

# The Unexpected Answer

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**An extract**

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## My hand is exhausted

*I don't even know him, thinks Esther, as he slips his hand further under her skirt. She thinks it in a very explicit way, word for word, in that order, as if she were thinking aloud, or at least practising the way she was going to say it, the following morning, totally perplexed, to the hideously ugly woman in the mirror, grimacing, thumping herself on the forehead: I don't even know him.*

While he slips his hand further under her skirt, she thinks these words twice, three times, one after the other, and strangely enough she doesn't push his hand away or hold it back. But she was the one who fell into his arms, in his car, in the dead of night, and that's even stranger. She doesn't know him, he doesn't concern her. I've come a long way, she thinks. That's a different set of words, words from a fairytale, probably a lot of fairytales, spoken by a prince or a rambler, a messenger or an exile, after sailing over seven seas or crossing seven deserts, and arriving somewhere.

There are faces she never forgets. There are different kinds of reasons why she never forgets a face, although there's probably no single reason really, such as why she likes blue or chocolate or Bach, but then, on the other hand, that just seems completely necessary. The faces that Esther never forgets have nothing to do with the people who sport these faces. They're sitting immobile in front of her, the people, in the wicker armchair roughly five meters away from her, under Gao Qipei's tiger, back inclined towards the window, so that they appear like stencils cut out of the daylight. They are stiff and unnatural. Their legs crossed, hands convulsed on the armrests, lips pressed tightly together, they fix on some arbitrary point on the wall, the doorknob or the coat-hook, for example, and try in the meantime to maintain an interesting look in their eyes. It never works. After half an hour, they get cramp in their legs, their hands tingle and the corners of their lips begin to tremble. Their gaze becomes misty and stupid, as if hypnotised, helpless lambs. From time to time one of them complains the next day that he dreamt the whole night about the doorknob. That's how it goes; everything lingers, without it having the least bit of meaning, the brain works that way.

Esther also sits and looks. She is waiting for the moment that the face comes loose, like the postage stamp from a letter soaking in water. It always comes loose, the one faster than the other. These are the faces she collects, the others don't concern her. It's about the moment a face becomes a mask, harder and more inflexible than itself, more real than itself. Or the moment a look merges into a landscape, deep, wide, but impersonal. She used to collect real landscapes. As a child,

she had about ten of them, for night time in bed. She closed her eyes, framed the blackness and copied the lines she had stolen while on holiday from real landscapes with a fluorescent finger. The most beautiful was that of the dunes, with fresh ridges blown by the wind in the sand, in the hollow a clump of beach grass end in the bottom left-hand corner, the rusty knots and spikes of barbed wire. The most difficult was the Swiss alpine landscape, not only because of the capricious shapes of the mountain peaks, the twenty-five tops of dark green spruces against the empty, elevated air and the speckled bodies of nine cows on the mountain meadow, dotted her and there, but mainly because of the cable-lift. The difficult thing about the cable-lift was that she had been in one and the landscape had moved. What she remembered seemed like photos of a city at night, with ribbons of light through the streets, where departed cars raced through one another.

Esther only drew the outside. A landscape doesn't have an inside. You can plough through it, you can explore its most forsaken corners, you can get lost in it or live in it. But it's never the inside. A landscape begins with dissent and stretches from there on out. It ends when it seems to agree.

They become talkative, one and all. It comes from being silent for a long time, the hoarse throat, the draughty stillness in the head. But it also comes from being afraid, afraid of the portrait. They do want to be as they appear. Sometimes they hardly dare look, but they look all the same, all of them. And they are all disappointed, no matter what, whatever it is, however they are. Shouldn't that chin be a little sharper? they ask in despair. Isn't that nose much too long? But they can't draw; they're powerless in front of their very own face. They can comb their hair, or squeeze a pimple on their nose, or frown or straighten the shoulders. But on paper, they're useless. That's why they try it with words, at afternoon tea or during a quick break.

Esther is washing her hands at the small white basin behind the painter's easel.

She asks if it's the first time they've posed for a portrait.

It's always the first time.

She tells them they have an interesting face.

Come on, they say, hopeful and delighted, it's boring, everyday, nothing special.

Honestly, says Esther. Its got something, its got character.

And then, of course, they tell her their entire life story, from childhood to unhappy marriage, from bed to bed, desire to disappointment, and all in the hope that it might change something, that Esther might make an adjustment here or there, that she might make the chin sharper, the nose shorter. They hope she will paint the portrait of someone as he is when he is loved, that she will draw everything that isn't there, and that it will be there all the same.

Esther lets them talk and listens. She listens, very carefully, but actually she's not listening. Listening is a form of looking. Watching how a face changes when the lips form words: I've always been lonely, or I never found what I was looking for. The face becomes serious and melancholic, as if it immediately believes what the lips are saying, just like that, and yet something isn't right, something's not completely sincere.

