

John Irving

The Pension Grillparzer

My father worked for the Austrian Tourist Bureau. It was my mother's idea that our family travel with him when he went on the road as a Tourist Bureau spy. My mother and brother and I would accompany him on his secretive missions to uncover the discourtesy, the dust, the badly cooked food, the shortcuts taken by Austria's restaurants and hotels and pensions. We were instructed to create difficulties whenever we could, never to order exactly what was on the menu, to imitate a foreigner's odd requests – the hours we would like to have our baths, the need for aspirin and directions to the zoo. We were instructed to be civilized but troublesome; and when the visit was over, we reported to my father in the car.

My mother would say, 'The hairdresser is always closed in the morning. But they make suitable recommendations outside. I guess it's all right, provided they don't claim to have a hairdresser actually *in* the hotel.'

'Well, they *do* claim it,' my father would say. He'd note this in a giant pad.

I was always the driver. I said, 'The car is parked off the street, but someone put fourteen kilometers on the gauge between the time we handed it over to the doorman and picked it up at the hotel garage.'

'That is a matter to report directly to the management,' my father said, jotting it down.

'The toilet leaked,' I said.

'I couldn't open the door to the W.C.,' said my brother, Robo.

'Robo,' Mother said, 'you always have trouble with doors.'

'Was that supposed to be Class C?' I asked.

'I'm afraid not,' Father said. 'It is still listed as Class B.' We drove for a short while in silence; our most serious judgment concerned changing a hotel's or a pension's rating. We did not suggest reclassification frivolously.

'I think this calls for a letter to the management,' Mother suggested. 'Not too nice a letter, but not a really rough one. Just state the facts.'

'Yes, I rather liked him,' Father said. He always made a point of getting to meet the managers.

'Don't forget the business of them driving our car,' I said. 'That's really unforgivable.'

'And the eggs were bad,' said Robo; he was not yet ten and his judgments were not considered seriously.

We became a far harsher team of evaluators when my grandfather died and we inherited grandmother – my mother's mother, who thereafter accompanied us on our travels. A regal dame, Johanna was accustomed to Class A travel, and my father's duties more frequently called for investigations of Class B and Class C lodgings. They were the places, the B and C hotels (and the pensions), that most interested the tourists. At restaurants we did a little better. People who couldn't afford the classy places to sleep were still interested in the best places to eat.

'I shall not have dubious food tested on me,' Johanna told us. 'This strange employment may give you all glee about having free vacations, but I can see there is a terrible

price paid: the anxiety of not knowing what sort of quarters you'll have for the night. Americans may find it charming that we still have rooms without private baths and toilets, but I am an old woman and I'm not charmed by walking down a public corridor in search of cleanliness and my reliefment. Anxiety is only half of it. Actual diseases are possible – and not only from food. If the bed is questionable, I promise I shan't put my head down. And the children are young and impressionable; you should think of the clientele in some of these lodgings and seriously ask yourselves about the influences.' My mother and father nodded; they said nothing. 'Slow down!' Grandmother said sharply to me. 'You're just a young boy who likes to show off.' I slowed down. 'Vienna,' Grandmother sighed. 'In Vienna I always stayed at the Ambassador.'

'Johanna, the Ambassador is not under investigation,' Father said.

'I should think not,' Johanna said. 'I suppose we're not even headed toward a Class A place?'

'Well, it's a B trip,' my father admitted. 'For the most part.'

'I trust,' Grandmother said, 'that you mean there is one A place en route?'

'No,' Father admitted. 'There is one C place.'

'It's okay,' Robo said. 'There are fights in Class C.'

'I should imagine so,' Johanna said.

'It's a Class C pension, very small,' Father said, as if the size of the place forgave it.

'And they're applying for a B,' said Mother.

'But there have been some complaints,' I added.

'I'm sure there have,' Johanna said.

'And animals,' I added. My mother gave me a look.

'Animals?' said Johanna.

'Animals,' I admitted.

'A suspicion of animals,' my mother corrected me.

'Yes, be fair,' Father said.

'Oh, wonderful!' Grandmother said. 'A suspicion of animals. Their hair on the rugs? Their terrible waste in the corners! Did you know that my asthma reacts, severely, to any room in which there has recently been a cat?'

'The complaint was not about cats,' I said. My mother elbowed me sharply.

'Dogs?' Johanna said. 'Rabid dogs! Biting you on the way to the bathroom.'

'No,' I said. 'Not dogs.'

'Bears!' Robo cried.

But my mother said, 'We don't know for sure about the bear, Robo.'

'This isn't serious,' Johanna said.

'Of course it's not serious!' Father said. 'How could there be bears in a pension?'

'There was a letter saying so,' I said. 'Of course, the Tourist Bureau assumed it was a crank complaint. But then there was another sighting – and a second letter claiming there had been a bear.'

My father used the rear-view mirror to scowl at me, but I thought that if we were all supposed to be in on the investigation, it would be wise to have Grandmother on her toes.

'It's probably not a real bear,' Robo said, with obvious disappointment.

'A man in a bear suit!' Johanna cried. 'What unheard-of perversion is *that*? A *beast* of a man sneaking about in disguise! Up to what? It's a man in a bear suit, I know it is,' she said. 'I want to go to that one *first*! If there's going to be a Class C experience on this trip, let's get it over with as soon as possible.'

