LÁSZLÓ KRASZNAHORKAI was born in Gyula, Hungary, in 1954. He has written five novels and won numerous prizes, including the International Man Booker Prize 2015, the 2013 Best Translated Book Award in Fiction for *Satantango*, and the 1993 Best Book of the Year Award in Germany for *The Melancholy of Resistance*.

For more about Krasznahorkai, visit his extensive website: *http://www.krasznahorkai.hu/*

The poet **GEORGE SZIRTES** was born in Budapest in 1948 and has been living in London since 1956. His translations have won The European Poetry Translation Prize and the Gold Star Award for the Republic of Hungary.

PRAISE FOR LÁSZLÓ KRASZNAHORKAI

"Throughout Krasznahorkai's work, what strikes the reader above all are the extraordinary sentences, sentences of incredible length that go to incredible lengths, their tone switching from solemn to madcap to quizzical to desolate as they go their wayward way; epic sentences that, like a lint roll, pick up all sorts of odd and unexpected things as they accumulate inexorably into paragraphs that are as monumental as they are scabrous and musical" **Man International Booker Prize judges' citation**

"The latest and most luminous book to appear in English by the Hungarian writer László Krasznahorkai … a devastatingly thoughtful, austere and contemplative book, written with a deep knowledge of artistic technique and human affairs that is rare among novelists" **Tim Martin, *Daily Telegraph***

"Krasznahorkai is a visionary writer" **Theo Tait, *Guardian***

"Krasznahorkai is the kind of writer who at least once on every page finds a way of expressing something one has always sensed but never known, let alone been able to describe" **Nicole Krauss**

"As always with Mr Krasznahorkai, real understanding remains beyond grasp, though a sense of illumination is pervasive. As a novelist he is a one-off, even if his work—as this book so finely shows—is universal" ***Economist***

"The contemporary Hungarian master of apocalypse who inspires comparison with Gogol and Melville" **Susan Sontag**

"Krasznahorkai's subject is a total disenchantment with the world, and yet the manner in which he presents this disenchantment is hypnotically enchanting. He is one of the great inventors of new forms in contemporary literature" ***New York Review of Books***

"László Krasznahorkhai offers us stories that are relentlessly generative and defiantly irresolvable. They are haunting, pleasantly weird and, ultimately, bigger than the worlds they inhabit" ***International Herald Tribune***

"Krasznahorkai is clearly fascinated by apocalypse, by broken revelation, indecipherable messages. To be always 'on the threshold of some decisive perception' is as natural to a Krasznahorkai character as thinking about God is to a Dostoyevsky character; the Krasznahorkai world is a Dostoyevskian one from which God has been removed" ***New Yorker***

"The rolling continuity of Krasznahorkai's prose slides between viewpoints, tracks back and forth in repetition and re-emphasis, steps aside to remember a different time, resembling the flux of memory, which at any moment may be jolted into the present. After many pages of being suspended in the unending, the approach to a full stop can bring a sense of dread, which Krasznahorkai most often justifies in his final phrase or two: the prose lifts us up: then we drop" ***Times Literary Supplement***

THE MELANCHOLY OF RESISTANCE

LÁSZLÓ KRASZNAHORKAI

Translated by George Szirtes

Tuskar Rock Press

A complete catalogue record for this book can
be obtained from the British Library on request

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It passes, but it does not pass away