Esther despises them, one and all. Especially the self-motivated crowd, the ones that come of their own accord to have her draw or paint them, and are even willing to pay for it themselves. But also the ones that have been sent by family members or friends, for an anniversary or a birthday, she despises them too. She even despises the ones she asks herself. The writers and actors who come and pose on her request, complaining all the while that they don't have the time or that they think it's ridiculous but they come all the same. She despises them because they come all the same. Only the ones that don't come, that should have come. Mostly men. The only men in Esther's life, but they are many. And they stay, just as long as she wants. Once in a while there's a man who keeps coming back after the portrait's done. Then she pushes him with profound contempt into the chair underneath Gao Qipei's tiger and starts drawing his portrait anew. Sometimes there's a man whose lips reveal, over coffee or during a break: I thought about you. Then she looks carefully at the changing face, the traces of desire, the sign of faith, the onset of emotions. But she does not change a single line.

Gao Qipei is a Chinese painter who painted with his hands. Every painter paints with the hands, unless they have no hands, then they try with the feet or the mouth. But Gao Qipei painted with the hand alone, without a brush. Chinese painters are so sick and tired of the brush because they have to write with it all day long so that there's no longer any difference between writing and painting. That's why Gao Qipei started painting with the hand alone. It is an unusual tiger, impressive and endearing. A tiger from the rear, a little sheepish, with the chubby backside of a bear, but still with great dignity. As a child, Esther kept trying to turn the painting around, to see the tiger's head from the other side. That's what her mother says; every time she visits Esther's atelier and sees the tiger hanging there. In that way it's almost become the truth, impossible to distinguish anymore from a memory. But Esther doesn't believe it's true. As a child she would have been much too scared to see the tiger's head, even if she had believed it was on the reverse side of the painting. She does remember the television screen, which wasn't a television screen in that memory but rather a hutch with two white rabbits, and Esther as a child slipping carrots in the back of the set for the white rabbits.

Esther sees them coming through the windows of her atelier. She likes to see them coming, especially the first time, when they're still new. The unfamiliar people on the other side of the street, looking for the house number, and then crossing over, nervous and excited. Frequently they comb their hair just before ringing the bell, which is of course ridiculous, as if they expect it to be reproduced lock for lock. Esther doesn't hurry to open the door for them. Sometimes she lets them ring twice, especially if it's a man she might just find a little attractive. Then she would have preferred not to open the door at all.

He finds the neighbourhood particularly pretty. The house is stately and impressive, the weather chilly for the time of the year. She ascends the steep, spiral staircase in front of him, two storeys up.

It's the custom, he says, for men to go first on stairs.

I know, says Esther, while she holds her skirts together at the knees. In elevators too, apparently.

That's a throw back to the days when elevators were not completely reliable. If the cage was open and you stepped in, there was always a chance you might crash to the ground, and then it was better if a man crashed to the ground, a lesser loss.

Everyone finds the atelier spacious and sunny and the view magnificent. None of them wants something to drink; they've just had breakfast, perhaps later. They stand there, boorish, in the middle of the attic, with their jacket and overcoat still on and their hands in their pockets. Esther lets them stand there. She messes about behind the painter's easel, rips a sheet of paper from the roll and attaches it to the plank.

Where should I sit? they ask. What should I take off?

If she were now to say: stay where you are, they would do it, for hours and hours on end. And if she were to say: everything, they would do it, like the hired models at the art school, but then with an unutterable shame, and the shame makes them unusable. It is impossible to draw a naked man if he's ashamed. Shame occasions shame. Love, on the other hand, does not occasion love. It's the eyes in particular that make it difficult. If they had no eyes it would probably be easier. They would have to be blind, one and all.

It's better without the glasses, says Esther.

Then I can't see a thing, he says.

But he obediently removes his glasses from his nose and places them on the wicker table next to the armchair.

You'll forget them, says Esther;

He winks and slips his glasses into his breast pocket.

Without the glasses he appears more vague, half rubbed-out, a little blurred. He looks like a man waking up in a bed. Although Esther had never seen a man wake up in a bed, first there had to be a man fallen asleep in a bed. But a man fallen asleep in a bed wasn't much different from a man fallen asleep on a train, and that Esther had witnessed, and also how they woke up. The question remains, how do you know which man it is?

Godfried H., he says.

He pretends to be a stranger, as if it were not presumed she might know who he was, not presumed she might recognise him from the photos and the interviews.

But how do you know which one it is? Is it the man with the lopsided head against the grimy brown curtain, with his hands folded over his belt, the gleaming yellow wedding ring, his blue checked shirt open at the neck, with grey chest hair? Is it the bolt upright man with balding head and beard, sitting rigidly with eyes closed, as if meditating, vigilant, as if furtively peeping between his eyelashes, but with his mouth open slightly as if perhaps asleep? Is it the man called Peter? with crew cut dark hair, pale complexion and dark eyes, restless hands with broad hairy wrists? Is it the prince, the beggar, the knight, the dragon? You're only sure if they appear to know the magic word, and they all know it. They are all the one, but she alone is not, not in this fairy tale.

You have a very interesting face.

I know. Comes in bloody handy.