'But we haven't got reservations for tonight,' Mother said.

'Yes, we might as well give them a chance to be at their best,' Father said. Although he never revealed to his victims that he worked for the Tourist Bureau, Father believed that reservations were simply a decent way of allowing the personnel to be as prepared as they could be.

'I'm sure we don't need to make a reservation in a place frequented by men who disguise themselves as animals,' Johanna said. 'I'm sure there is *always* a vacancy there. I'm sure the guests are regularly dying in their beds – of fright, or else of whatever unspeakable injury the madman in the foul bear suit does to them.'

'It's probably a *real* bear,' Robo said, hopefully – for in the turn the conversation was taking, Robo certainly saw that a real bear would be preferable to Grandmother's imagined ghoul. Robo had no fear, I think, of a real bear.

I drove us as inconspicuously as possible to the dark, dwarfed corner of Planken and Seilergasse. We were looking for the Class C pension that wanted to be a B.

'No place to park,' I said to Father, who was already making note of that in his pad.

I double-parked and we sat in the car and peered up at the Pension Grillparzer; it rose only four slender stories between a pastry shop and a Tabak Trafik.

'See?' Father said. 'No bears.'

'No *men*, I hope,' said Grandmother.

'They come at night,' Robo said, looking cautiously up and down the street.

We went inside to meet the manager, a Herr Theobald, who instantly put Johanna on her guard. 'Three generations traveling together!' he cried. 'Like the old days,' he added, especially to Grandmother, 'before all these divorces and the young people wanting apartments by

themselves. This is a *family* pension! I just wish you had made a reservation – so I could put you more closely together.'

'We're not accustomed to sleeping in the same room,' Grandmother told him.

'Of course not!' Theobald cried. 'I just meant that I wished your *rooms* could be closer together.' This worried Grandmother, clearly.

'How far apart must we be put?' she asked.

'Well, I've only two rooms left,' he said. 'And only one of them is large enough for the two boys to share with their parents.'

'And my room is how far from theirs?' Johanna asked coolly.

'You're right across from the W.C.!' Theobald told her, as if this were a plus.

But as we were shown to our rooms, Grandmother staying with Father – contemptuously to the rear of our procession – I heard her mutter, 'This is not how I conceived of my retirement. Across the hall from a W.C., listening to all the visitors.'

'Not one of these rooms is the same,' Theobald told us. 'The furniture is all from my family.' We could believe it. The one large room Robo and I were to share with my parents was a half-sized museum of knickknacks, every dresser with a different style of knob. On the other hand, the sink had brass faucets and the headboard of the bed was carved. I could see my father balancing things up for future notation in the giant pad.

'You may do that later,' Johanna informed him. 'Where do I stay?'

As a family, we dutifully followed Theobald and my grandmother down the long, twining hall, my father counting the paces to the W.C. The hall rug was thin,

the color of a shadow. Along the walls were old photographs of speed-skating teams – on their feet the strange blades curled up at the tips like court jesters' shoes or the runners of ancient sleds.

Robo, running far ahead, announced his discovery of the W.C.

Grandmother's room was full of china, polished wood, and the hint of mold. The drapes were damp. The bed had an unsettling ridge at its center, like fur risen on a dog's spine – it was almost as if a very slender body lay stretched beneath the bedspread.

Grandmother said nothing, and when Theobald reeled out of the room like a wounded man who's been told he'll live, Grandmother asked my father, 'On what basis can the Pension Grillparzer hope to get a B?'

'Quite decidedly C,' Father said.

'Born C and will die C,' I said.

'I would say, myself,' Grandmother told us, 'that it was E or F.'

In the dim tearoom a man without a tie sang a Hungarian song. 'It does not mean he's Hungarian,' Father reassured Johanna, but she was skeptical.

'I'd say the odds are not in his favor,' she suggested. She would not have tea or coffee. Robo ate a little cake, which he claimed to like. My mother and I smoked a cigarette; she was trying to quit and I was trying to start. Therefore, we shared a cigarette between us – in fact, we'd promised never to smoke a whole one alone.

'He's a great guest,' Herr Theobald whispered to my father; he indicated the singer. 'He knows songs from all over.'

'From Hungary, at least,' Grandmother said, but she smiled.

A small man, clean-shaven but with that permanent

gun-blue shadow of a beard on his lean face, spoke to my grandmother. He wore a clean white shirt (but yellow from age and laundering), suit pants, and an unmatching jacket.

'Pardon me?' said Grandmother.

'I said that I tell dreams,' the man informed her.

'You tell dreams,' Grandmother said. 'Meaning, you have them?'

'Have them and tell them,' he said mysteriously. The singer stopped singing.

'Any dream you want to know,' said the singer. 'He can tell it.'

'I'm quite sure I don't want to know any,' Grandmother said. She viewed with displeasure the ascot of dark hair bursting out at the open throat of the singer's shirt. She would not regard the man who 'told' dreams at all.

'I can see you are a lady,' the dream man told Grandmother. 'You don't respond to just every dream that comes along.'

'Certainly not,' said Grandmother. She shot my father one of her how-could-you-have-let-this-happen-to-me? looks.