AN EMERGENCY

INTRODUCTION

SINCE THE PASSENGER TRAIN connecting the icebound estates of the southern lowlands, which extend from the banks of the Tisza almost as far as the foot of the Carpathians, had, despite the garbled explanations of a haplessly stumbling guard and the promises of the stationmaster rushing nervously on and off the platform, failed to arrive ('Well, squire, it seems to have disappeared into thin air again …' the guard shrugged, pulling a sour face), the only two serviceable old wooden-seated coaches maintained for just such an 'emergency' were coupled to an obsolete and unreliable 424, used only as a last resort, and put to work, albeit a good hour and a half late, according to a timetable to which they were not bound and which was only an approximation anyway, so that the locals who were waiting in vain for the eastbound service, and had accepted its delay with what appeared to be a combination of indifference and helpless resignation, might eventually arrive at their destination some fifty kilometres further along the branch line. To tell the truth, none of this really surprised anyone any more since rail travel, like everything else, was subject to the prevailing conditions: all normal expectations went by the board and one's daily habits were disrupted by a sense of ever-spreading all-consuming chaos which rendered the future unpredictable, the past unrecallable and ordinary life so haphazard that people simply assumed that whatever could be imagined might come to pass, that if there were only one door in a building it would no longer open, that wheat would grow head downwards into the earth not out of it, and that, since one could only note the symptoms of disintegration, the reasons for it remaining unfathomable and inconceivable, there was nothing anyone could do except to get a tenacious grip on anything that was still tangible; which is precisely what people at the village station continued to do when, in hope of taking possession of the essentially limited seating to which they were entitled, they stormed the carriage doors, which being frozen up proved very difficult to open. Mrs Plauf, who happened to be on her way home from one of her customary winter visits to relatives, took full

part in the pointless struggle (pointless since, as they soon discovered, no one actually remained standing), and by the time she had shoved aside those who stood in her way and used her tiny frame to hold up the crowd pressing behind her in order to assure herself of a rear-facing window seat, she could no longer distinguish between her sense of indignation at the intolerable jostling she had just endured and a different feeling, oscillating between fury and anguish, occasioned by the awareness that she, with her first-class ticket, which was quite worthless in this stench of garlic sausage blended with the aroma of mixed-fruit brandy and cheap pungent tobacco, surrounded as she was by an almost menacing ring of loud-mouthed, belching 'common peasants', would be faced by the acute uncertainty faced by all those engaged in what was in any case the risky business of travelling nowadays, in other words not knowing whether she would arrive home at all. Her sisters, who had lived in complete isolation ever since age had rendered them immobile, would never have forgiven her if she had neglected to pay them her regular early-winter visit and it was only on their account that she refused to abandon this dangerous enterprise even though she was as certain as everyone else that something around her had changed so radically that the wisest course under the circumstances would have been to take no risks at all. To be wise, however, soberly to anticipate what might lie in store, was truly no easy task, for it was as if some vital yet undetectable modification had taken place in the eternally stable composition of the air, in the very remoteness of that hitherto faultless mechanism or unnamed principle – which, it is often remarked, makes the world go round and of which the most imposing evidence is the sheer phenomenon of the world's existence – which had suddenly lost some of its power, and it was because of this that the troubling knowledge of the probability of danger was in fact less unbearable than the common sense of foreboding that soon anything at all might happen and that this 'anything' – the law governing its likelihood becoming apparent in the process of disintegration – was leading to greater anxiety than the thought of any personal misfortune, thereby increasingly depriving people of the possibility of coolly appraising the facts.

To establish one's bearings among the ever more frightening events of the past months had become impossible, not only because there was little coherence in the mixture of news, gossip, rumour and personal experience (examples of which might include the sharp and much too early cold snap at the beginning of November, the mysterious family disasters, the rapid succession of railway accidents and those terrifying rumours of gangs of criminal children defacing public monuments in the distant capital, between any of which it was hard to find any rational connection), but also because not one of these items of news meant anything in itself, all seeming to be merely omens of what was referred to by a growing number of people as 'the coming catastrophe'. Mrs Plauf had even heard that some people had started to talk of peculiar changes in the behaviour of animals, and while this – for the time being at least, though who knows what might happen later – could be dismissed as irresponsible and harmful gossip, one thing was certain, that unlike those to whom this signified a state of utter chaos, Mrs Plauf was convinced that, on the contrary, it was perfectly appropriate in its timing since a respectable person hardly dared set foot outside her house any more, and in a place where a train can disappear 'just like that' there was, or so her thoughts ran on, 'no sense left in anything'. And this was how she prepared herself mentally for the ride home, which was bound to be far less smooth than the outward journey, cushioned as she had then been by her nominal status as a first-class passenger, since, as she pondered nervously, 'anything might happen on these dreadful branch-lines' and it was best to steel oneself for the worst; so she sat like one who would happily make herself invisible, straight-backed, her knees schoolgirlishly clamped together, wearing a chilly, somewhat contemptuous expression, among the slowly diminishing huddle of people still tussling for seats, and while she kept a suspicious eye on the terrifying gallery of undefined faces reflected in the window, her feelings swung between anxiety and yearning, thinking now of the ominous distances ahead and now of the warmth of the house she had had to leave behind; those pleasant afternoons with Mrs Mádai and Mrs Nuszbeck, those old Sunday walks along the tree-lined