It has character, something special.

My face, sure, pretty much.

Esther washes her hands again. She detests even the slightest traces of paint or charcoal on her hands. She washes them thirty times a day, sometimes half way through a mouth or a nose. She would have preferred to be able to draw or paint under a running tap, then everything would wash off immediately, if that were possible. Or to paint with a sort of remote control, or with the eyes only, without hands. It's actually a miracle she ever started to paint in the first place.

She's at the kitchen table, hates making a mess. Pots of paint arrayed before her, immaculate, never used: yellow, green, blue and red. And next to every pot of paint a jar of water, a paintbrush and a rag. Every paintbrush neatly rinsed and dried after every session. And after every rinsing, to the sink for fresh water. How is it ever going to be possible to learn to mix colours, to allow impurities?

He's sitting reasonably still. Sometimes they find it difficult, sitting still. They keep crossing their legs, scratching, folding their hands open and closed. Peter at the cello, hands on the strings, the only way to keep him immobile. This one's doing it unassisted. He's almost too still. There is nothing about him that moves. He hasn't blinked once in half an hour. A fly crawls over his hand and there is nothing to show that a fly is crawling over his hand. He begins to look like the motionless watchman at the wax museum, the one you want to shake to see if he's real.

He is a writer. Painting doesn't interest him. He doesn't even take a look at his own portrait. It's your portrait, he says, of me.

He once had the idea to make written portraits of people, for a fee and all that. He saw himself doing it, sitting on a street corner somewhere or on the Place du Tertre in Paris, between the painters and the sketchers, to have passers-by pose for him on a stool for ten minutes while he portrayed their face in words. Like the photofit picture of a fugitive criminal after the news: oval face, short chestnut hair, green eyes, bushy eyebrows, plump lips, a birthmark on the left cheek. Or, alternatively, the psychological approach: troubled features, melancholic eyes, a serene forehead, sensual lips, a wilful chin. Or more romantic: a look of intense but unfulfilled desire, soft fleshy lips like a pouting child, but callous ridges along the cheeks, suggesting pent-up resistance, stubborn, dogged. Comparison with animals also works a treat: head like a mole, haddock eyes, rabbits' teeth. Esther has never painted animals. In addition to tigers, Gao Qipei also painted spiders, dragonflies and shrimp. They all look human.

She's busy with the ear. It's a small ear, close to the skull, so that the dark but here and there greying hairs around the temples gently fall across it. The ear itself looks soft and downy, a few longer hairs growing in the middle, the earlobe partly attached. Under the ear, stubble from shaving, the short, broad neck, the dark blue silk shirt with the top button open.

Is it a listening ear? He doesn't like music, he says. He doesn't care what cd she puts on he won't hear it. He says: music is like wallpaper in a room, it's background, you don't look at it. Nobody every asked: do you like wallpaper?

He stares at the doorknob without batting an eye and doesn't budge an inch. But if he doesn't listen, then what does he do? If he doesn't listen, doesn't see much without glasses, and doesn't move, what does he do? Think? Feel?

He stares motionless at the doorknob. Will he dream about the doorknob? Esther knows all about it, how staring evolves into imagining. But it remains strange and inexplicable that the eyes look and the hands draw what the eyes see. It's like typing a page in typing class with the keyboard covered, without knowing what you're actually doing or whether it's right or not.

Now she has his ear. She looks at his ear on the white grainy sheet of rice-paper. It's clearly his ear. It's an ear you could cut off, out of desperation or in surgery.

And why does she like blue? Blue is the colour of Yves Klein's flower, a blue sponge on a lanky stem, cheep, noxious ink-blue, screaming and helpless. She is standing in the middle of the spiral in the Guggenheim, and the Guggenheim also looks like an ear, a giant ear pressed against the heart of Manhattan, listening for pending disaster. It's this colour blue.

The oleander, he says, about the budding red oleander in the window alcove. It sounds as if he is announcing the title of a poem he is about to recite.

The oleander is one of the most poisonous plants in existence. The flower isn't poisonous but the leaf is. One single arrow shaped blade is enough to send any adult to the grave, irretrievably. And yet, the sun soaked *avenidas* of the Italian Riviera, where it crawls with sauntering suicides, are lush with blossoming white, pink and red oleander trees. And the resounding corridors of schools full of vigorous school kids are adorned with unsuspecting oleanders in white plastic flowerpots, moved outside to the playground at the beginning of spring, the moment when suicides are statistically spoken at their highest. But nobody knows this. The oleander leaf is incredibly tough and hard. It would be easier to cut your wrists with one, so to speak, than to eat one.