'But I know one,' said the dream man; he shut his eyes. The singer slipped a chair forward and we suddenly realized he was sitting very close to us. Robo, though he was much too old for it, sat in Father's lap. 'In a great castle,' the dream man began, 'a woman lay beside her husband. She was wide awake, suddenly, in the middle of the night. She woke up without the slightest idea of what had awakened her, and she felt as alert as if she'd been up for hours. It was also clear to her, without a look, a word, or a touch, that her husband was wide awake too – and just as suddenly.'

'I hope this is suitable for the child to hear, ha ha,' Herr Theobald said, but no one even looked at him. My grandmother folded her hands in her lap and stared at them – her knees together, her heels tucked under her straight-backed chair. My mother held my father's hand.

I sat next to the dream man, whose jacket smelled like a zoo. He said, 'The woman and her husband lay awake listening for sounds in the castle, which they were only renting and did not know intimately. They listened for sounds in the courtyard, which they never bothered to lock. The village people always took walks by the castle; the village children were allowed to swing on the great courtyard door. What had woken them?'

'Bears?' said Robo, but Father touched his fingertips to Robo's mouth.

'They heard horses,' said the dream man. Old Johanna, her eyes shut, her head inclined toward her lap, seemed to shudder in her stiff chair. 'They heard the breathing and stamping of horses who were trying to keep still,' the dream man said. 'The husband reached out and touched his wife. "Horses?" he said. The woman got out of bed and went to the courtyard window. She would swear to this day that the courtyard was full of soldiers on horseback – but *what* soldiers they were! They wore *armor*! The visors on their helmets were closed and their murmuring voices were as tinny and difficult to hear as voices on a fading radio station. Their armor clanked as their horses shifted restlessly under them.'

'There was an old dry bowl of a former fountain, there in the castle's courtyard, but the woman saw that the fountain was flowing; the water lapped over the worn curb and the horses were drinking it. The knights were wary, they would not dismount; they looked up at the castle's dark windows, as if they knew they were uninvited

at this watering trough – this rest station on their way, somewhere.

'In the moonlight the woman saw their big shields glint. She crept back to bed and lay rigidly against her husband.'

'"What is it?" he asked her.

'"Horses," she told him.

'"I thought so," he said. "They'll eat the flowers."

'"Who built this castle?" she asked him. It was a very old castle, they both knew that.

'"Charlemagne," he told her; he was going back to sleep.

'But the woman lay awake, listening to the water which now seemed to be running all through the castle, gurgling in every drain, as if the old fountain were drawing water from every available source. And there were the distorted voices of the whispering knights – *Charlemagne's* soldiers speaking their dead language! To this woman, the soldiers' voices were as morbid as the eighth century and the people called Franks. The horses kept drinking.

'The woman lay awake a long time, waiting for the soldiers to leave; she had no fear of actual attack from them – she was sure they were on a journey and had only stopped to rest at a place they once knew. But for as long as the water ran she felt that she mustn't disturb the castle's stillness or its darkness. When she fell asleep, she thought *Charlemagne's* men were still there.

'In the morning her husband asked her, "Did you hear water running, too?" Yes, she had, of course. But the fountain was dry, of course, and out the window they could see that the flowers weren't eaten – and everyone knows horses eat flowers.

'"Look," said her husband; he went into the courtyard with her. "There are *no* hoofprints, there are *no* droppings. We must have *dreamed* we heard horses." She

did not tell him that there were soldiers, too; or that, in her opinion, it was unlikely that two people would dream the same dream. She did not remind him that he was a heavy smoker who never smelled the soup simmering; the aroma of horses in the fresh air was too subtle for him.

'She saw the soldiers, or dreamed them, twice more while they stayed there, but her husband never again woke up with her. It was always sudden. Once she woke with the taste of metal on her tongue as if she'd touched some old, sour iron to her mouth — a sword, a chest plate, chain mail, a thigh guard. They were out there again, in colder weather. From the water in the fountain a dense fog shrouded them; the horses were snowy with frost. And there were not so many of them the next time — as if the winter or their skirmishes were reducing their numbers. The last time the horses looked gaunt to her, and the men looked more like unoccupied suits of armor balanced delicately in the saddles. The horses wore long masks of ice on their muzzles. Their breathing (or the men's breathing) was congested.

'Her husband,' said the dream man, 'would die of a respiratory infection. But the woman did not know it when she dreamed this dream.'

My grandmother looked up from her lap and slapped the dream man's beard-gray face. Robo stiffened in my father's lap; my mother caught her mother's hand. The singer shoved back his chair and jumped to his feet, frightened, or ready to fight someone, but the dream man simply bowed to Grandmother and left the gloomy tearoom. It was as if he'd made a contact with Johanna that was vital but gave neither of them any joy. My father wrote something in the giant pad.

'Well, wasn't *that* some story?' said Herr Theobald. 'Ha

'Someone is riding a bike in the hall,' Robo said. 'I saw a wheel go by — under our door.'

'Robo, go to sleep,' Mother said.

'It went "squeak squeak,"' Robo said.

'Good night, boys,' said Father.

'If you can talk, we can talk,' I said.

'Then talk to each other,' Father said. 'I'm talking to your mother.'

'I want to go to sleep,' Mother said. 'I wish no one would talk.'

We tried. Perhaps we slept. Then Robo whispered to me that he had to use the W.C.