avenue of Friars' Walk, and finally the soft carpets and delicate furniture of home, that radiantly calm order of carefully tended flowers and all her little possessions, which, as she well knew, was not only an island in a wholly unpredictable world where afternoons and Sundays had become merely a memory but the one refuge and consolation of a lonely woman the orderliness of whose life was calculated to produce peace and calm. Uncomprehendingly, and with a certain degree of envious contempt, she realized that her noisy fellow travellers – most likely coarse peasants from the darkest nooks and corners of distant villages – were quickly adapting themselves even to such straitened circumstances: to them it was as if nothing unusual had happened, everywhere there was the rustling of greaseproof paper being unwrapped and food being doled out, corks were popping, beer-can lids were dropping to the greasy floor, and here and there she could already hear that noise 'so calculated to offend all one's finer feelings' but, in her opinion, 'perfectly common among common people' of munching and crunching; and what was more, the party of four directly opposite her, who were among the loudest, had already started dealing a deck of cards – till only she was left, solitary, sitting even more stiffly among the increasingly loud human hubbub, silent, her head determinedly turned to the window, her fur coat protected from the seat by a sheet of newspaper, clutching her clipped handbag to her with such terrified and resolute suspicion that she hardly noticed the engine up ahead, its two red lights probing the frozen darkness, drawing uncertainly out into the winter evening. A discreet sigh was her only contribution to the noises of general relief (grunts of satisfaction, whoops of joy) that after such a long and chilly period of waiting something at last was happening; though this did not last long, since, having travelled barely a hundred metres from the now silent village platform and after a few clumsy jerks – as if the order permitting them to start had been unexpectedly revoked – the train came judderingly to a stop; and though the cries of frustration soon gave way to puzzled and angry laughter, once people realized that this state of affairs was likely to continue and were forced to admit that their journey – possibly because of the extended chaos

owing to the employment of an off-timetable train – was sadly destined to vacillate between lurching forward and lurching to a halt, they all relapsed into a jokey indifference, the dull insensibility that ensues when one has been forced to accept certain facts, which simply goes to show how people behave when, having failed, infuriatingly, to understand something, they try to suppress the fear caused by genuine shock to a system which seems to have been overtaken by chaos, the nerve-rackingly repeated instances of which may be met with nothing but withering sarcasm. Although their crude incessant joking ('I should take so much care when I'm in bed with the missus …!') naturally outraged her delicate sensibilities, the stream of ever ruder cracks with which each hoped to trump the one before – jokes, in any case, now dying away – had a relaxing effect, even on Mrs Plauf, and, every so often, on hearing one of the better ones – and there was no real escape from the coarse laughter that followed in each case – she herself couldn't entirely suppress a shy little smile. Slyly and carefully, she even ventured a few momentary glances, not at her immediate neighbours but at those who were sitting further off, and in the peculiar atmosphere of daft good humour – since, while the occupants of the carriage (those men slapping their thighs, those women of nondescript age cackling with their mouths full) remained rather fearsome, they seemed less threatening than they had been – she tried to keep her anxious imagination in check and tell herself that she might not actually have to face the lurking terrors of the ugly and unfriendly mob by which, her instincts told her, she was surrounded, and that it might only be because of her keen susceptibility to omens of ill-fortune and her exaggerated sense of isolation in such a cold and alien environment, that she might arrive home, unharmed it may be, but exhausted by her state of constant vigilance. To tell the truth, there was very little real basis for hope of such a happy resolution but Mrs Plauf simply couldn't resist the false enticements of optimism: though the train was once again stalled nowhere, waiting minutes on end for a signal, she calmly concluded that they were making 'some kind of progress', and she controlled the nervous impatience occasioned by the regular – alas too frequent

