

## Love in the Childhood of Konrad Vost · *John Hawkes*

ONLY THE DISFIGURED ADULT can properly care for the disordered child . . .

So nightly shouted Anna Kossowski in her great stone kitchen where all the children, young and old, lay sprawled like dogs or dwarves about the fire in the iron stove which, in the center of the kitchen of the long low all-but-abandoned farm house, was as tall and fat and black as an engine. Nightly Anna Kossowski walked among the children, some of whom were older even than she, shouting, laughing, and drinking from the half-empty bottle that she held by its neck. She as well as the children dressed in heavy discarded clothes supplied by the village. She was lightly bearded, heavy, passionate, with the thick large hands and feet of a man. From her left cheek grew a shiny brown toadstool in justification of her shouted rhetoric. Every night she walked in the kitchen among her charges and under the loving gaze of a small young female person known as Kristel, who was maintained by the village to assist Anna Kossowski in her care of the children.

The little Konrad Vost was always among those closest to the iron stove. He loved the light. He loved the drunken Anna Kossowski. He loved the small girl called Kristel. Also he loved the other children who were larger than himself or smaller, fatter than himself but rarely thinner, older than himself or younger. He loved those with hairless heads and faces as well as those whose faces were concealed behind mats of hair. He loved the sounds they made, or the bright red lips that never closed, the fingers without fingernails, the large round faces watered with the fluid of the mouths and eyes. But most of all he loved not the woman or the girl or the other children but the fat horses roped side by side in the long low nearby barn of stone and wood. In these days his own thin wide smile sat perpetually on his narrow face, though for him it was as yet unrecognized. Gone were his trumpet, his marching comrades, the white porcelain stove, the cigar-smoker, the singing teacher. But his life had improved, or so he thought. By night he smiled beside the fiery stove. By day he smiled beneath the massive legs of his favorite horse. What more could he ask?

The sagging barn. The long low corridor or tunnel of wood and stone. The dust-filled darkness into which the day could hardly reach. The darkness, the heat and smells of the great beasts, the feeling of the hard shiny straw against his skin. The occasional large dry round balls of manure he found in the straw, like eggs in a henhouse, which he accumulated throughout the day into his own pile of natural treasure. Dust, straw, darkness, animal heat, the nest he made for himself in the straw between the legs of the largest and sweetest-smelling horse in the barn: here he was safe, here he was the happy insect among the monsters he could not imagine, and the

heaps and swells of snow banked high against the outside of the barn only made the inside warmer, darker, safer. In the straw at the horse's feet he could hear the cold snow creaking against the stones of the barn, while above him and in a long line to his either side the great monsters stood protectively at rest, at peace in the decay of the barn. The horses were no longer used. Rarely did anyone come to the barn to care for them. They were forgotten and left in peace. They were tall, heavy, massive, old, with shaggy uncut coats of hair impacted with month on month of gathering dust. The stone walls were sagging; the roof beams were sagging; the great beasts had lived forever and slept on their feet; up and down the long line of them he crept, looking, admiring, smiling, then returning to lie again beneath the horse that was his and that he thought of by the name of the woman he loved: Anna Kossowski. Above all the long hollow heads of the horses, which were as large as the coffins for dead children, the entire low ceiling of the barn was a honeycomb of cobwebs. Between the sagging beams, dangling above the twitching ears, up there the cobwebs existed in a thick silvery inverted mass of decay, desolation, time that was no longer time. Cobwebs above, straw below, here and there the dangling shrouded body of a small bird preserved as if by the art of a village taxidermist: it was here that he drowsed, hour on hour, smiling, breathed upon by the horses, forgotten, listening to the thudding of the great beasts near at hand or the distant wordless shouting of the clumsy children running aimlessly on the hills and in the fields of deep snow.