'You know where it is,' I said.

Robo went out the door, leaving it slightly open; I heard him walk down the corridor, brushing his hand along the wall. He was back very quickly.

'There's someone *in* the W.C.,' he said.

'Wait for them to finish,' I said.

'The light wasn't on,' Robo said, 'but I could still see under the door. Someone is in there, in the dark.'

'I prefer the dark myself,' I said.

But Robo insisted on telling me exactly what he'd seen. He said that under the door was a pair of *hands*.

'Hands?' I said.

'Yes, where the feet should have been,' Robo said; he claimed that there was a hand on either side of the toilet — instead of a foot.

'Get out of here, Robo!' I said.

'Please come see,' he begged. I went down the hall with him but there was no one in the W.C. 'They've gone,' he said.

'Walked off on their hands, no doubt,' I said. 'Go pee. I'll wait for you.'

He went into the W.C. and peed sadly in the dark.

ha.' He rumbled Robo's hair — something Robo always hated.

'Herr Theobald,' my mother said, still holding Johanna's hand, '*my father died of a respiratory infection.*'

'Oh, dear shit,' said Herr Theobald. 'I'm sorry, *meine Frau*,' he told Grandmother, but old Johanna would not speak to him.

We took Grandmother out to eat in a Class A restaurant, but she hardly touched her food. 'That person was a gypsy,' she told us. 'A satanic being, and a Hungarian.'

'Please, Mother,' my mother said. 'He couldn't have known about Father.'

'He knew more than you know,' Grandmother snapped.

'The schnitzel is excellent,' Father said, writing in the pad. 'The Gumpoldskirchner is just right with it.'

'The Kalbsnieren are fine,' I said.

'The eggs are okay,' said Robo.

Grandmother said nothing until we returned to the Pension Grillparzer, where we noticed that the door to the W.C. was hung a foot or more off the floor, so that it resembled the bottom half of an American toilet-stall door or a saloon door in the Western movies. 'I'm certainly glad I used the W.C. at the restaurant,' Grandmother said. 'How revolting! I shall try to pass the night without exposing myself where every passerby can peer at my ankles!'

In our family room Father said, 'Didn't Johanna live in a castle? Once upon a time, I thought she and Grandpa rented some castle.'

'Yes, it was before I was born,' Mother said. 'They rented Schloss Katzelsdorf. I saw the photographs.'

'Well, *that's* why the Hungarian's dream upset her,' Father said.

When we were almost back to our room together, a small dark man with the same kind of skin and clothes as the dream man who had angered Grandmother passed us in the hall. He winked at us, and smiled, I had to notice that he was walking on his hands.

'You see?' Robo whispered to me. We went into our room and shut the door.

'What is it?' Mother asked.

'A man walking on his hands,' I said.

'A man *peeing* on his hands,' Robo said.

'Class C,' Father murmured in his sleep; Father often dreamed that he was making notes in the giant pad.

'We'll talk about it in the morning,' Mother said.

'He was probably just an acrobat who was showing off for you, because you're a kid,' I told Robo.

'How did he know I was a kid when he was in the W.C.?' Robo asked me.

'Go to *sleep*,' Mother whispered.

Then we heard Grandmother scream down the hall.

Mother put on her pretty green dressing gown; Father put on his bathrobe and glasses. I pulled on a pair of pants, over my pajamas. Robo was in the hall first. We saw the light coming from under the W.C. door. Grandmother was screaming rhythmically in there.

'Here we are!' I called to her.

'Mother, what is it?' my mother asked.

We gathered in the broad slot of light. We could see Grandmother's mauve slippers and her porcelain-white ankles under the door. She stopped screaming. 'I heard whispers when I was in my bed,' she said.

'It was Robo and me,' I told her.

'Then, when everyone seemed to have gone, I came into the W.C.,' Johanna said. 'I left the light *off*. I was *very* quiet,' she told us. 'Then I saw and heard the wheel.'

'The wheel?' Father asked.

'A wheel went by the door a few times,' Grandmother said. 'It rolled by and came back and rolled by again.'

Father made his fingers roll like wheels alongside his head; he made a face at Mother. 'Somebody needs a new set of wheels,' he whispered, but Mother looked crossly at him.

'I turned on the light,' Grandmother said, 'and the wheel went away.'

'I told you there was a bike in the hall,' said Robo.

'Shut up, Robo,' Father said.

'No, it was not a bicycle,' Grandmother said. 'There was only one wheel.'

Father was making his hands go crazy beside his head. 'She's got a wheel or two *missing*,' he hissed at my mother, but she cuffed him and knocked his glasses askew on his face.

'Then someone came and looked *under* the door,' Grandmother said, 'and *that is* when I screamed.'

'Someone?' said Father.

'I saw his hands, a man's hands – there was hair on his knuckles,' Grandmother said. 'His hands were on the rug right outside the door. He must have been looking up at me.'

'No, Grandmother,' I said. 'I think he was just standing out here on his hands.'

'Don't be fresh,' my mother said.

'But we saw a man walking on his hands,' Robo said.

'You did *not*,' Father said.

'We *did*,' I said.

'We're going to wake everyone up,' Mother cautioned us.