– squealing of brakes and periods of unavoidable immobility, since the pleasant warmth that had resulted from the heating being switched on when the engine started had encouraged her to divest herself of her coat, so she no longer had to fear that she might catch a cold on stepping out into the icy wind on arrival home. She adjusted the creases in the stole behind her, spread the fake-fur wrap over her legs, locked her fingers round the handbag swollen by the woollen scarf she had stuffed inside it, and, with an unchangingly straight back, was just looking out again through the window when there, in the filthy glass, she suddenly found herself face to face with a 'peculiarly silent' unshaven man, swigging from a bottle of stinking brandy, who, now that she was clad only in a blouse and the little jacket of her suit, was staring ('Lustfully!!') at her perhaps too prominent, powerful breasts. 'I knew it!' – quick as lightning, despite a hot flush running right through her, she turned her head away, pretending she hadn't noticed. For several minutes she didn't move a muscle, but stared blindly into the darkness outside, and tried, vainly, to recall the man's appearance (conjuring up only the unshaven face, the 'somehow so dirty' broadcloth coat and the uncouth, sly yet shameless gaze which she was to find so disturbing …), then, very slowly, trusting that she ran no risk in doing so, she allowed her eyes to slide across the glass, withdrawing immediately when she discovered not only that 'the creature in question' was persisting in his 'impudence', but that their eyes had met. Her shoulders, neck and nape were all aching because of the rigid posture of her head, but by now she couldn't have torn her eyes away even if she had wanted to, because she felt that whichever way she turned beyond the narrow darkness of the window, his terrifyingly steady gaze would easily commandeer every nook of the carriage and 'snap her up'. 'How long has he been looking at me?' – the question cut Mrs Plauf like a knife, and the possibility that the man's dirty raking eye had been 'on her' from the very start of the journey made the gaze, whose meaning she had understood in a flash in the very second of contact, appear even more terrifying than before. These two eyes, after all, spoke of sickeningly 'foul desires' – 'worse still!' she trembled – it was as if some sort of dry contempt burned

within them. While she couldn't think of herself as an old woman, not precisely, she knew she was past the age when this kind of attention – not uncommon when paid to others – was still natural, and so, as well as regarding the man with a certain horror (what kind of person is it, after all, who is capable of lusting after elderly women?), she was frightened to realize that this fellow stinking of cheap brandy wanted nothing more perhaps than to make her ridiculous, to mock and humiliate her, then laughingly toss her aside 'like an old rag'. After a few violent jolts the train now began to pick up speed, wheels clattered furiously on rails, and a long-forgotten feeling of confusion and acute embarrassment took hold of her as her full, heavy breasts started to throb and burn under the man's fixed, uncontrollable and threatening gaze. Her arms, with which she could at least have covered them, simply refused to obey her: it was as if she had been specially selected, helpless to cover the shame of her exposure, and as a consequence she felt ever more vulnerable, ever more naked, ever more conscious of the fact that the more she yearned to conceal her thrusting womanhood the more it drew attention to itself. The card players ended another round with an outburst of crude bickering which broke across the hostile and paralysing hum – cutting, as it were, the bands that tightly bound her and prevented her escaping – and she would almost certainly have succeeded in overcoming her unfortunate torpor had not something even worse suddenly happened, the sole purpose of which, she realized in despair, was to crown her suffering. Driven as she was by her instinctive embarrassment and in an act of unconscious defiance, she was just trying to hide her breasts by tactfully inclining her head, when her back bent awkwardly, her shoulders slumped forward and she realized in a moment of terror that her bra – perhaps due to her unusual physical exertion – had come unclipped behind her. She looked up aghast, and was not at all surprised to see the two male eyes still fixed steadily on her, eyes that winked at her with an air of complicity, as if aware of her ridiculous ill-fortune. Mrs Plauf knew all too well what would happen next, but this almost fatal accident so disturbed her that she only sat stiffer than ever in the accelerating train, helpless once more, her cheeks

