothing, pulled back the heavy gaudy bed cover (almost a rug) and went to sleep. Sometimes he did that after breakfast, too. He did not feel quite steady even in brilliant healthful weather; consciousness reeling as if he had been driving a car over endless plains and whole continents. He was eye-sick, head-sick, seat-sick, motion-sick, gut-sick, wheel-weary. So he rested after breakfast. The nights were not easy. Minna wasn't sleeping. She seemed to lie there rerunning in her mind all the worst sequences of the day. To these were added thoughts for which there hadn't been sufficient time. The room was cold, the nights unnaturally black – or was this Corde's own intensity working outward, blacker than night. He put out his fingers and fetched the covers over his bony shoulders, but when he heard Minna stirring he knew that he must get up and offer her comfort. Lying down with her usually helped. But not now.

She didn't turn when he entered her small bed and put his arms around her from behind. They held a whispered conversation.

Minna said, 'What does she think? Days go by and I'm not there.'

'What, she? She can't open her eyes, and in that room you couldn't tell days from nights anyway – besides, she understands why you're not there.'

'Does she?'

'Are you kidding? With her experience? Inside the government? And/or private life? They've been under the Russians since 1945. That's a long, long time. She's got to know every wrinkle. You can be sure she thought it through even before we arrived.'

'Yes, that may be.'

He lowered his voice still more. 'Even after a few days you feel them sitting on your face. And at this rate we may be looking at our own future.'

'You shouldn't say that . . .'

'It's not me that says it. I don't believe it, but it's what you hear and see. You should read what they say on the Russian New Right. Like, it's the weak democracies that produce dictatorships. Or that our decadence is heading full speed towards collapse. Of course, they overdo it. But you can't help thinking about it.'

Minna let him go on, and he stopped himself. It wasn't exactly the time to develop such views. Evil visions. The moronic inferno. He read too many articles and books. If the night hadn't been so black and cold, none of this would have been said. The night made you exaggerate. Between them on the pillow was the float of her hair.

'They want to do a tracheotomy,' she said.

'Do they have to?'

'Dr Moldovanu said on the telephone that it had to be done. He also told me that he wrote a report to the Colonel about the visits. He suggested they were good for my mother.'

'They're all afraid of that bastard. He scares them to death.'

'Ileana told me that when Dr Moldovanu's mother had an infarct, he wasn't allowed to bring her to the Party hospital. The request was refused.'

'They call it an infarct here? There might be a way to go over the man's head, if this were Chicago or Honduras, or some such place.'

'How can he not allow me . . . !'

It was Corde's habit to explain matters to his unworldly wife. It gave him pleasure and was sometimes instructive even to himself. 'This gives the man an opportunity to test the efficiency of his controls. This is fine tuning,' said Corde. 'Yesterday I sent a note to a guy at the American embassy.'

'Did you?'

'I asked Gigi to have it delivered for me. It's only a couple of blocks, she said. You see, just before we left Chicago I phoned my old friend Walter, in Washington, and explained where we were going, told him about this. He got back to me with some names here – contacts. I don't expect great results, but I did tell this guy in the information branch I wanted to visit him.'

'Could he do us any good?'

'It's worth a try. I might suggest he ask the State Department to put in its oar.'

'No! Do you think they might . . . ?'

'There's an election coming, and this would be one of those humane Christian things from the White House. Make good copy.'

'Do they do such things?'

'Those people are sweet, and mostly air, like Nabisco wafers. Still, I did ask Walter to get to the right desk in the State Department. I've been worried all along about your dual citizenship.'

'I should have attended to that long ago.' She changed the subject. In science she was scientific; in other matters her methods were more magical, Corde believed. By giving up the dual citizenship, she would be admitting her mother's mortality, and that in itself might have weakened the old woman. That kind of primitive reasoning.

'Tanti Gigi wants me to get in touch with Dr Gherea,' she said.

'Gherea?'

'You remember who he is? You *don't* remember.'

'Yes, I do. I do so. Your father's pupil, the one he trained in brain surgery.'

'That's the man. He's the big neurosurgeon here, practically the only one. My father made him. After my father died he became a big shot.'

'Is he good?'

'They say he's a genius.'

'We'll have to think about it.'