The toilet flushed and Grandmother shuffled out the door with only a little of her former dignity intact. She was

occupant was not standing on his or her hands. I saw what were clearly feet, in almost the expected position, but the feet did not touch the floor; their soles tilted up to me – dark, bruise-colored pads. They were *huge* feet attached to short, furry shins. They were a *bear's* feet, only there were no claws. A bear's claws are not retractable, like a cat's; if a bear had claws, you would see them. Here, then, was an imposter in a bear suit, or a declawed bear. A domestic bear, perhaps. At least – by its presence in the W.C. – a *housebroken* bear. For by its smell I could tell it was no man in a bear suit; it was all bear. It was real bear.

I backed into the door of Grandmother's former room, behind which my father lurked, waiting for further disturbances. He snapped open the door and I fell inside, frightening us both. Mother sat up in bed and pulled the feather quilt over her head. 'Got him!' Father cried, dropping down on me. The floor trembled; the bear's unicycle slipped against the wall and fell into the door of the W.C., out of which the bear suddenly shambled, stumbling over its unicycle and lunging for its balance. Worriedly, it stared across the hall, through the open door, at Father sitting on my chest. It picked up the unicycle in its front paws. '*Grauf?*' said the bear. Father slammed the door.

Down the hall we heard a woman call, 'Where are you, Duna?'

'*Harf!*' the bear said.

Father and I heard the woman come closer. She said, 'Oh, Duna, practicing again? Always practicing! But it's better in the daytime.' The bear said nothing. Father opened the door.

'Don't let anyone else in,' Mother said, still under the featherbed.

In the hall a pretty, aging woman stood beside the bear,

wearing a gown over a gown over a gown; her neck was very long and her face was creamed white. Grandmother looked like a troubled goose. 'He was evil and vile,' she said to us. 'He knew terrible magic.'

'The man who looked at you?' Mother asked.

'That man who told my *dream*,' Grandmother said. Now a tear made its way through her furrows of face cream. 'That was *my* dream,' she said, 'and he told everyone. It is unspeakable that he even *knew* it,' she hissed to us. 'My dream – of Charlemagne's horses and soldiers – I am the only one who should know it. I had that dream before you were born,' she told Mother. 'And that vile evil magic man told my dream as if it were *news*.'

'I never even told your father all there was to that dream. I was never sure that it *was* a dream. And now there are men on their hands, and their knuckles are hairy, and there are magic wheels. I want the boys to sleep with *me*.'

So that was how Robo and I came to share the large family room, far away from the W.C., with Grandmother, who lay on my mother's and father's pillows with her creamed face shining like the face of a wet ghost. Robo lay awake watching her. I do not think Johanna slept very well; I imagine she was dreaming her dream of death again – reliving the last winter of Charlemagne's cold soldiers with their strange metal clothes covered with frost and their armor frozen shut.

When it was obvious that I had to go to the W.C., Robo's round, bright eyes followed me to the door.

There was someone in the W.C. There was no light shining from under the door, but there was a unicycle parked against the wall outside. Its rider sat in the dark W.C.; the toilet was flushing over and over again – like a child, the unicyclist was not giving the tank time to refill.

I went closer to the gap under the W.C. door, but the

who now balanced in place on its unicycle, one huge paw on the woman's shoulder. She wore a vivid red turban and a long wrap-around dress that resembled a curtain. Perched on her high bosom was a necklace strung with bear claws; her earrings touched the shoulder of her curtain-dress and her other, bare shoulder where my father and I stared at her fetching mole. 'Good evening,' she said to Father. 'I'm sorry if we've disturbed you. Duna is forbidden to practice at night – but he loves his work.'

The bear muttered, pedaling away from the woman. The bear had very good balance but he was careless; he brushed against the walls of the hall and touched the photographs of the speed-skating teams with his paws. The woman, bowing away from Father, went after the bear calling, 'Duna, Duna,' and straightening the photographs as she followed him down the hall.

'*Duna* is the Hungarian word for the Danube,' Father told me. 'That bear is named after our beloved *Donau*.' Sometimes it seemed to surprise my family that the Hungarians could love a river, too.

'Is the bear a *real* bear?' Mother asked – still under the featherbed – but I left Father to explain it all to her. I knew that in the morning Herr Theobald would have much to explain, and I would hear everything reviewed at that time.

I went across the hall to the W.C. My task there was hurried by the bear's lingering odor, and by my suspicion of bear hair on everything; it was only my suspicion, though, for the bear had left everything quite tidy – or at least neat for a bear.

'I saw the bear,' I whispered to Robo, back in our room, but Robo had crept into Grandmother's bed and had fallen asleep beside her. Old Johanna was awake, however.

'I saw fewer and fewer soldiers,' she said. 'The last time they came there were only nine of them. Everyone looked so hungry; they must have eaten the extra horses. It was so cold. Of course I wanted to help them! But we weren't alive at the same time; how could I help them if I wasn't even born? Of course I knew they would die! But it took such a long time.'

'The last time they came, the fountain was frozen. They used their swords and their long pikes to break the ice into chunks. They built a fire and melted the ice in a pot. They took bones from their saddlebags – bones of all kinds – and threw them in the soup. It must have been a very thin broth because the bones had long ago been gnawed clean. I don't know what bones they were. Rabbits, I suppose, and maybe a deer or a wild boar. Maybe the extra horses. I do not choose to think,' said Grandmother, 'that they were the bones of the missing soldiers.'