burning with embarrassment, having to suffer the malicious look of glee in those contemptuously self-confident eyes which were now glued to her breasts, breasts which, freed from the encumbrance of the bra, jogged merrily up and down with the jolting of the carriage. She didn't dare look up again in order to check this, but she was sure it was the case: it was no longer just the man but all those 'loathsome peasants' staring at her discomfort; she could practically see their ugly, greedy, grinning faces encircling her, and this humiliating torture might have gone on for ever had not the conductor – an adolescent lout with a bad case of acne – entered the carriage from the rear compartment; his harsh, recently broken voice (Tickets please!') finally freed her from the grip of shame, she snatched her ticket from the handbag and folded her arms below her breasts. The train stopped again, this time where it was supposed to, and – even if only to avoid having to contemplate the genuinely frightening expressions about her – she mechanically read the name of the village on the faintly illuminated signboard above the platform, and could have cried out with relief at recognizing it from the familiar because exhaustively perused timetables she endlessly consulted before any journey, knowing that only a few minutes from now they would be arriving at the county town where ('He'll get off! He must get off!') she would almost certainly be free of her pursuer. Tense with excitement, she watched the slow approach of the conductor through the derisive clamouring of those who wished to know why the train was so late, and though she had intended to ask for help as soon as he came to her, his baby-face wore an expression of such helplessness in the surrounding racket, an expression so unlikely to offer her the assurance of official protection, that by the time he was standing next to her she felt so rattled it was all she could do to ask him where the washroom was. 'Where else should it be?' the boy answered nervously as he punched her ticket. 'Where it's always been. One at the front, one at the back.' 'Ah yes, of course,' mumbled Mrs Plauf with an apologetic gesture and leapt from her seat clutching her handbag to her, scuttling back down the carriage, swaying now left now right as the train lurched off again, and it was only once she had reached the place

of desolation masquerading as a WC and leaned gasping against the locked door that she realized she had left her fur coat hanging on the hook by the window. She knew she had to move as fast as possible and yet it took her a full minute before – surrendering all thought of dashing back for her expensive fur – she could pull herself together and, rocked to and fro by the juddering of the train, divest herself of her jacket, quickly pull the blouse over her head and, holding coat, blouse and handbag under her arm, tug her pink slip right up to her shoulders. Her hands trembling with nervous haste, she brought her bra round and, seeing ('Thank heaven!') that the clip was not broken, sighed in relief; she had just begun clumsily to dress when she heard behind her the tentative but clearly audible sound of someone outside knocking at the door. There was about this knocking some peculiar quality of intimacy which, naturally enough in the light of all that had happened so far, succeeded in scaring her, but then, on reflecting that the fear was probably no more than a monstrous product of her own imagination, she grew indignant at being hurried like this; and so she continued her half-finished movement, taking a perfunctory glance in the mirror, and was just about to reach for the handle when there came another burst of impatient knocking, quickly succeeded by a voice announcing: 'It's me.' She drew her hand back aghast, and by the time she had formed an idea of who it was, she was overtaken less by a sense of entrapment than by desperate incomprehension as to why this croaky strangled male voice should bear no trace of aggression or low threat but sound vaguely bored and anxious that she, Mrs Plauf, should at last open the door. For a few moments neither stirred a muscle, each waiting for some word of explanation from the other, and Mrs Plauf only grasped the monstrous misunderstanding of which she had become the victim when her pursuer lost patience and tugged furiously at the handle, bellowing at her, 'Well! What is it to be?! All tease, no nookie?!' She stared at the door, terrified. Not wanting to believe it, she bitterly shook her head and felt a constriction at her throat, startled, like all those attacked from an unexpected quarter, to find that she had 'fallen into some infernal snare'. Reeling at the thought of the sheer unfairness, the naked