Sometimes she clamps her jaws so hard together that her teeth hurt. Then she has to force them apart and she thinks: it's from keeping silent for so long. At lunch, if she's alone, she performs a whole battery of relaxation exercises against hoarseness, although there's nothing wrong with being hoarse if you rarely speak anyway. Chewing with broad, round movements, unabashed if possible, with the mouth wide open, first to the left, while the lower jaw makes a grinding circular downward curve, then the same thing to the right, like a cow chewing the cud. Yawning is also good for the vocal chords, a sort of inner ventilation. For the neck muscles, which suffer terribly from the long periods of sitting still behind the painter's easel, it helps to rest the head to one side against the shoulder, turning to the rear, then in a slow curve to the other shoulder, and finally letting it fall forward before starting again in the opposite direction. It strikes her every time just how heavy a head is to carry. For the wrists: all the hand to bend forwards and then backwards like a mechanical child, a Mongol waving goodbye.

Peter the Deleter, she called him – because his mind always immediately deletes what is not actually present. He forgets everything. One day he arrived at the conservatory and appeared to be without his cello. Lost somewhere along the way, he said with a broad grin. They tramped all the way back to his room, five of them, but the cello wasn't there. Then he remembered the sandwich at the baker on the corner. There they stood, cello and sandwich.

I have a fantastic memory, said Peter. Because, he said, and I quote a well-known philosopher, memory is the capacity to forget.

With the same memory he forgot names, dates and promises. He forgot where he had parked the car, forcing them to search half the city in the middle of the night. He sat waiting two hours early in the wrong restaurant for the wrong girl.

Forgetting, he said, was a precondition for happiness.

He forgot his wallet one day, left it on a bench in the park and never found it again. But even that was quickly forgotten, so!

Esther, he said. You'd be better off forgetting me.

As a consequence she started right away, zealous and obedient, at night in bed, her quilt high over her ears, her knees pulled up and her ice-cold feet rolled in her long night dress, to delete Peter. The feeling didn't differ much from desiring Peter, only Peter could no longer be part of it. Deleting Peter was nothing more than an exercise in concentration, a technique like Yoga or Zen, a question of rhythmic breathing and muscle relaxation. Alas, deleting Peter turned out to be more exhausting than desiring him once had.

After a while forgetting becomes a matter of course, like old age. Esther sees a woman in the mirror, forty-five, a matter of course. There's no technique necessary. But it is an exterior woman, with an adulthood that continues to be strange, unrecognisable inside.

Some painters maintain that the lines on their own face are also carved in their own hands, so that whoever begins to draw a face blind automatically draws a self-portrait, much to his or her great surprise. The question is, how can the hand know from inside how the face should look from the outside? It is already strange enough that a head would appear to know everything, especially the things that come from the body, like someone dreaming about a lump in the belly, who has felt no pain and knows nothing about a lump but afterwards appears to actually have a lump in the belly.

The woman she sees is unquestionably an ugly woman, and that's a shame. It is a woman with short, wiry curls of an undetermined colour between drab brown and dark grey. She has a long, pointed nose and dark deep-set eyes with high eyebrows. Her lips are thin and a little too tightly pressed together over teeth that are too big, the cheeks are pale and gaunt, the neck long and thin. But she paints herself as a woman who sees herself, and thus with that look in her eye, a look from somewhere else. For that reason alone she paints herself other than she is, because she becomes other when she looks at herself and paints herself. Something disappears.

There's one who writes letters in which he says how beautiful he finds her. When he comes, they never say a word about the letters. The first time Esther wrote him back. She wrote: I'm sorry some things are simply not possible, that's how life is. But when he comes, it's as if he never wrote those letters and certainly not her who wrote that answer. She draws him in three-quarter profile, with his eyes facing the door. He is a handsome man in every respect, raven-haired and dark eyes, but when she draws him, he's not a man anymore. There is no difference between a man and a plaster statue, a bowl of fruit or a sansevieria. It's always the same pencil she holds in her hand, and what she feels is never more than the shiny paper.

She reads his letters quickly, hurriedly, standing by the letterbox; she doesn't even take the time to go inside. She reads them and rereads them, over and over again, searching for what they contain; she can't get enough of what they contain. She reads that she's beautiful, that he is waiting

for her and that he cannot sleep. She hopes he will always write to her. But when he comes, he's not the same and all she can do is draw him.

She can only draw Peter also. Draw and delete.

And Peter in love. Jumpy, difficult to draw, as if his contours wouldn't stay still.

Esther, he said, in that tone. I've met someone.

Who is she? She asks. Do I know her?

Yes, he says. Her name begins with E.

And in that short second, the possibility that it would be like the movies, the veiled declaration of love, initially misunderstood, the doubt, the certainty that it had to be someone else, the impossibility of so much happiness.

She knew precisely who it really was.

I hope we can stay friends, he says.

Yes, of course, says Esther, sheepishly.

Friendship's more important, no matter what, Peter would later say.

Yes, of course, said Esther, self-assured.

Peter's sorrow was magnificent to draw. It gave him dark rings around his eyes that already looked like charcoal, and an ashen hue that was the same as that of the paper. To cap it all he had never sat so still, his restless hands motionless on his lap, heavy, as if it were impossible to lift them. Real robot hands, just like in the sketch books for beginners where they explain how to draw hands, beginning with a broad cube as a palm, to which you attach each finger in the form of three articulated cubes, the phalanges. The sadness penetrated into every fingertip, yet still it wasn't such a terribly awful sadness, because Peter forgot quickly and Elisabeth was easy to forget, and he still had his friends, and his cello, which he left behind from time to time.

