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SHAME HEIRS

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Dedicated to the memory of my father and grandparents

“DAMN! I’VE SWELLED UP AGAIN! I CONTINUE GETTING STOUT!” The young, well-made, attractive woman, had become plump-waisted noticeably, and the very angry brunette examined herself in the mirror in the bright-lit and beautifully furnished hall. “I can’t even dress up stylishly now! And what’s the reason? You wanted to wipe the child’s snot.”

She pulled down her tight skirt spitefully. It hardly covered her knees, and then she began viewing her face in the mirror more attentively. Her big, ashen blue eyes were outlined with eyeliner, and contrasted sharply with her pale complexion.

“Girl, I beg of you, stop shouting.” Her mother-in-law, Madam, an attractive and pretentious fifty-year-old lady with amazingly clear-cut and regular, but pleasant-looking features, stared at the girl with horror. “Think of what other people could say about us. Why do you raise your voice?”

“And what am I supposed to do, be happy and pleased?” Girl snapped and then grinned discontentedly, turned to face Madam and placed her hands on her hips. “You and your...your dear sonny made me suffer from...this awful pregnancy! I’m cheesed-off at carrying and dragging this huge pot-belly. I’m baking hot when I wake up every morning and go to work with such an awful appearance.”

“Girl, we can be overheard. Our neighbours...”

“Why are you afraid of those dickheads? They give you a sugary smile, but at the same time you should be aware of their stab in the back.” She grinned and turned away from Madam; then she began combing her shoulder-long hair. The Girl’s hairdo seemed unnaturally smooth and symmetric in the very bright artificial lighting.

“How is it possible, my darling? In fact, they always ask me

about your well-being and your heir,” Madam murmured.

Girl burst out laughing and threw the hairbrush into her purse. Having put on her dark coat, she approached the mirror again, stroked her neck and her chin with her palm and sighed.

“They ask....but the masculine part of those compassionate inhabitants always tries to touch my thighs. You believe it might be their method of taking an interest in my well-being, don’t you?”

Madam lifted up her eyes to the ceiling, like a repentant sinner, and buttoned her lips.

“Well, everything will be over soon.” Girl threw another disappointed glance at her image, and then went to the front door, clasping her coat.

The mixed scent of vanilla and burnt bread rushed into the vestibule from the staircase. Madam frowned and suddenly swore coarsely. “The Neighbour has cooked something disgusting again. It reeks of muck everywhere. What worthless people live in this house! They can make nothing suitable.”

She was going to shut the front door, when the aforementioned Neighbour in a bright-coloured apron appeared on her threshold, and then she rushed to Madam.

“My dear, help me, please,” the Neighbour begged. “I tried to make a pudding, but my grandson deliberately put the oven temperature on maximum again, and everything burnt. I don’t know what to do. It’s time to have breakfast, but I’ve got no bread. Would you be so kind as to give me a loaf? The shop, where his favourite bread can be bought, does not open for an hour.”

The Neighbour’s grandson was a thin, eight-year-old boy, who frequently smiled. Now he was standing on the threshold of his flat and gave a crafty look out of the slightly open door. Madam frowned. The Neighbour and her grandson were a trial for everybody in the house, in her opinion. Qualified doctors thought the boy to be mentally disturbed from his birth, and his mother, having decided such a creature would be a handicap, left him with

her mother in the beautiful flat. The woman visited her son once a month, gave him a few minutes of her precious time, put a large pack of monetary denominations on the table in the flat, and left. She never communicated with her son. She began her life anew, became the wife of a very rich person, but gave birth to nobody. Her son had never met his father.

Madam examined the Neighbour arrogantly and slowly, from head to foot. She narrowed her eyes, being apparently displeased. The Neighbour kept silent and waited; she looked at her prospective rescuer like a hungry puppy.

“Well, you’ll be given what you are begging for, but don’t dare cross the threshold of our flat.” Madam warned and shut the front door slightly.