obscenity of her situation, it took her some time to comprehend that – however incredible, since as a matter of fact she had always resisted the idea – the unshaven man had from the very start believed that it was she who was propositioning *him,* and it became clear to her how, step by step, the 'degenerate monster' had interpreted her every action – her taking off her fur … the unfortunate accident … and her enquiring after the washroom – as an invitation, as solid proof of her compliance, in a word as the cheap blush-worthy stages of a low transaction, to the extent that she now had to cope with not only a disgraceful attack on her virtue and respectability but the fact that this filthy repulsive man, stinking of brandy, should address her as if she were some 'woman of the streets'. The wounded fury which seized her proved even more painful to her than her sense of defencelessness, and – since, apart from anything else, she could no longer bear the entrapment – driven by desperation, in a voice choking with tension, she shouted to him: 'Go away! Or I shall cry for help!' On hearing this, after a short silence, the man struck the door with his fist and, in a voice so cold with contempt that shivers ran down Mrs Plauf's back, he hissed at her: 'Go screw yourself, you old whore. You're not worth breaking down the door for. I wouldn't even bother to drown you in the slop-pail.' The lights of the county town pulsed through the window of the cabin, the train was clattering over points, and she had to stop herself falling over by grasping at the handrail. She heard the departing footsteps, the sharp slamming of the door from corridor to compartment, and, because she understood by this that the man had finally released her with the same colossal impudence as he had accosted her, her whole body trembled with emotion and she collapsed in tears. And while it was really only a matter of moments, it seemed to last an eternity, that in her hysterical sobbing and sense of desolation she saw, in a brief blinding instant, from a height, in the enormous dense darkness of night, through the lit window of the stalled train, as if in a matchbox, a little face, her face, lost, distorted, out of luck, looking out. For though she was sure that she had nothing more to fear from those dirty, ugly, bitter words, that she would be subject to no new insults, the thought of her escape filled

her with as much anxiety as the thought of assault, since she had absolutely no idea – the effect of each of her actions so far being precisely the reverse of that calculated – what it was she owed her unexpected freedom to. She couldn't bring herself to believe it was her choking desperate cry that frightened him off, since having felt a miserable victim of the man's merciless desires throughout, she, by the same token, considered herself an innocent and unsuspecting victim of the entire hostile universe, against whose absolute chill – the thought flashed across her mind – there is no valid defence. It was as if the unshaven man had actually raped her. She swayed in the airless, urine-smelling booth, broken, tortured by the suspicion that she knew all there was to know, and under the spell of the formless, inconceivable, ever-shifting terror of having to seek some protection against this universal threat, she was aware only of an emerging sense of agonizing bitterness: for while she felt it was deeply unfair that she should be cast as an innocent victim rather than an untroubled survivor, she who 'all her life had longed for peace, and never harmed a soul', she was forced to concede that this was of little consequence: there was no authority to which she could appeal, no one to whom she might protest, and she could hardly hope that the forces of anarchy having once been loosed could afterwards be restrained. After so much gossip, so much terrifying rumourmongering, she could now see for herself that 'it was all going down the drain', for she understood that while her own particular immediate danger was over, in 'a world where such things happen' the collapse into anarchy would inevitably follow. Outside she could already hear the impatient grumbling of passengers preparing to get off and the train was noticeably slowing down; realizing, panic-stricken, that she had left her fur coat wholly unguarded, she hastily unbolted the door, stepped out into the press of people (who, ignoring the fact that there was no point in it, engaged in the same storming of doors on the way out as they had on the way in) and, stumbling across suitcases and shopping bags, struggled back to her seat. The coat was still there but she didn't immediately see the fake-fur wrap and while conducting a furious search and trying desperately to remember whether she had