I don't understand, he said. She said she loved me.

Love passes, said Esther intending to comfort him, so she figured.

And she thought: I must remember that, love passes; it might indeed comfort someone, especially if one is the one who loves, which also passes.

But real love then? That's as if you might say: life passes. But real life then? Real life also passes. And there is no other life than the life that passes. And it's not even a question of: the longer it lasts the more real it is. Children that die a cot death have really lived for an instant; time is absolutely not the test.

And then his shoulders shuddered all at once. With men that's a sign that they're crying. A crying man is impossible to draw; it's even worse than a naked man.



Esther stood up and went to wash the charcoal from her hands. She hoped that it would be over by then. With men it's over quickly, it's a moment of weakness.

But not with him, not then. When she turned he was sitting there sobbing like a child. She went towards him and rested her cold, still damp hands on his neck. He threw his arms around her as if it was love, and it was indeed love, only not love for her.

Later he said: I'm sorry.

You can stay the night if you want, she said.

You're sweet, he said, but better not.

At the door he kissed her again, something he had to do, then.

This shouldn't have happened, he added, while he kissed her.

No, said Esther. Not like this.

Not like anything, he said with his mouth in her neck.

No, said Esther. Of course not.

It happens every day, every second, more often than people die or are born: people are rejected. If it's not clear what rejection is, it depends on what one wanted. Benares or Lourdes. People come to Lourdes from far and wide, the sick, crippled, the incurably handicapped, looking for a miracle, a cure, a new life. People come to Benares from every corner of the world, lepers, the lame, the incurably sick, looking for a redeeming death, liberation into the great nothingness, and they lie down in rows on the banks of the Ganges and feel rejected by eternity because it won't let them in. What is rejection, anyway?

The sketched body of a man at the door, that's what he was. As long as he was sketched standing there, it was impossible to say whether he came in or left. He came in. After standing at the door for a long time and hesitating he finally came in. It was a man who had returned, you could see it immediately. It was the portrait of a man who stayed.

No man had ever remained so still for her as this man, in the wicker armchair, under the Gao Qipei's tiger. He's not stiff or tense, he's completely relaxed, motionless as if asleep with his eyes open. He appears to be absent in his body. When the telephone rings he's undisturbed and does not even take the opportunity to scratch himself or adjust his position.

It starts to rain, heavy, black droplets on the zinc roof of the atelier, and he doesn't seem to notice. She would like to take a look inside his ear to see if something's trembling there. And if his heart is beating, if he's breathing alright. Conversations while listening to the rain, it's the name of a book written about Gao Qipei by a contemporary. Somewhere inside it says: 'I heard that when he painted tigers he pressed his elbow in the ink in order to portray their crouched position prior to pouncing on their prey.'

She doesn't know him. She hasn't even read one of his books. She knew his name, of course, and his face from photos. And now she knows his ear, his neck, his nose, his chin. And

words come from his mouth that probably existed first as thoughts in his head, and she knows them now too. But she doesn't know him. He's somewhere inside, if he's there at all. She has the impression no one is there, as if she is sketching a sketch.

Actually she already met him, very briefly, he probably won't remember. That evening in the theatre, each with a friend who knew the other, leaving them suddenly next to one another on the way out. It was after that particularly terrible play with a young actor playing Nero, and she asked him if he found it terrible too.

He said it was alright.

You're not serious, she said.

He smiled.

I only half listen, he said, maybe that's why.

Are you joining us for a drink? he asked.

No, she said, then.

No is actually the most beautiful word. Esther repeats it as often as possible, out loud, in the dark, as lovers do with I love you. *Je t'aime. Ich liebe dich. Te quiero.* No, *non, nein, njet.* And then there's that song, *Je suis une poupée-hee-hee, qui dit non non non non non non.*

He has blue eyes, surprisingly blue for someone with dark hair. He says he was blond when he was a child. Next time he comes he brings a photo as proof, twelve years old, short trousers, a sweet boyish smile and, indeed, blond hair, although it's not so clear in black and white. He didn't wear glasses in those days.

His eyes seem different without glasses, deeper, bluer, hazier, as if he had just been swimming underwater or peeling an onion. But his eyes are impenetrable, they only reflect. You can see in them what they themselves see and nothing more. And what they see is the doorknob. Still, he's not really staring, he's really looking, with a strange, penetrating, questioning gaze, at the doorknob.

Blue is the deepest colour. It is the colour of the sea and the night as dawn approaches. It is a colour that appears like velvet, like violets, and like desire. That song, *Bleu, bleu, l'amour est bleu.*

Not always, he says when she asks if he always wears silk shirts.

He always wears the same shirt because he thinks it's easier for her to draw.

It makes no difference, she says. Shirts are all the same.

People too, he says. Why bother painting them then?

It's not about people, Esther says, it's about drawing as such.