He stirred. The mice were running fitfully over the stones. He pushed off his blanket of straw, rose to an elbow, crawled out from beneath the monster he loved. He felt himself to be the animal's attendant; without thinking he knew what to do for his great beast, she whose dusty ears and yellow eyes he had once inspected by climbing high on a broken wooden chair he had found buried under a pile of leather harness that had turned to stone. Water. She wanted water. He felt her blind thirst in his own throat. He groped for the wooden bucket; against his chest he carried the immense bucket through the shadows, down the length of the stones, and outside to the well that was cold, wet, shimmering in the bright light and virgin snow. He shivered, cracked the film of ice, drew water, filled the bucket. A breeze intensified the light; his shivering had become a little dance. The water splashed against him, he staggered, he heard the distant shouted grunts and cries of the children. He turned, he dragged the water a short distance at a time, in puffs and starts; again he crept into the space between the high sagging wooden doors that were curved in age and frozen and ice-coated for three of the four seasons.

Slowly he made his way through the darkness, up the long line of forgotten horses toward the warm and slightly steaming place where the great ancient horse stood waiting. The water splashed from the bucket,

from the other and far-off end of the barn came the sudden sounds of water beating down from one of the great beasts roped to the wall. The little valiant water-carrier moved like an insect with his legs apart, the great bucket dragged and carried between them, his head flung back in the effort so that once again he was treated to the sight of the enormous glistening honeycomb of cobwebs that grew from the ceiling. But now, as he approached Anna Kossowski the horse, and despite his preoccupation with the sloshing bucket, he noted momentarily that something had changed: from a crack or small hole in the opposite wall a long thin finger of orange light was pointing directly at the neck of the waiting horse's immense black dependent tail. Something was different too about the great rear legs: they were somewhat farther apart than usual, and they were not relaxed as they usually were but rigid. The tip of the finger of light was becoming increasingly diffused over the neck of the tail that ordinarily reached down all the way to the straw but now appeared to be somewhat lifted, somewhat drawn aside; and the light was diffused over the round curving buttocks and flanks of matted shaggy hair the color of rich earth freshly plowed. Never before had the littler water-carrier noted such mild but oddly quickening changes in the immensity of Anna Kossowski the horse. But he did not allow himself to pause. Instead he squeezed into the narrow space between the rotted planks of the partition and the warm thick matted weight of his enchanted monster, until at last the lichen-covered bucket was properly positioned in the straw near the stones that bore the iron ringbolt to which she was tied.

He waited. With his own small breath he attempted to warm his fingers still cold from the work of drawing water and still curved like transparent talons from the work of carrying the bucket. He waited. Overhead the cobwebs were stirring like sea grasses; again he thought of himself and, not in the least deceived by the baggy clothes he wore, again enjoyed what he knew to be his extreme small size and the lively frailty that was his own. Though he could not have said so, he was aware that the little frantic and ecstatic trumpeter had become, in the disguise of his borrowed clothes, the thin contented gnome who languished happily for as many of his waking hours as possible near or even beneath the living statue that was Anna Kossowski the horse.

The great head was now descending. From high in the darkness it came down, as long as he himself was tall and, despite its bony emptiness, much heavier than was he. The roman nose was larger than his own white pointed face, the glistening eyes were as large as his fists, the sight that informed her enormous eyes was more somber and comforting than anything he had ever seen. The head nudged him as usual and as usual he staggered back in happiness, not fear, from its careless touch. As always he seized one of the great dusty ears and twisted it, waiting for the emergence of all the miniature creatures (with wings, with many legs, with several heads, with tiny

white cloven hooves like human teeth) that lived inside. The creatures did not appear, as usual, but the ancient head dipped, groped downward for the bucket, and began to drink. He, the martial musician transformed into the contented gnome, pressed both hands and all of his upper body flat to the broad fluted immensity of the lowered neck and waited, feeling in his own frailty the slow rhythmical passage of the well water drawn upwards, by a thirst that was only slowly quenched, into the flesh of the horse. He heard the sound of its drinking, in himself he felt the movement of the immense quantities of water his monster needed in order to see, in order to live. Invisibly, in single file, in long thin columns, everywhere the armies of mice were faintly running across the stones, running along the walls, tearing their way through the cobwebs, through the straw, and disappearing into the ears of all the horses that were not his. He waited. He languished in the touch of the horse, the sound of the mice, the sound of the nostrils breathing and the thick lips skimming the water. But still he was thinking of the light he had seen and the changes he had noticed in Anna Kossowski the horse.