Her schoolgirl bed was too narrow for them both, and he returned to the divan. Several times during the night he got up to stroke her head or kiss her on the shoulders. These remedies had always given Corde a sense of useful power, but they were ineffectual now. The night pangs were too bad. He had them himself. He listened to Minna's breathing. She appeared to hold her breath. He waited, listening until she exhaled. He said at last, 'Let's get out the bottle and have a shot or two. No use lying here like dummies.' He switched on the light. They sat side by side in their coats, drinking plum brandy. The stuff was slightly oily and rank, but went down smooth and warm. Then up came the fermented fumes.

'It won't be easy to approach Gherea.'

'Why not?' said Corde. 'Don't you know him?'

'Thirty years ago he was like one of the family. But he's turned into a savage.'

'In what way savage?'

'He knocks people down – assistants, anesthetists, nurses. He

even hits his colleagues, doesn't give a damn for anybody. They have to take it from him. He punches and kicks them if they hand him the wrong instrument. And he won't operate without money. "You don't give me five hundred thousand lei, I don't remove your brain tumor."'

'A brute. You don't have to tell me about brutes. And the only game in town.'

'That's it, Albert. Even the dictator's son, when he had a skull fracture and they brought him to Gherea, they say Gherea had him put in bed with another patient.'

'Are they two to a bed here?'

'In lots of hospitals they are. This was Gherea's way of pointing out to *him* that he had to spend more on hospitals.'

'So even the dictator has to put up with him. And what does Gherea do with the dough he squeezes from people – does he live it up?'

'I guess he must. But I don't see how – he never leaves the country. How do you live it up here? He doesn't have a second language. Maybe Russian. I think he comes from Bessarabia. He never goes abroad.'

'... Pictures, music?'

'They say he has no use for such stuff.'

'Just himself and his knives and saws? Him and death? Only interested in the basic facts? What about sex?'

'That's just it; he has a lady friend and I happen to know her. I met the woman in Zurich eight or ten years ago. She's very decent, divorced. They're together.'

'And you want her to persuade him to examine Valeria?'

'What's your picture of Gherea?'

'Your people had class, and he was a boor. They took him up because he had a knack for surgery. He despised them. Thought it was idiotic that with all their advantages they should be Communists. A peasant mentality. He concentrated on learning the Cushing techniques from your father, and then to hell with him.'

'That's about right,' said Minna. Corde's speed in making connections never failed to please her. She counted on him to spell things out.

'Sure, I see him. He's the tough glory type who goes into people's heads with his tools and his fingers. The brain has got to be hell to work in. Save 'em or kill 'em. Hates sentiment, dramatizes himself as a beast . . . maybe there's a peasant mother who still pines for him out in the bush. He never sees her. There's only this devoted woman with access to his softer side.'

'I'm going to talk to her. Tanti Gigi got the number for me.'

'Can't hurt.'

'You think I should?'

'Of course. Let Gherea look at the X-rays.'

The X-rays would show a cloud over the brain of the sort Corde had once seen on a film. A smart microphotographer had managed to insert a tiny lens into the carotid artery and push it up to the skull, capturing a cerebral hemorrhage on his camera. What you saw was the blood beginning to fizz out. At first it wavered in a thick, black, woolly skein. Then it suddenly filled in, thickened, a black rush, the picture of death itself. The memory of this television documentary was something Corde preferred to avoid.

He thought, Sure, let Minna get this surgeon character to look at the clot, make his gesture. It won't do any good. But let her put up a fight. Valeria fought for her. Minna when she was brought back to earth could be a tigress. He had seen that. Fighting was quite unrealistic, of course. Under the circumstances it would get her nowhere. The Colonel had them all in chancery, like John L. Sullivan. But it was necessary emotionally to do battle.

Corde had heard anecdotes about Valeria's dignified refusal to rejoin the Party after she was 'forgiven.' She told the Central Committee that she had loved her late husband, and that if he had been unfaithful she would have loved him still but she would never have taken him back. In matters of self-respect she was the model for her daughter, her sister and all the ladies of her circle. Had she made serious trouble, it would have been easy enough for the regime to put her away, but this would have upset many old academicians and physicians and educators of her own dying generation. Why stir up the codgers? Besides, she had been a sensible old character, and circumspect, and knew exactly how far she could go, so they were letting her