Actually, it makes absolutely no difference to her whatsoever what she draws. It just gets a little monotonous if she draws the same thing all the time and it doesn't help her technique. What's nice

about drawing different people is that you also get paid more than once. And that they all think their face is extremely exceptional, that it must almost be a privilege to be allowed to draw it.

People are vain, says Esther.

Especially writers, he says.

But your face, says Esther, there's something about it, something very special.

Come on, he says irritated, I'm actually very shallow.

His cheeks are soft, a little pliable, with deep furrows running from the nose to the corners of his mouth. The nose is neutral, neither big nor small, neither a hawk nor a button, an ordinary nose, short and blunt. He wears a moustache and a beard, but cut very short, so that it looks more like a well-tended way of not shaving for a couple of days; not the rough stubble of the more nonchalant types. On his upper lip and chin the hair is dark, but on the lower jaw and the cheeks it's greyer and even completely white here and there. He has four children, two boys and two girls, evenly, in turns: boy, girl, boy, girl. They had intended to stop at two but then a third came along and his wife thought four would be better.

Anna likes everything to be even, he says.

A strange notion, says Esther.

She also sees a lot of strange people, Anna, he says.

And a writer, says Esther, lives for his work, of course.

So you'd think, he says.

For writing, says Esther, women and drink.

Women don't interest me, he says.

Then there's only drink, Esther concludes.

Moderately, he laughs. Everything in moderation.

Do you think it exists, asked Peter.

They were in a rowing boat in the middle of a lake, scorching sun and the incredible blue of a cloudless sky with a ripple free reflection. It was summer, the summer of Elisabeth, when Peter suddenly appeared unable to forget and kept returning again and again to the same thing. He sat at the back of the boat with his knees hoisted up and his big hands with their broad wrists on the paddles. Set off against the blue, he looked like a prisoner condemned to forced labour. You could easily have imagined a ball and chain around his ankles, preventing him from running away, or here on the lake from jumping into the water and swimming to the bank. Although he could easily have let it drag him to the bottom, help him end his life, if he had wanted. Peter the galley slave, with his pale complexion and his crew cut, flattop hair. Esther let her hand hang over the railing in

the water and watched the ripples undulate; the irregularities vanish from the surface. Water is the most difficult thing to draw; it's like light turned hard, almost a mirror.

No, she said.

Naturally, Esther had stroked things before: a cat, a rabbit, a cuddly toy, a man. But stroking for her is a science, it's looking with the hands to know how something feels.

So many people, if you see them, on the tram, where they're at least sitting still or standing still, orderly, but already an eddying confusion at the exit to the station, too fast to catch a glimpse, and then it would have to be one of them, destined for eternity.

Why do you write then? asks Esther.

He genuinely doesn't know; just happened actually. Best essay at school followed by a longer essay, a story in a magazine and a longer story, and longer still and, all at once, it was a book. The best book of the year and, all at once, he was a writer.

I hate writing, he says.

He writes only rarely, preferably not at all, only if it's unavoidable. Thus, he's not even a real writer. He has his career and that keeps him busy enough, giving lectures, attending courses. Occasionally he gets an outstanding idea, mostly in the train, but he's too lazy to make something of it. Only very rarely, during one of those shiftless vacations, does he lock himself up and write a book. That's what makes him a writer.

The problem with me is, he says, that I'm so content.

He is a happy man; and happy people don't write.

But you write, says Esther expectantly.

That's passing the time, he says, tedium, amusement.

And then he suddenly starts talking about Prague. Prague in the spring, the most beautiful city in Europe, with the sweet smell of linden blossom. Prague the city of music, with child orchestras and musicians with every imaginable sort of musical instrument: violins, flutes, cellos, trombones, harps. On Starometski Square there's even a pianist, his piano mounted on a chassis with wheels and a towing hook, but the instrument was so out of tune from being moved around that the onlookers were hysterical with laughter. Even he, unable to tell the difference between a lullaby and a military march, noticed it.

It is the mouth of a slightly pouting boy, lips soft and full blowing a bubble or a boy considering a kiss on a cheek. A moment later hard and thin again, as if sealed, lips pressed together, corners drooping. The teeth become visible as he talks and laughs and he's the engaging boy again. Small and regular, but the two upper front teeth are slightly larger and a little whiter than the rest. Teeth, however, are not drawn.

The story of the two upper front teeth. In the meantime quite a while ago, fearlessly drunk, twenty, reckless, and above all completely pissed, late at night or early morning with a bunch of friends as

witnesses, and especially that particular girlfriend. With an elegant leap, inspired by Hollywood heroes, wallop onto the hood of a brand-new Porsche, alas - but just like the movies - right in front of the approaching owner. Thereafter, two missing teeth. Those were the days, his wild years, when he still felt like an artist and a bohemian.