She was drinking. She would not know that, for the moment, he was gone. Still pressing himself to the slow inner throbbing of the serpentine neck into which he himself could crawl, now he was consumed as never before with a curiosity that he did not understand, that had no object, and that was, as he somehow knew, forbidden. He did not know what he wanted to see or was going to do. But he who in body was among the smallest and weakest of all the children kept on Anna Kossowski's farm was now aware, for the first time in his life, of a dark wet craving inside himself for a knowledge he could not name. The horse was drinking. The horse was roped by a brass ring in her halter to an iron ring in the stone wall. He was free to do whatever he must do, to see what he craved.

Again he squeezed himself backwards along the body of the great silent horse. In the darkness, hesitating, helpless, baffled, performing the small and nearly motionless dance (with his feet, his hands) that was characteristic of how he expressed either fear or eagerness, and recognizing in his indecision a sudden need for haste, thus suddenly he found himself searching for the broken chair and dragging it down the corridor of stones where he placed it directly behind the massive hindquarters of Anna Kossowski the horse. He was hardly able to contain his dancing long enough to position the broken chair: high above his head the orange light was shining warmly, as if it could not fade, on the slopes and apex of the gigantic sculpted but living hindquarters that were now his to explore. He was dancing, he could not breathe, he knew that already the ancient horse was aware of his presence, but he did not care, he would no longer deny himself the sight that he craved. She was still drinking but she was aware of him: the great legs were oddly spread, the great neck of the tail was lifted and drawn slightly aside. He gripped the broken rungs of the chair, he smelled the

straw and all around him heard the great jaws softly working; he tilted his head and stared upward at the steaming bestial hindquarters that were beckoning.

He climbed onto the chair. It wobbled; he straightened himself slowly and as best he could; eagerly he extended a small white timorous left hand and, barely touching the flesh of the horse, balanced himself on the ladder that would carry him to fire. The light was stronger, dustier, more diffused, more generous. He wobbled, with more reassurance he steadied himself by clutching with his small left hand the hair that was thick and matted even as those slopes that were in the province of the sacred tail. He felt that in a moment more the smile would fly from his face. Now he knew that what he craved to see was concealed high in the somber velvet darkness beneath the tail.

No longer was there need for haste. With his free hand he drew great shanks of the black luxurious hair of the tail against his cheek, his mouth, then allowed it to ripple away through the little transparent fingers. He thought that he was a bird on a perch. The rhythm of his stationary dance had reached him, suddenly, in the depths of the baggy pants, yet for him the tingling he could not have named existed only in the long thick strands of hair, and in the light, and in the love he felt toward Anna Kossowski the horse for allowing him to be where he was and to find what he craved. But perhaps what he sought was not forbidden to those who were ordinarily tall enough to see it in a passing glance; perhaps it was forbidden only to children. But Anna Kossowski the horse was tied; she could not speak; never would she strike down, with one of her great hooves, the child who, like a loving insect, was now climbing about that part of her body she could not see. Never.