With the same discontent in her tired heart she went—No! She deliberately slowly walked—into the kitchen and, having reached the bread bin, pressed two long loafs with her well-groomed forefinger. Having chosen the drier one, Madam twiddled the loaf in her hands, sniffed, tossed her head and, as slowly as before, returned to the hall. She approached the mirror and smoothed her hair, then began inspecting her reflection from different visual angles: full face, profile, half-face, and looking down at her own reflection, from under her brows at her own reflection. Madam spotted the new minute wrinkle on her face and puckered her brows. Ah! Negative emotions had created this new awful crease! Being inexpressibly disappointed, she stamped her foot gracefully, rounded her lips off and puffed out her cheeks several times. Having exhaled, Madam decided to buy a new anti-aging face cream immediately.

Finally, the Neighbour received the loaf and the freshly fastidious stare from Madam. As soon as the Neighbour took the loaf, Madam gave her fingers a shake, as if she wanted to shake off the invisible dirt from her hand. The Neighbour’s Boy appeared in front of these two women and grasped the loaf from his grandmother’s hands.

“You’re not pretty.” Madam heard the Neighbour’s Boy

slowly say and laugh. His grandmother gasped, and he ran into his flat.

“What’s the medical verdict?” Madam followed him with her eyes and frowned yet again. She never even pretended to feel indifference to this child. “In fact, he’s obviously wearing you out!”

The Neighbour looked at her in embarrassment and answered apologetically, “The doctors advised us to send him to a special boarding school. My daughter and I visited that school. Tidiness and cleanliness everywhere, but is there anybody who can look after my boy better, than me? In spite of everything, he’s at home now. And my daughter wants him to live with me. She loves him so much!”

“How long will he be alive?” Madam blurted out unexpectedly. “I know such creatures don’t exist for too many years. He’s a plant, but not a person. Why are you still so sentimental about him? He’s not a useful plant, but a weed.”

“How....He’s my grandson....Actually....”

“I don’t care. Have it your own way. But, when you walk him in the street, such a procedure becomes impossibly difficult. Everybody, who meets him points the finger at him, but he only laughs as a fool would laugh.”

As though confirming her words, Madam nodded several times and stared down at the Neighbour. She said nothing; tears appeared in her eyes. Having thanked Madam, the Neighbour took out a small wallet from her apron’s pocket and gave Madam some small monetary denomination. Madam then gripped the banknote between her forefinger and her middle finger, and then she hummed. The Neighbour approached her front door, stopped, looked back, as if wishing to say something, then changed her mind and left.

Madam shook her head, shut the door and began turning in front of the mirror like a young coquette; then she walked into the kitchen, where she sat in front of her husband.

The kitchen wasn't very big, but modern and decorated in purely white. Kitchen utensils; the huge, round dining table; the curtains; the chandelier; the walls; the floor and the ceiling—everything merged into one white spot. At times, it was impossible to notice snow-white utensils, standing on the table, covered with a white foam tablecloth.

Madam and her husband Monsieur lived in the centre of a big city in the so-called high-status part of it, where the price of each square metre occasionally resembled a phone number with an international and a regional code. This high-status territory was like a paradise on earth among the intense, driving-you-mad city life. However, inside the house, identical passions raged and the same hatred splashed out as in the hovels of the poor.

Madam poured herself a cup of strong tea, and then she began cooling her drink, stirring it noisily with a silver spoon. Having thrown an annoyed glance at her husband, Madam tossed the spoon onto the saucer. How could he be so indifferent?

“What a trial this slip of a girl is! Have you heard, darling? What other people say about our family?”

“I always ask the Girl to guard her reputation,” Madam added hastily, though, nobody was going to interrupt her. “Can it be possible? I say that to her again and again until I'm blue in the face. In fact, all of us are always considered as respectable people. We're cited as an example of the ideal family. *O tempore, o moris!* Darling, you can't imagine how I, a hereditary noble, suffer from living among such human cattle. They're interested in nothing and don't even know who Zola was. And Girl...In fact, this spawn has never understood our Sonny...”

Madam put her hands to her forehead. Then she shook her head gracefully, looked upward, touched the internal corners of her eyes with her forefingers and blinked several times quickly. Yet, even after these refined actions as old as the world, tears didn't fill her still beautiful eyes.