In the meantime, indeed, not much left of the artist or the bohemian. A little too impeccably attired, although not boring or conventional. Calculated nonchalance, blue silk shirt open at the neck, socks precisely the same colour as the shirt, trousers a slightly darker blue arranged in a perfect pleat over brown leather shoes, not too overtly polished. Not that the lower body means anything to her. She stops with the arms and the hands, draped loosely over the arm of the chair. It almost annoys her that she cannot cut off the image at the middle, that she is confronted with so much redundant information.

During the lunch break she gives him bread and cheese to eat. Turns out that he is one of that rare group of people who don't finely remove the cheese rind – the frugal types – but actually eat the whole thing, plastic layer and all.

Thriftness gone crazy, he explains. The war, children in Ethiopia, you get the picture.

You can't digest plastic, Esther observes.

Then it just comes out the other end intact, he says. Journey through a well-known writer!

Later she shows him the drawings by Gao Qipei. The smiling fish, the elegant antelope, the monkey trying to reach a beehive with a stick, the heron bent double ready to plunge, the tiger in the wind, the tiger licking its paw, the tiger drinking. He leafs readily through the book but is completely without interest. Only the drawings of the unhappy looking, overburdened donkey draw his attention a little longer than the rest;

That reminds me, he says.

Of sitting on his mother's lap as a little boy and her asking him, as mothers inevitably ask their sons, what he wanted to be when he grew up. And how he answered, without the least hesitation, as if he had been thinking about it for years; that he wanted to be a donkey, with the only purpose that he would then be able to carry his venerated mother wherever she wanted.

Passed in the meantime, his mother, a few years ago. Father already gone.

Getting older himself. Hair thinning at the crown, but with the parting to one side and the longer hair combed over the bald patch it's open to disguise. The lines on the cheeks and the wrinkles around the eyes, on the other hand, that's a different story.

He says he doesn't mind getting older. That he's had everything he wanted to have, that he's content. No midlife crisis, no frustrations. Children grown up and soon to marry. That he's already looking forward to becoming a grandfather.

Not Anna, he says. Just the very idea of becoming a grandmother.

Esther can't imagine what it would mean to be a grandmother. You would have to be a mother first. Something would have to grow in your body and then something else in the body that comes from your body. Russian dolls outgrowing one another.

Esther is pleased she is not a mother, one thing at least she's been spared.

A small birthmark on the right cheek and a larger one on the forehead, at the edge of the hair transplant. In the throat, to right, a lump. He doesn't have a big build and he's a little over weight.

The man who finds her beautiful is himself beautiful. Big and dark, exactly the way everyone should agree a man should be. Esther wonders why he can't be the one. When she reads his letters it seems so right. If the man who wrote these letters really existed then there would be no doubt. But it's not him. It can't be him, because it can't be anyone.

But when the drawing starts everything is different. Colours emerge where there were once no colours; the grey of a shadow turns out not to be grey but rather light blue, pink, green, brown or yellow. Things bear their shadow on their own surface and the edges of shadows appear in their turn to have shadows. From the moment the drawing starts, nothing in the world is known, the features of things, how everything is supposed to be. What is known of the world turns out to be mistaken, not as we see it. We often see the impossible, what we know is not possible: how forms penetrate one another, how formless forms are. The advantage of drawing is that it puts a halt to thinking. The one who draws what he thinks, draws another world; thoughts appear above things as coloured slides.

He is so uninterested in his portrait that he doesn't even bother to take a single look. Even while she's showing him round the atelier and they get close to the painter's easel he doesn't glance over his shoulder. He doesn't have a word to say about her other paintings either; he just nods a little condescendingly.

On the last day, when it's ready and only then, he gives in and takes a look. He stands there with his hands in his pockets in front of the portrait while Esther busies herself and the washbasin, the black of the charcoal deep under her fingernails, her wrists hurting from hours of drawing.

Gao Qipei was a busy civil servant who had the habit of taking two days off per month in order to paint. On those days he painted from nine to five and produced about fifty drawings. In so doing he made use of the natural process of wear and tear on his nails. Somewhere in the corner of one of his prints one can read: 'I paint with my hand. With everything: nails, flesh, palm, back. My hand begins: nothing yet. But when I'm ready, then my hand is exhausted.'

I'm not crazy about it, he says after a long silence.

The resemblance is strong, she says.

A portrait shouldn't resemble, he says ruthlessly.

Not for writers perhaps, says Esther, but for artists preferably.

Drawing is also writing, he says.

No, says Esther. It's just the opposite.

Once everything has been arranged, they sit for a moment in the courtyard drinking coffee and he begins blabbing without warning about the tree lice on the laurel. You can't get rid of them with the usual insecticides. The only thing that works is a simple lather of carbolic soap and tobacco; rub the entire tree in, leaf per leaf, surface and underneath, trunk included, preferably every week and for a couple of months.

*Il faut cultiver son jardin*, he says, waving his index finger in the air.