But now he must climb higher, higher. Again he braced himself lightly with his left hand; he took a frightened breath and imprisoned it immediately deep in his lungs; then, as serious as he had ever been, despite the winged smile, he restrained the faint dancing motion of his legs and hands, and, standing on his toes, reached upwards as far as he could with his free hand and ran the tip of one small brittle finger along the nearly hairless fat neck of the tail where it began. A trembling commenced in the bestial hindquarters. The tail rose. It swung aside. Again the great legs stiffened, increasing the distance they were spread apart; again the muscle that was the neck of the tail exerted itself, as if to assure him that the touch of a child's fingernail could speak to a mountain, and now he saw, up there, socketed in a sombre field of dark velvet, exactly what he had craved to see: the large slightly opened vent he could not have known existed, bearing a few bright oily tears that never fell and that might have come from the great lemon-colored eyes of Anna Kossowski the horse. Quickly, expelling and catching another breath, and growing suddenly wet inside his baggy clothes, feeling the unexpected return of the need for haste, quickly he strained himself once

more and extended the same hand, the same finger, until the very tip of the finger touched for an instant the oily traces of the passionate bestial tears of Anna Kossowski the horse. But no sooner had he done so than he heard an unfamiliar sound at the barn's door and felt in the animal herself an unfamiliar tremor. With both hands he clutched the tail; he regained his balance; carefully he leaned to one side and peered around the hindquarters and into the darkness, only to find himself staring into the luminous white and lemon-colored eyes of the horse that had ceased its drinking, lifted its head, and swung to the side and rear the great neck and head so that now the wet and softly lighted eyes of the horse were fixed on his own. As small as he was, and as ignorant, innocent, happy, loving, still through the darkness he recognized the expression in her watchful eyes: reproach. Anna Kossowski the horse was looking at him with reproach in her eyes; she had not understood; she had not intended him to see what he craved. It was forbidden.

"So," cried Anna Kossowski the woman from mid-way up the corridor of stone, the tunnel of darkness, "so, little Konrad Vost, you have shamed the horse!"

His hands flew out, he toppled from the broken chair, he heard the quick heavy sounds of her wooden shoes on the stones. Then he was on his feet and dancing so extravagantly that he was convinced that he was running in all directions at once, though he was standing still. He had not meant to offend the horse; never before had he offended Anna Kossowski the woman he loved. Yet now she was speaking in anger, breathing in anger, making the sounds of anger with her wooden shoes. What could he do if not flutter his hands and flee in all directions at once, going nowhere?

"Stand still," said the woman, "you who have shamed the helpless horse."

She gripped his neck, she kicked aside the chair, from an iron hook on a beam she seized a length of rope which she tied to his neck. Gone was the finger of light, the horse had returned to its drinking, in the darkness and shadows Anna Kossowski the woman loomed as large as Anna Kossowski the horse. Despite his terror, his dancing, his humiliation, still he realized that as the horse had been drinking its water, so had the woman her wine. Its heavy aroma sifted through the smells of dust, straw, leather, wood, cobwebs, mice.

"Please," he whimpered, "please, Anna Kossowski, allow me to go free. I meant no harm. I was only trying to see where Anna Kossowski the horse expels her manure. . . ."

"So," muttered the towering woman, "so you have given my own good name to an aged horse. So much the worse for you, little Konrad Vost."

He danced. The rope was burning on his neck. Anna Kossowski was muttering to herself, scowling to herself in words that were unclear, and now, as she rummaged about in the darkness, tugging occasionally on the

length of rope, now in this dark mood she was more frightening than she had been when enraged. She stumbled, he heard her curse, he made out a fragment of her mumbled speech: “. . . Anna Kossowski the horse indeed . . . indeed . . .” Then at last she found what she was searching for: a long and crudely pointed stick.

“Please,” he whimpered, “please, Anna Kossowski, I beg of you . . .”

She did not answer. She wrapped the end of the rope several turns around her wrist, tugging on it again as she did so. Then she righted the broken chair, positioned it slightly to the rear and to the side of the horse, and seated her mighty and fuming self to wait for as long as she needed to wait in the darkness. Little Konrad Vost, as she called him, did not know what she was awaiting. He knew only that he could not cease his dancing, that he could not escape, that all the mice had fled, rending the cobwebs, and that he could hardly see the great shape of the unrelenting woman he loved where she sat in the darkness waiting, jerking the rope, thoughtlessly rubbing her finger against the toadstool that grew on her cheek. The long stick was leaning beside her against the rotted planks of the stall. Now the interior of the barn was as silent as the dead birds hanging in shreds from the thick white bed of cobwebs growing down from the ceiling; the horse that he loved had lifted its head; he could hear the drops slowly falling from the still mouth to the surface of the water yet in the pail; Anna Kossowski sighed from the depths of the patience for which she was well known; in another moment surely he himself would drop in the midst of his dancing; he could not go on. The smile had long since flown from his face. Soon the fluttering hands would fall from the wrists. He could not go on.