'Go to sleep, Grandmother,' I said.

'Don't worry about the bear,' she said.

In the breakfast room of the Pension Grillparzer we confronted Herr Theobald with the menagerie of his other guests who had disrupted our evening. I knew that (as never before) my father was planning to reveal himself as a Tourist Bureau spy.

'Men walking about on their hands,' said Father.

'Men looking under the door of the W.C.,' said Grandmother.

'That man,' I said, and pointed to the small, sulking fellow at the corner table, seated for breakfast with his cohorts – the dream man and the Hungarian singer.

'He does it for a living,' Herr Theobald told us, and as if to demonstrate that this was so, the man who stood on his hands began to stand on his hands.

'Well, she married *me* first,' said the dream man.

'And then she heard *me* sing!' the singer said.

'She's never been married to the *other* one,' Theobald said, and everyone looked apologetically toward the man who could only walk on his hands.

Theobald said, 'They were once a circus act, but politics got them in trouble.'

'We were the best in Hungary,' said the singer. 'You ever hear of the Circus Szolnok?'

'No, I'm afraid not,' Father said, seriously.

'We played in Miskolc, in Szeged, in Debrecen,' said the dream man.

'Twice in Szeged,' the singer said.

'We would have made it to Budapest if it hadn't been for the Russians,' said the man who walked on his hands.

'Yes, it was the Russians who removed his shinbones!' said the dream man.

'Tell the truth,' the singer said. 'He was *born* without shinbones. But it's true that we couldn't get along with the Russians.'

'They tried to jail the bear,' said the dream man.

'Tell the truth,' Theobald said.

'We rescued his sister from them,' said the man who walked on his hands.

'So of course I must put them up,' said Herr Theobald, 'and they work as hard as they can. But who's interested in their act in this country? It's a Hungarian thing. There's no *tradition* of bears on unicycles here,' Theobald told us. 'And the damn dreams mean nothing to us Viennese.'

'Tell the truth,' said the dream man. 'It is because I have told the wrong dreams. We worked a nightclub on the Kämtnerstrasse, but then we got banned.'

'You should never have told *that* dream,' the singer said gravely.

'Make him stop that,' Father said. 'We know he can do it.'

'But did you know that he can't do it any other way?' the dream man asked suddenly. 'Did you know that his legs were useless? He has no shinbones. It is *wonderful* that he can walk on his hands! Otherwise, he wouldn't walk at all.' The man, although it was clearly hard to do while standing on his hands, nodded his head.

'Please sit down,' Mother said.

'It is perfectly all right to be crippled,' Grandmother said, boldly. 'But you are evil,' she told the dream man. 'You know things you have no right to know. He knew my *dream*,' she told Herr Theobald, as if she were reporting a theft from her room.

'He is a *little* evil, I know,' Theobald admitted. 'But not usually! And he behaves better and better. He can't help what he knows.'

'I was just trying to straighten you out,' the dream man told Grandmother. 'I thought it would do you good. Your husband has been dead quite a while, after all, and it's about time you stopped making so much of that dream. You're not the only person who's had such a dream.'

'Stop it,' Grandmother said.

'Well, you ought to know,' said the dream man.

'No, be quiet, please,' Herr Theobald told him.

'I am from the Tourist Bureau,' Father announced, probably because he couldn't think of anything else to say.

'Oh my God shit!' Herr Theobald said.

'It's not Theobald's fault,' said the singer. 'It's *our* fault. He's nice to put up with us, though it costs him his reputation.'

'They married my sister,' Theobald told us. 'They are *family*, you see. What can I do?'

'"They" married your sister?' Mother said.

'Well, it was your wife's responsibility, too!' the dream man said.

'She was *your* wife, then,' the singer said.

'Please stop it,' Theobald begged.

'We get to do the balls for children's diseases,' the dream man said. 'And some of the state hospitals – especially at Christmas.'

'If you would only do more with the bear,' Herr Theobald advised them.

'Speak to your sister about that,' said the singer. 'It's *her* bear – she's trained him, she's let him get lazy and sloppy and full of bad habits.'

'He is the only one of you who never makes fun of me,' said the man who could only walk on his hands.

'I would like to leave all this,' Grandmother said. 'This is, for me, an awful experience.'

'Please, dear lady,' Herr Theobald said, 'we only wanted to show you that we meant no offense. These are hard times. I need the B rating to attract more tourists, and I can't – in my heart – throw out the Circus Szolnok.'

'*In his heart*, my ass!' said the dream man. 'He's afraid of his sister. He wouldn't dream of throwing us out.'

'If he dreamed it, you would know it!' cried the man on his hands.

'I am afraid of the *bear*,' Herr Theobald said. 'It does everything she tells it to do.'

'Say "he," not "it,"' said the man on his hands. 'He is a fine bear, and he never hurt anybody. He has no claws, you know perfectly well – and very few teeth, either.'

'The poor thing has a terribly hard time eating,' Herr Theobald admitted. 'He is quite old, and he's messy.'

Over my father's shoulder, I saw him write in the giant pad: 'A depressed bear and an unemployed circus. This family is centered on the sister.'