Monsieur looked at his wife who was desperately trying to

burst into tears and said nothing. Beside her, he preferred to be as dumb as a statue. Frankly speaking, his only wish was to go to work as quickly as possible. It was unique in his reality, the only place where calmness and measured life reigned. At work, Monsieur feared nobody; and from time to time, sitting alone in his office, he could talk to himself, being free of condemnation, if his ideas were directed improperly.

When you're alone, you have to prove nothing to nobody. When you're alone with yourself, you're at all times remaining in the right. You've got no necessity to dig into another person's psychology, and to try to understand it, to solve his everyday little madneses. Monsieur, whilst being alone, reflected on why he spent his life in such a silly way.

Who says that a person has to have a family? A family often exists as a mediocre quality group. The happiest family, is strange enough, and sometimes consists of only one person. Monsieur never knew why he was obliged to listen to his wife's emotional chatting at the most inconvenient moment, while his mind desperately searched for other ideas. He wanted to shout at her, to turn over the table and everything in the flat, even to break a cup, but he did nothing. What could the neighbours tell about their family? *Walls have ears*. Indeed, before other people, Monsieur and Madam represented themselves as an ideal, irreproachably supportive family; and they called each other in public only with the help of caressing word forms. Their family was everywhere considered as *una famiglia molto morale*. So, it was futile to be discontented, when everything had become settled....Long years of pretence now and then seemed to him such a harmful sneer. There were periods when he thought everything was really fine. And now he felt a painful despondency and irritation, but he didn't stir. He just asked Destiny silently, why it was so cruel to him.

During the last twenty years he had seldom talked to his wife. He mutely listened to her infinite claims about her noble mind among the immoral, dissolute crowd. Recently she had found one of her ancestor's correspondences. It helped Madam to realise her membership of the upper-classes. Immediately, she remembered

all her inherited talents: a passion for classical music, old-time dancing and literature, jewellery, furs, parquet floors and table silver. She found obvious rare breeding in her features, refinement in her manners, and put on her right little finger an ancient, massive gold ring. Eventually, Madam understood her own temper. Her whims she began interpreting as an “aristocratic fastidiousness”; her intolerance of human weaknesses she named “lordly severity”; her caustic remarks she called “noble anger”.

Monsieur understood very well that he would never fit into his wife’s perfect, upper-class life. He just didn’t value his wife’s lofty ideals.

He and Madam lived in different parts of their huge flat. Monsieur tried not to let her into his residential territory often. His room was big, dark, silent and stuffy. Finding himself at home after work, Monsieur had dinner, then bundled away to his room to watch TV or went to bed. At this time of night Madam preferred to speak on the phone. She discussed the latest gossip with her *noble friend*. Madam kept harping on the same string. Oh, society was becoming unbearable, completely! For such exquisite ladies, like Madam and her *noble friend*, communicating with people who couldn’t distinguish Richter-physicist from Richter-chemist, Richter-seismologist and Richter-pianist was very difficult....Ah, in that shop such beautiful mink coats were on sale! Unfortunately, it became impossible, gradually, to avoid meeting people outdoors who did belong to the lower-classes. These vulgar persons’ smell was completely different from the delicate aroma that belonged to glossy magazine’s space between pages. In general, nobody could understand such ladies who were born for a particular life.

Monsieur heard his wife’s phone conversations from time to time. They never surprised him, but had begun annoying him recently. When being near Madam, he always wanted to rush away.

Once, when he came home very late and was pie-eyed, Monsieur blurted out to his reflection in the mirror, “I’m green with envy, when I meet an unmarried person! In loneliness you

shouldn't ever need to prove your case. When you're alone..."

He sighed, and then he continued, "I hate my wife! I sought *love* and what have I got now? Sometimes I'm eager to shout at her, even to beat her, to break up everything here. But, it's impossible...What, if our neighbours overhear us? They consider us a perfect family."

"And sometimes I even think, we're really happy," he whispered theatrically and stared wide-eyed at his own reflection. "I don't know, where the truth is, anymore."

It was the first and the last time, that Monsieur was so plain-spoken in his home. Monsieur reflected about the universe imperfection often, especially when he became a married person once again.