But then Anna Kossowski sat up straight, seized the stick, took a shorter grip on the rope and gave it a sudden furious snap, pulling him abruptly in her direction. She jammed the end of the stick against his side. He thought she meant to pierce him through with the pointed stick. At the same time Anna Kossowski the horse gave an immense lurch, again spread wide the tall hind legs, again swung her head so as to look at herself and the woman and child with baffled and frightened incomprehension. As soon as the urine burst from the great animal with the intensity and heat of compressed steam, Anna Kossowski quickly loosened the rope, holding it like a taut rein, and with the end of the stick began deftly prodding the dancing child. He attempted to spring away; he was held by the rope. He attempted to fling himself toward the woman’s knees; he was propelled backwards by the thrusting stick. In this way, pulling the rope and pushing him off with the jabs of the terrible stick, Anna Kossowski guided him cruelly and expertly between the spread legs of the horse and directly into the noise and heat and fury of the torrential fall of the urine. He gagged, he choked, he danced up and down as he had never danced in his life, all the while held hopping and turning in place by the stick and rope. He heard the urine crashing about him into the matted straw, in an instant his fine-spun hair

and his skin and his clothing were as sopping wet as the straw and the great spattered hocks of the horse itself. He thought that he had drowned in the downpour of sour waste; he floundered as if in a tin tub containing all the transformed water that he had fed in buckets to Anna Kossowski the horse for the past three days. He could not even shout for mercy so fierce was the flow.

Then it stopped. In one moment or several it came to him in dim consciousness that it had stopped, that Anna Kossowski the horse was empty at last. Beneath her belly he hung limp on his feet. He was no longer dancing. His skin burned. His eyes, nose, wide mouth, pointed ears: all were burning. His baggy shirt and trousers clung to his bones. It was as if he had lived the worst possible dream of the incontinent child. Now, all around him, he heard the intolerable slow dripping of himself and the horse. Then through the dripping silence he heard a different sound: that of the laughing woman who, though she did not know it, was now happily possessed by a fresh thirst for her wine.

She stood up. She flung aside the stick. Without looking she pulled him from beneath the horse and, not so much as once peering over her shoulder, dragged him blind and stumbling down the stone corridor to the high wooden sagging doors and beyond to the sunlight, to the high-banked snow, to the well where he himself had smashed the ice only a short while before. She tied her end of the rope to a rusted iron stanchion of the well; she drew a bucket of water glittering with chips of ice, and, hardly bothering to glance at her target, flung the water at the child who was still squeezing shut his eyes. He fell at once to his hands and knees. He cried out. The large and no longer patient Anna Kossowski then further deluged her charge with bucket after swiftly drawn bucket of icy water.

Then she carried him rope and all toward the farmhouse and the roaring stove.

“Come, little Konrad Vost, the woman is preferable to the horse.”

Thus one day in the fourth season, when the snow was gone, Anna Kossowski spoke to him again, and with kindness. Throughout the third season he had lain by the stove, shivering, refusing to move, refusing to speak, unable to rid himself of the yellow stench of urine, like a dog that has managed to soak its own leg.

The well water had done no good, he continued to smell on himself the horse's urine that he thought was his. The snow had diminished then disappeared, the expressionless eyes of the children had reflected the green of the trees, all about the stove the stone floor had become tracked with the black wet mud for which they had yearned: but he had not moved, curled as close as he could be to the hot stove, the elvin child who no longer danced up and down as if over a lighted candle.