In the meantime, Bach's cello sonatas resound from the other side of the courtyard wall, lamentably played, as if the effort were enormous. According to Peter, the cello is the most comfortable of instruments. He subdivided instruments according to the physical discomfort they ensured the player. He found wind instruments objectionable as a matter of course. After the discovery of the bellows, he couldn't see the point in blowing anymore. As a matter of fact, there wasn't much point in playing anything anymore given the invention of the gramophone. Since the development of photography, by the way, drawing was also meaningless. OK, a few of musicians were necessary here and there to record the LP's or the CD's. And if you had to play one instrument or another than it made sense to choose one that didn't occasion too much discomfort; like is difficult enough as it is. The cello was thus the best option. Look at the violin, you have to hold it at the ready all the time and you end up with pain in the back and in both arms. The double bass was a step in the right direction, but then you had to lug the thing around everywhere and hold it at the ready. The cello was simply ideal, comfortable posture with the legs open, the most natural human posture since the taming and riding of wild horses. You clutch it between your knees as if you're riding a horse and you lean forwards slightly now and then to stroke its mane.

Bach's cello sonatas sound disconsolate, like a child reciting the multiplication tables in tears.

Now that I find beautiful, he says approvingly.

A couple of months later she meets him again when visiting friends and ends up next to him at dinner. He's wearing the same blue silk shirt, as if he hadn't worn anything else since they last met.

I read one of your books, she says.

Oh, he says, surprised.

I mean, she corrects herself, I started one of your books. I haven't finished it.

Is that so, he frowns.

I'm not crazy about it, she says.

He claps his hands together and sighs dramatically.

They're nothing spectacular, he confesses.

Your best book is the one for children, she says. About the cat that dies.

That was when they were all dying, he says, run over or poisoned. We got through about four cats per year. And the children crying and crying until they were cried out. They could keep pace with the grief.

It's such a cheerless book, says Esther.

And I'm not really that fond of cats, he says.

Then he turns to his table companion on the left and ignores her for the rest of the evening.

It suits her fine. She observes him obliquely as he slices into his roast of lamb. It suits her fine meeting him again and not having to talk. Now she can check if she was right, if she had drawn him correctly in her atelier where he sat so still. Here he's moving, seems more real.

She is content with the ear, which now appears to correspond perfectly with the charcoal ear. It is as if she first drew it and only then it became real; like the cartoons in fairy tale movies, or like Pinocchio, first a puppet and then a naughty boy. She observes the line of his nose, his mouth, his chin. His blue shirt is open at the neck as before. It seems, indeed, to be his neck, completely.

And then she looks at his hand, resting on the table next to the cutlery, a box of matches between his thumb and his index finger. It's the hand that rested on the arm of the wicker chair, the fingers hanging loose in a tired and listless gesture. It's not a very big hand, nor is it the delicate hand of a writer, neither rough and hairy nor shiny and feminine, fingers neither short nor long, above all motionless, disquietingly calm. He plays with his matchbox in a totally exceptional way, not nervously like someone with a nervous twitch, but carefully turning it over and over with subdued interest, as if it was something that had to happen with the utmost care, something extremely important.

And then, all at once, she sees it, something she has not seen before. There is something strange about his hand, something different from other hands, trivial perhaps, something not even an artist would notice. The ring finger is just as long as the middle finger. She's knows about the paintings of El Greco and the business about the fingers and their obscene significance, but she had simply not noticed. She would have to redo his hand.

A bungled painting and a botched evening.

How such things can happen no one knows, but when they arrive at his car in the parking lot she gets in beside him.

What's going on? he asks surprised.

Nothing's going on, says Esther. Just drive somewhere.

He promptly starts the engine and departs. He first drives through half the city, deathly silence everywhere, then he takes the old road and drives towards the woods. Esther stares ahead, her heart in her mouth. The palms of her hands moisten with sweat. It's like a crime thriller, a kidnapping, rape and probably murder. Out of the corner of her eyes she sees the lights of houses and street lamps flashing past, a giddy whirling like the cavorting octopus at the fairground, everyone holding tight for fear and for fun.



He stops on an abandoned dirt track and turns off the engine

No, thinks Esther.

Then she clicks open the safety belt and throws herself into his arms. He starts to kiss her immediately, wildly.

Esther, Esther, he says. I've been longing for this forever.

I don't even know him, thinks Esther. I don't even know him. I don't even know him.

Esther, Esther, he says anew. The most beautiful poem I know is about you.

She happens to know it too, a poem by Rilke about the biblical Esther who comes trembling before the king to beg his favour. Her life is in his hands, a snap of the finger and she is dead.

He knows it by heart, of course. He's not a literary theorist for nothing.

He holds her at arms length and quotes Rilke, in German would you believe.

*Er rührte sie mit seiner Szepters Spitze:*

*Und sie begriff es ohne Sinne, innen.*

As he drives her back to her car at the parking lot it runs out to be three-thirty in the morning already.

Let's leave it here, she says. I don't want to start something with you.

Nor do I with you, he says with a smile.

But the following morning she stands before the window and looks outside at the green grassy fields in the dazzling sun, and all at once there are yellow dandelions that were not there before, or at least were not so yellow before, so incredibly yellow in the incredibly green grass, so yellow it hurts the eyes, it hurts the hands.