All are good lasses, but whence come the bad wives?

Though, he knew the final result every time in advance, he didn't stop searching for perfection, wishing to experience a *love* ecstasy splash with a woman who seemed to him better that time. But, constantly, he felt disappointment and fear when several years with a certain female had passed. He compared this condition with a natural phenomenon. When you came to a former river-bed after heavy rains, you could be engulfed alive. The same effect you could experience with your wife, Monsieur believed.

During the breaks between his futile searches for an ideal woman, Monsieur played the role of a very enthusiastic employee at one company where he made diligent, but, almost every time, vain attempts to improve the world. Monsieur had an exceptionally strong faith in his own importance, and also he was too curious. He considered himself the one who had a great hand at selecting undemanding persons for a voluntary drudgery. These were named vacancies to be urgently filled. One should say, he succeeded in his occupation. He managed to cast the roles in such a manner, so that the pencil pushers feared each other and preferred not to go, but to whisk into the office, as if they were shadows; and as though they were afraid of being caught in a plot against the head

of the company.

Monsieur liked observing people, their habits and the exchange of ideas, while they stormed different *fortresses* that were on their road to the “*rope*” *ladder of success*. This was the time, when he could hear the real song of a disdained human heart. He thought, even nowadays, when everybody seemed to be free, too much cogitative nastiness produced a well-educated, and a well-trained person.

A being who voluntarily becomes a marked-down duplicate of his master, produces an obedient smile and marvellous chanting about the master’s thought-up perfection, has got the most chances to reach his aim. From time to time, his fellow tribesmen in the office, who supposed nothing bad, become generators of disgusting epithets, addressed to the master. The master grows furious and starts scraping out his slaves’ rows; and the *local well-wisher* continues to bend his head obligingly, puts his palms on his breast, as though during the moment of his expression of gratitude, and reports resignedly. His knees tremble, his breath breathes off, but his speech is smooth.

Nobody knows how this *well-wisher* hates his moral wretchedness, colourlessness, featurelessness.

Nobody knows how this *well-wisher* hates to be content with having grey sweaters, hastily knitted by the puny creature, namely his wife.

Nobody knows how this *well-wisher* hates his everyday searching for friends who are not greedy and who are ready to share a sandwich for dinner.

Nobody knows how this *well-wisher* hates to look thievishly at well-groomed women, realising the impossibility of spending at least one minute of his life with them.

The *well-wisher* wants to rise upwards, where the soup is richer; the wine is stronger in turning your head; an expensive perfume permeates the air; well-groomed-slippery hand-shaking is more negligent; offers are more cynical; scabrous language is more

refined. And everything is for the click of a master's favourable fingers, when he decides to call his sickly-sweet slave. And, when the ordinary slave stands beside his master, his hand with a whip *convulsively clamped* in it does not tremble, when it comes to talking with his former fellow tribesmen....

The chief in charge of Monsieur was the sweetest and the most patient person in the world. He adored his special subordinate, because he perfectly understood: neither he nor Monsieur, needed any young and more professional competitors in the company. They both were not very young. It was the suitable time for them both to give way to youth. It's strange how a person's fear appears. Everybody begins to think about other's mental torments when he himself gets his first sad-grey hair or a silvery bristle on his chin and on his cheeks.

Though, Monsieur's chief had another reason for not being too categorical. The chief's precious son—the sweet booby—had been beaten down the university's doors for several years, getting gaps constantly. Monsieur had all the necessary acquaintances in the education sphere and represented his chief's last hope....

Daily duties and the necessity to go somewhere are essential for every sensible creature. And, nevertheless, women accept their ageing more naturally and easier. Women just know they can find a fat-containing substance with unsurpassed molecules that rejuvenates their every wrinkle. Besides, they can *iron* their crumpled faces under anaesthetic or implant rejuvenating fibres into their skin. And great dressmakers can help them to hide their disadvantages under a baggy, bright and reminding one of a parrot's feathering, blouson. In addition, they spend all their spare time attracting the representatives of the opposite sex, who are already by their side, or still wait patiently for their fate at the ball of infinite youth. So, women have got no time to be bored. Though, there exist ones who do show an open contempt of the whole Universe and blame everybody for everything: their grandsons receive blame for being young wits; their children are blamed for a careless coquetry in their lives; and their own peers are reproached for minor corporal and mental sores.