taken it with her into the washroom it suddenly dawned on her that in all that nervous excitement her assailant was nowhere to be seen: obviously, she thought, much assured, he must have been one of the first to leave the carriage. At this moment the train actually stopped but the briefly less stuffy, partially vacated, carriage was almost immediately overrun by an even larger, and, if possible, more frightening mass of bodies, more frightening because silent, and while it was easy to see that this dark huddle would give rise to equal anxiety over the remaining twenty kilometres, there was a still greater shock in store for her: if she had hoped to be rid of the unshaven man she was to be bitterly disappointed. Having gathered up her coat and finally located her wrap under the worn and shining seat, she gathered it about her shoulders and had, just for safety's sake, set out to find another carriage in which to continue her journey, when – she could hardly believe her eyes – there was the very same broadcloth coat ('As if he had left it there expressly for me to see!') thrown carelessly across the back of a distant seat. She stoppped dead in her tracks, then hurried on, through the back door into the next carriage where she pushed her way through another silent mass of people to find another central rear-facing seat which, in desperation, she immediately occupied. For some time she kept her eyes fixed on the door, ready to leap up, though she no longer knew of whom she was most frightened, nor from what direction the danger was most likely to threaten, then, nothing untoward having happened (what with the train still standing in the station), she tried to gather her remaining strength so that should some awful adventure befall her she would at least be ready. Suddenly she felt infinitely tired, but though her weak legs were practically burning in the lining of her boots and her aching shoulders felt 'ready to collapse' she was unable to relax even a little, or only to the extent of slowly turning her head about to relieve the pain in her neck and reaching for her compact to cool her tearful flushed face. 'It's over, over, there's nothing to be scared of now,' she kept muttering to herself without believing it: for not only did she lack any such confidence, but she was unable even to lean back in her seat for greater comfort without increasing, as she thought, the risk of

leaving herself unprepared. For the carriage was being occupied by a crowd 'every bit as ugly as the first lot' and not a whit less frightening than that at the start of her journey, so she could only hope that the three empty seats around her – the last empty seats – might act as some kind of defence and remain unoccupied. There was indeed some chance of that, at least for a while, because, for practically a whole minute (the train whistle blew twice in the interval), not a single new passenger entered the carriage; but suddenly, at the head of a new wave, loudly puffing and panting and carrying an enormous backpack and basket, balanced by a few well-filled shopping bags, a fat headscarved peasant woman appeared in the doorway, and turning her head this way and that way ('Like a hen …' it occurred to Mrs Plauf), took a decisive step towards her and, grunting and croaking with an aggression that brooked no argument, proceeded to colonize all three seats with her endless baggage which formed a barricade for her as well as Mrs Plauf from the throng of contemptible (or so her expression suggested) travellers behind her. It would have been useless of course for Mrs Plauf herself to have muttered a word of complaint and, suppressing her fury, she came round to thinking how it might even have been a stroke of good luck that, having lost the comforting cushion of space around her, she was at least preserved from the encroachments of the silent mob, but this feeling of consolation was short-lived, for her unwelcome fellow traveller (all she wanted was to be left in peace) loosened the knot binding her headscarf under her chin and, without a moment's hesitation, launched into conversation. 'At least the place is heated, eh?' The sound of that raven-like croaking and the sight of two piercing malicious eyes that seemed to leap at her from beneath the headscarf decided her immediately that, since she could neither repel nor escape her, the only course of action was to ignore her entirely and she turned her head away to look out of the window in protest. But the woman, having cast a few more contemptuous looks down the carriage, was not bothered in the slightest. 'You don't mind me talking to you? There's just the two of us so we might as well have a good natter, eh? Going far? Right to the end of the line, me. Visiting my lad.' Mrs