At that moment out on the sidewalk, we could see her tending to the bear. It was early morning and the street was not especially busy. By law, of course, she had the bear on a leash, but it was a token control. In her startling red turban the woman walked up and down the sidewalk, following the lazy movements of the bear on his unicycle. The animal pedaled easily from parking meter to parking meter, sometimes leaning a paw on the meter as he turned. He was very talented on the unicycle, you could tell, but you could also tell that the unicycle was a dead end for him. You could see that the bear felt he could go no further with unicycling.

'She should bring him off the street now,' Herr Theobald fretted. 'The people in the pastry shop next door complain to me,' he told us. 'They say the bear drives their customers away.'

'That bear makes the customers *come!*' said the man on his hands.

'It makes some people come, it turns some away,' said the dream man. He was suddenly somber, as if his profundity had depressed him.

But we had been so taken up with the antics of the Circus Szolnok that we had neglected old Johanna. When my mother saw that Grandmother was quietly crying, she told me to bring the car around.

'It's been too much for her,' my father whispered to Theobald. The Circus Szolnok looked ashamed of themselves.

Outside on the sidewalk the bear pedaled up to me and handed me the keys; the car was parked at the curb. 'Not everyone likes to be given the keys in that fashion,' Herr Theobald told his sister.

'Oh, I thought he'd rather like it,' she said, rumpling my hair. She was as appealing as a barmaid, which is to say

I did not want to report on the usual business concerning the care of the car, but I saw that Father was trying to maintain order and calm; he had the giant pad spread on his lap as if we'd just completed a routine investigation. 'What does the gauge tell us?' he asked.

'Someone put thirty-five kilometers on it,' I said.

'That terrible bear has been in here,' Grandmother said. 'There are hairs from the beast on the back seat, and I can smell him.'

'I don't smell anything,' Father said.

'And the perfume of that gypsy in the turban,' Grandmother said. 'It is hovering near the ceiling of the car.' Father and I sniffed. Mother continued to massage her temples.

On the floor by the brakes and clutch pedals I saw several of the mint-green toothpicks that the Hungarian singer was in the habit of wearing like a scar at the corner of his mouth. I didn't mention them. It was enough to imagine them all – out on the town, in our car. The singing driver, the man on his hands beside him – waving out the window with his feet. And in back, separating the dream man from his former wife – his great head brushing the upholstered roof, his mauling paws relaxed in his large lap – the old bear slouched like a benighted drunk.

'Those poor people,' Mother said, her eyes still closed.

'Liars and criminals,' Grandmother said. 'Mystics and refugees and broken-down animals.'

'They were trying hard,' Father said, 'but they weren't coming up with the prizes.'

'Better off in a zoo,' said Grandmother.

'I had a good time,' Robo said.

'It's hard to break out of Class C,' I said.

'They have fallen past Z,' said old Johanna. 'They have disappeared from the human alphabet.'

that she was more appealing at night; in the daylight I could see that she was older than her brother, and older than her husbands too – and in time, I imagined, she would cease being lover and sister to them, respectively, and become a mother to them all. She was already a mother to the bear.

'Come over here,' she said to him. He pedaled listlessly in place on his unicycle, holding on to a parking meter for support. He licked the little glass face of the meter. She tugged his leash. He stared at her. She tugged again. Insolently, the bear began to pedal – first one way, then the next. It was as if he took interest, seeing that he had an audience. He began to show off.

'Don't try anything,' the sister said to him, but the bear pedaled faster and faster, going forward, going backward, angling sharply and veering among the parking meters; the sister had to let go of the leash. 'Duna, stop it!' she cried, but the bear was out of control. He let the wheel roll too close to the curb and the unicycle pitched him hard into the fender of a parked car. He sat on the sidewalk with the unicycle beside him; you could tell that he hadn't injured himself, but he looked very embarrassed and nobody laughed. 'Oh, Duna,' the sister said, scoldingly, but she went over and crouched beside him at the curb. 'Duna, Duna,' she reproved him, gently. He shook his big head; he would not look at her. There was some saliva strung on the fur near his mouth and she wiped this away with her hand. He pushed her hand away with his paw.

'Come back again!' cried Herr Theobald, miserably, as we got into our car.

Mother sat in the car with her eyes closed and her fingers massaging her temples; this way she seemed to hear nothing we said. She claimed it was her only defense against traveling with such a contentious family.

'I think this calls for a letter,' Mother said.

But Father raised his hand – as if he were going to bless us – and we were quiet. He was writing in the giant pad and wished to be undisturbed. His face was stern. I knew that Grandmother felt confident of his verdict. Mother knew it was useless to argue. Robo was already bored. I steered us off through the tiny streets; I took Spiegelgasse to Lobkowitzplatz. Spiegelgasse is so narrow that you can see the reflection of your own car in the windows of the shops you pass, and I felt our movement through Vienna was superimposed (like that) – like a trick with a movie camera, as if we made a fairy-tale journey through a toy city.

When Grandmother was asleep in the car, Mother said, 'I don't suppose that in this case a change in the classification will matter very much, one way or another.'

'No,' Father said, 'not much at all.' He was right about that, though it would be years until I saw the Pension Grillparzer again.