When looking at old persons, everyone, even an incorrigible optimist, begins to guess to his horror what sort of a mask of wrinkles will appear on his face. For a comprehensible reason everybody considers himself unsurpassedly better than an old person whom he meets; and he expels from his memory the wrinkled image with fastidiousness. Destiny is infinitely wise, because after a silent and a quiet death in serene reality's embraces only righteous people receive complacent and pacified expressions on their faces. And other ones change. Somebody changes completely and to such a degree that his close relatives can't recognise a person in a wooden, fancifully decorated box....

Aged men represent a special natural phenomenon. They are never grateful for small favours. Boys, youths, men....All of them receive, from their birth, the ability to disfigure their own destinies with characteristic grace and the ecstasy. As to everyday life, they've got the demonic quick temper that makes them hurry up and overtake others, even if it's detrimental for them. They have to be first to take away, to attack, to bend someone to their will, to obtain revenge and to forget. And, suddenly, when the violent circular running finishes, they get their souls exhausted by melancholy. If old men have got a lot of spare time, their daily face and torso observations in front of a mirror become prolonged. They make a revision of their total life acts. Children's insults and also maidens' refusals emerge in their memory.

Besides, aged men have to keep themselves on water and not to be ruined ahead of time, waiting for a person to be interested in them. They have not to be worse than young, brawny, white-teethed, imprudent guys, whom they consider as coxcombs, and complain about the incredibly bad manners of the young, as to their communicating with women. During an image reconstruction massage brushes for bald heads grind, ice for minimising wrinkles and the sharp transition to a diet of eternally young art workers are used. Sometimes morning exercises are popular and are accompanied by the subsequent lying on a sofa and groaning from an unusual trunk's discomfort, especially, if only at the age of sixty you're made learn what torso inclinations are. But, beings' seconds

continue running, and nature is vindictive. And here, in the moment of donating a young girl your charming old-fox's smile you have to show her the certain part of your face, where the lack of teeth is not visible and there is no probability of losing a denture.

As to Monsieur, he suffered a constant shortage of time. Maybe, therefore, he managed to save a youth's ardour. Passion arose in his heart every time when he saw nice female employees—brand new vigorous hens,—who couldn't realise at once who was the truly chief cockerel in the company, so twisted their lips and flirted with every man, trying not to regret their actions in the future. But, passion was likely to arise not in his heart, as it was initially created for the best human qualities. Passion appeared in another part of Monsieur's body. Having stirred in his armchair in front of *new sexual office war participants* impatiently, he started instructing them, telling about the company advantages, not forgetting to mention his own invaluable contribution to the flourishing of the company.

Well-studied words slipped from his lips automatically; it gave extraneous ideas the opportunity to spin in his head with an incredible speed. His facial expression, when he saw a young female, changed instantly and became more frivolous and preposterous; his fingers began smoothing his nonexistent moustache. By the way, Monsieur had a problem with his imagination: it developed too much at his mature age and distracted him from essential affairs in improper time.

How nice the gentle cheeks and the purposely slightly opened knees of these flirts! Monsieur wanted to rain kisses on them from their heads to their feet. How pleasant to examine them steadfastly, impudently, being duty-bound, and to confuse them with greasy jokes, and stare at their breasts! Such girls' future was evident at once. One girl blushed to the roots of her hair, in her eyes tears appeared, and she didn't know where to put her sweaty palms. Another girl, while listening to Monsieur, caved in her waist and moved forward in her chair, what made her blouse knitted button leg stretch disturbingly. Both girls had to make a choice soon. The

first girl, without doubt, would choose her principles and, till the end of her life, would be an object of spoken and mental kicks. The second one would rashly take the driver's place in a gorgeous car, presented to her as an indemnification for her overtime work. There's no need to wonder. So is the great validity of equality!