Plauf glanced at her reluctantly, but seeing that the more she ignored her the worse things would get, nodded in acknowledgement. 'Because,' the woman perked up at the encouragement, 'it's the grandson's birthday. He said to me, at Easter, he did, sweet little bairn, 'cause I was there then: You're coming, mam, aren't you? That's what he calls me, mam, that's his name for me, the little lad. So that's where I'm off to now.' Mrs Plauf felt constrained to smile here but immediately regretted it because this opened the floodgates: there was no stopping the woman now. 'If that little bairn only knew what a hard life it is for us old folk nowadays …! Spend the whole day standing about in the market on your poor feet, and what with the varicose veins and all, no wonder a body gets tired by the end of the day. Because, you know, to tell you the truth, we do have a little garden, but the pension hardly stretches. I don't know where all those shiny Mercedes come from, all that money people seem to have, I honestly don't. But you listen here, I'll tell you something. It's thieving is what it is, thieving and cheating! It's a Godless crooked world, God has no say in it any more. And this awful weather, eh? You tell me what it's all coming to. It's all round you, isn't it? Radio says it'll be seventeen degrees or whatever – below freezing, that is! And we're only at the end of November. You want to know what'll happen? I'll tell you. We'll freeze till spring. That's right. 'Cause there's no coal. I wish I knew why we had all those no-good miners up in the hills. Do you know? There, you see.' Mrs Plauf's head was swimming in the verbal downpour but however hard it was to bear she found it impossible to interrupt her, to make her shut up, and eventually, realizing the woman wasn't really expecting her to listen and that she could get away with nodding every so often, she spent more and more time looking out of the window at lights slowly drifting by, attempting to bring some order to her troubled thoughts while the train drew away from the county capital, though hard as she tried she couldn't banish the memory of the carelessly discarded coat which bothered her even more than did the frightening ill-omened crowd of silent faces that confronted her. 'Was he disturbed?' she fretted. 'Did drink get the better of him? Or has he deliberately …' She made up her mind not to torture herself with vain

surmise, but, however risky the enterprise appeared, to ascertain whether the coat was still there, so, wholly ignoring the lumpen woman, she joined those loitering at the end of the carriage, crossed over the coupling and peered as carefully as she could through the gap of the door which had been left partly open. Her intuition that it would be better to investigate the unshaven man's unexpected disappearance was immediately rewarded, for there, to her horror, he was, sitting with his back to her, his head just tipped back to swig at the bottle of brandy. Lest he, or anyone else among that dumb crew, should notice her (for in that event God himself could hardly absolve her of bringing her troubles on herself), still holding her breath, Mrs Plauf returned to the rear carriage, and was dumbfounded to see that a fur-hatted figure had taken advantage of her brief absence to occupy her seat practically unopposed, so that she, the only lady present, would have to travel standing, pressed against the side of the carriage, and she realized she had been rather stupid in deluding herself that, simply because she hadn't seen him for a few minutes, she had been freed of the man in the broadcloth coat. Whether he had gone to the lavatory or popped out to the platform ('Surely not without his coat?!') to get himself another bottle of stinking spirits was completely immaterial now as she was not really worried that he would try to get at her again here on the train, since the crowd – provided it didn't turn against her ('A fur coat, a boa or my handbag might be enough for these people …!') – and the difficulty of making one's way across it, did, after all, offer some kind of defence; at the same time her mistake forced her to admit, since she might as well face the worst that could befall her, that in the case of some beastly mishap ('… some incomprehensible, mysterious act of fate') she would be firmly trapped and that this time there would be no escape. Next to her helplessness this was what most terrified her, since with the passing of immediate danger, the greatest threat, on reflection, was not so much that he would want to rape her (though 'just to pronounce the word is awful …') but that he looked to be the sort of creature who 'knew neither God nor man', who, in other words, had no fear of hellfire, and was therefore capable of anything ('Anything!'). Once