When Grandmother died, rather suddenly and in her sleep, Mother announced that she was tired of traveling. The real reason, however, was that she began to find herself plagued by Grandmother's dream. 'The horses are so thin,' she told me once. 'I mean, I always knew they would be thin, but not *this* thin. And the soldiers – I knew they were miserable,' she said, 'but not *that* miserable.'

Father resigned from the Tourist Bureau and found a job with a local detective agency specializing in hotels and department stores. It was a satisfactory job for him, though he refused to work during the Christmas season – when, he said, some people ought to be allowed to steal a little.

My parents seemed to me to relax as they got older, and I really felt they were fairly happy near the end. I know

that the strength of Grandmother's dream was dimmed by the *real* world, and specifically by what happened to Robo. He went to a private school and was well liked there, but he was killed by a homemade bomb in his first year at the university. He was not even 'political.' In his last letter to my parents he wrote: 'The self-seriousness of the radical factions among the students is much overrated. And the food is execrable.' Then Robo went to his history class, and his classroom was blown apart.

It was after my parents died that I gave up smoking and took up traveling again. I took my second wife back to the Pension Grillparzer. With my first wife, I never got as far as Vienna.

The Grillparzer had not kept Father's B rating very long, and it had fallen from the ratings altogether by the time I returned to it. Herr Theobald's sister was in charge of the place. Gone was her tart appeal and in its place was the sexless cynicism of some maiden aunts. She was shapeless and her hair was dyed a sort of bronze, so that her head resembled one of those copper scouring pads that you use on a pot. She did not remember me and was suspicious of my questions. Because I appeared to know so much about her past associates, she probably knew I was with the police.

The Hungarian singer had gone away – another woman thrilled by his voice. The dream man had been *taken* away – to an institution. His own dreams had turned to nightmares and he'd awakened the pension each night with his horrifying howls. His removal from the seedy premises, said Herr Theobald's sister, was almost simultaneous with the loss of the Grillparzer's B rating.

Herr Theobald was dead. He had dropped down clutching his heart in the hall, where he ventured one night to investigate what he thought was a prowler. It was

and he ate most of someone's cat. Then he was poisoned twice and became afraid to eat anything in this perilous environment. There was no alternative but to donate him to the Schönbrunn Zoo, but there was even some doubt as to his acceptability. He was toothless and ill, perhaps contagious, and his long history of having been treated as a human being did not prepare him for the gentler routine of zoo life.

His outdoor sleeping quarters in the courtyard of the Grillparzer had inflamed his rheumatism, and even his one talent, unicycling, was irretrievable. When he first tried it in the zoo, he fell. Someone laughed. Once anyone laughed at something Duna did, Theobald's sister explained, Duna would never do that thing again. He became, at last, a kind of charity case at Schönbrunn, where he died a short two months after he'd taken up his new lodgings. In the opinion of Theobald's sister, Duna died of mortification – the result of a rash that spread over his great chest, which then had to be shaved. A shaved bear, one zoo official said, is embarrassed to death.

In the cold courtyard of the building I looked in the bear's empty cage. The birds hadn't left a fruit seed, but in a corner of his cage was a looming mound of the bear's ossified droppings – as void of life, and even odor, as the corpses captured by the holocaust at Pompeii. I couldn't help thinking of Robo; of the bear, there were more remains.

In the car I was further depressed to notice that not one kilometer had been added to the gauge, not one kilometer had been driven in secret. There was no one around to take liberties anymore.

'When we're a safe distance away from your precious Pension Grillparzer,' my second wife said to me, 'I'd like you to tell me why you brought me to such a shabby place.'

only Duna, the malcontent bear, who was dressed in the dream man's pin-striped suit. Why Theobald's sister had dressed the bear in this fashion was not explained to me, but the shock of the sullen animal unicycling in the lunatic's left-behind clothes had been enough to scare Herr Theobald to death.

The man who could only walk on his hands had also fallen into the gravest trouble. His wristwatch snagged on a tine of an escalator and he was suddenly unable to hop off; his necktie, which he rarely wore because it dragged on the ground when he walked on his hands, was drawn under the step-off grate at the end of the escalator – where he was strangled. Behind him a line of people formed – marching in place by taking one step back and allowing the escalator to carry them forward, then taking another step back. It was quite a while before anyone got up the nerve to step over him. The world has many unintentionally cruel mechanisms that are not designed for people who walk on their hands.

After that, Theobald's sister told me, the Pension Grillparzer went from Class C to much worse. As the burden of management fell more heavily on her, she had less time for Duna and the bear grew senile and indecent in his habits. Once he bullied a mailman down a marble staircase at such a ferocious pace that the man fell and broke his hip: the attack was reported and an old city ordinance forbidding unrestrained animals in places open to the public was enforced. Duna was outlawed at the Pension Grillparzer.

For a while, Theobald's sister kept the bear in a cage in the courtyard of the building, but he was taunted by dogs and children, and food (and worse) was dropped into his cage from the apartments that faced the courtyard. He grew unbearable and devious – only pretending to sleep –

'It's a long story,' I admitted.

I was thinking I had noticed a curious lack of either enthusiasm or bitterness in the account of the world by Theobald's sister. There was in her story the flatness one associates with a storyteller who is accepting of unhappy endings, as if her life and her companions had never been exotic to *her* – as if they had always been staging a ludicrous and doomed effort at reclassification.