It's absolutely priceless to observe the former girlfriends' readiness to bite each other's veins for the sake of movement of advancement, as they think. How extraordinary looks a former disgraced employee the next morning! A former disgraced employee's life does become different just after the much talked-about quarter of an hour.

Young men don't have any delicacy too, if it comes to the bonuses; however, their intrigues are prosier. They can't pretend skilfully. They just deceive in a masterly way those who for a long time want to be misled.

Monsieur valued his personnel manager post, where he felt himself nourished, chilled, warmed and interested, as a very high-status position. The personnel department in any even slightly significant establishment is a concourse of special caste representatives. It's such a bowl for verbal waste that is delivered regularly by compassionate employees for considering and the further report upward to the chief. Besides, when it comes to tea time in a personnel department there always exists a slice of "sweet pie", having been brought by *news lines authors*.

At work Monsieur was all but happy, but now he tried desperately not to pay attention to his wife's monologue and to concentrate on his own feelings. He was a tall, lean and rather peppery man, who had the socialist epoch's worst beliefs. Usually, in his wife's company Monsieur smoked second-quality cigarettes wordlessly and shook off cigarette ashes into a cup. In the flat there were a lot of ashtrays, but, nevertheless, he preferred to use cups. While listening to his wife, Monsieur looked at her unkindly with his mouse-coloured eyes. He did hate her slightly flabby chin and neck. Her well-groomed and very bright finger-nails betrayed her age even more cruelly. And now she bowed down her head

slightly, trying to look into his eyes. Here she drew closer, and he smelt her sweet perfume. What a sickening smell! But, there was a time he had considered her skin's aroma and her perfume as Heaven's gift....

Monsieur couldn't remember how they had met, but recollected perfectly how pretty and favourable his future wife had been. Madam was the state official's only daughter and the university head's niece. Monsieur's thoughts were in a whirl. So many new acquaintances, unusually courageous conversations about life, conducted by important men generally! To him it was a new life completely, but Madam turned out to be a person, who tired of such a life-style. Having fallen in *love* with that unlucky fellow Monsieur, she threw all her mental treasures at his feet in threadbare shoes. Fear of what other people could say was her only demerit. She created tales about her husband skilfully and told them willingly.

"You know, my darling prepares me pancakes and coffee and brings them to me in the bedroom every morning," Madam narrated to her neighbour who knew Monsieur spent nights in a young girl's embraces from time to time. That girl lived in the same house, but two floors lower. "He *loves* me so much!"

Everyone, who knew Madam, listened to her cock-and-bull stories with affection, being perfectly aware how many lovers her beloved and sweet darling had. A person who tells one spouse about the unfaithfulness of the other one, and after that a divorce happens, is said to be punished by God. Monsieur's and Madam's friends evidently knew about it and never opened their lips about the truth.

The married life of Monsieur and Madam had an interesting scenario. At first Madam stunned him, but half a year later he looked at her well-shaped figure indifferently and began thinking about less perfect women. His delight at the sight of his wife was dying gradually. And now he tried to force himself not to wave his hand in front of his nose, wishing to get rid of her terrible stink.

Each age has its own aroma. But, incomprehensibly, advanced

age is often fragrant with damp books and a mildewed kefir. Those maddening aromas and mixes sometimes have a perfumed she-aristocrat and a lonely, poor old man whose only interlocutor in this world is an all-understanding cat....

Every woman Monsieur had was very convenient for him in certain situations. Having left his three previous spouses, he took nothing from his family nests, except for a teapot, an ashtray and several newspapers. It didn't disturb him at all. As soon as a previous spouse slammed the front door in his face, another woman opened her door and her arms also. His nomadic mood appeared somehow unpredictable and fitful. Monsieur acted as a lamb, which decided to run somewhere else suddenly, having gobbled up green grass from around him.

Why did women consider Monsieur as inviting? He had an unquestionable talent to keep silent, when required. *A close mouth catches no flies*. And, also he could make an aristocrat's grimace, when it was necessary.

Had he a special interest in anything? Yes. Popularity among his colleagues was Monsieur's touchy subject; and also he did *love* tumours on trees, known as wood burls. These tumours appear where there was plenty of young, not skilled growth and gain strength even more quickly, than normal wood. When the vegetative youth struggles to survive, circumstances, like fire or grazing cattle, create a local trouble, and there appears a quick wood burl. Such botanical warts were placed on window-sills in Monsieur's office. He cleaned them carefully, then polished and varnished them. To find botanical warts, Monsieur quite often ran into a nearby forest, having warned nobody at home. He left his car at the road's edge and started wandering among silent wood creations, kicked one of them from time to time, when he felt a fury attack coming. He put all his hatred to his irreversible ageing in these skirmishes with flora. There was nothing to be done: near Monsieur's ears and around his eyes deep age wrinkles appeared.

However, Monsieur's strolls turned out to be rather pleasant and fruitful. After several such strolls his daughter-in-law, Girl,

began putting on weight. She was a real Satan in aspect! With her he felt himself younger and found, he was eager to continue joyful living. But, everything ended quickly. His *love* was just a flash in a pan. The damsel proved to be not stupid. She had to catch on in her new family by means of a child, but her husband couldn't help her in this urge. Madam repeated herself over and over again about the necessity to produce her son's successor. So, as soon as Girl found she was pregnant, she broke off her strolls with Monsieur who wasn't exactly in the first blush of youth; and the joyful family event even was celebrated with the wine bottle corkage. The stronger the creature in the glasses sparkled, the funnier the future pseudo-father looked, and the more expressive the real founder's cheek-bones moved. That evening the deceived, already preening his feathers as a ladies' man took a good deal of soporific medicines. The next morning he woke up and immediately saw in front of him his worried wife and felt the desire to hang himself with shame, but escaped instead to work.

It was strange, but nobody guessed what was going on. Nobody had got a leg to stand on. Whether it was necessary to worry and to kick up a fuss because of such a trifle? One should even thank Monsieur officially for his ability to strengthen the society cell in due time, though, in such an unusual way.

Damn! What was it? He was up in arms. Now Madam had decided to calm Monsieur by patting his hand. What had she muttered? If she knew the truth, she would want to give her spouse a patting in an absolutely different manner. At last, Madam stopped her monologue. She rose and went somewhere with her head lowered, biting her brightly coloured lips.

Monsieur couldn't remember whether he and his wife touched each other with affection lately. For years, when Madam laid her palms on his forearm, he had moved away from her sharply, feeling all but disgust. How could he have allowed this woman to touch himself earlier? Why Monsieur couldn't recollect, if he was soft and tender with his wife?

For years, in their flat nobody had created sounds, reminding

one of laughter. Monsieur, Madam, Son and Girl lived in the atmosphere of the greatest expectation of something irreparable and gloomy, already severely predicted for centuries before then. Their life could be compared to the expected robot's manipulations. And, if now robots sometimes begin acting on their own, getting out of control, Monsieur and his family representatives haven't even tried to ask why their existence was so dull.

While touching Girl's finger-tips with his trembling, spoon-nailed fingers, Monsieur named her his sweetie girl and the last beautiful floret in his life. He couldn't come to terms with her refusal. He couldn't be glad they would meet only at dinner, when all the family gathered in the dining-room, having crept out from the distant parts of the huge flat.

His *love* turned out to be the most unfortunate thing. Monsieur thought, he had fallen in *love* with Girl, like a teenager, who for the first time got to know his lips' contact with a skilled temptress's mouth. He couldn't stop himself thinking about her body's curves and wasn't able to control his respiration rate, when she appeared in his sight. The idea he wasn't a painter had never disturbed Monsieur until now, but his free-will blindness didn't worry him at all. Girl's indifference, while they made *love*, he explained as her weariness and her fleeting boredom. That's why he tried to make his wits show and his eloquence a brilliant display. All his so-called spontaneous words, full of delight, were just carefully prepared pep talks.

She's never met such a man similar to me, poor girl, Monsieur reflected. She had to conceal her feelings to me from everybody.

So, watching Girl's apathetic glances, Monsieur experienced the confusion and the desire as a mixed feeling, and somewhere in his reason's remote corners his conscience wagged the finger at him in a frolicsome manner.