Then at last Anna Kossowski spoke to him again: “. . . the woman is



preferable to the horse," she said, and reaching down seized his arm and drew him, with only moderate roughness, to his feet. Outside the children were flapping in the mud or lumbering in the green fields; in the kitchen that was as large as a barn the sunlight was filling one of the stone corners where there was a wooden bench, a stone trough smelling of sewage, the morning's collection of Anna Kossowski's empty wine bottles, standing or flat on their side. In this corner the walls were inexplicably covered with green slime where Anna Kossowski had been seated all morning with the mouths of the consecutive wine bottles raised to her lips. Now she again seated herself on the bench, still holding the hand of the child who was disordered and dishonored as well. Across the room, at a long sink made of slate, little Kristel, who had herself been one of the disordered children until she had become Anna Kossowski's friend and assistant, was removing the skins from a sack full of onions and dropping them one by one into the cold greasy water that sloshed about in an iron pot as fat as the stove.

"Kristel," said the seated woman, "are you still pure?"

"Of course I am not pure," came the voice of the girl, who did not bother to turn around from her onions. "At my age, how could anyone be pure? I may look like a child, but I am not."

"You do not look like a child," said the woman. "You look like a nice ripe little bird. Someday a man will turn you slowly over a hot fire."

"A pretty thing to say to someone. A pretty remark. You have drunk too much wine. But no one will put Kristel over the fire!"

Anna Kossowski laughed, two fat onions fell into the pot, the sunlight was shining directly on Anna Kossowski's face: on the hairs growing from her chin, on the toadstool growing from the right cheek, on the eyes that were red. Suddenly, feeling himself drawn closer to the woman he had once loved, who was now sprawled on the bench with her head leaning back against the slime on the wall, suddenly little Konrad Vost opened his eyes, readied his wide lips to receive the long-lost smile, prepared himself to pull free of the hand on his waist and run, or to submit to the hand and to sink as of old into the warm lap. Was he now to be forgiven or punished anew? Could he now love Anna Kossowski as he had before, or must he flee?

"At least you are safe with me, Kristel," said the seated woman who was lolling her head, closing her eyes, breathing more deeply, holding him at the waist with her heavy hand. "There is nothing to fear from children or village idiots."

"Oh, you needn't worry about Kristel. I am not afraid. . . ."

The girl glanced over her shoulder, the sun was warm, were it not for the movements of Anna Kossowski's hand against his waist he might have thought she was sleeping. But she was not sleeping, though her eyes were closed. Trembling, warmed by the sun, readier than ever to smile once more, aware that his hands and feet were preparing once again to flutter in pleasure, not fear, it was then that he found himself held by both of Anna

Kossowski's hands instead of one. But what was happening to the woman he was beginning once again to love? What was she doing?

"So you are not afraid," said the woman at length, softly, as if she were talking to herself. "But there is not one of them who does not follow you urgently, striving to find in himself the capacities for normal speech. What is it they are trying to say? What do they want?"

"Kristel is not interested in what they want."

"Kristel is not interested," mocked the woman, "Kristel is not pure. Sooner or later one of them will take down his pants. Then you will see. . . ."

But what was happening to Anna Kossowski? What was she doing? She had managed to gather into her lap the tangle of rags that were her skirts, and had stiffened and slightly spread her heavy legs. With her head against the wall, the bottom of her spine on the wooden bench, and the heels of her wooden shoes propped on the stone floor, it was as if she were simultaneously sitting, lying down and floating rigidly in the warmth and light of the kitchen. But now she was holding him between her stiff legs and in such a way that her hands were now on his waist, now further down holding him firmly on the hips or shifting on the circumference of his little body so that one hand was pressed to the seat of his pants while the other turned palm up and cupped the front. Half the smile had returned to his face, the green slime was bright, a large slick naked onion splashed into the pot. Anna Kossowski's great calloused hands were careful, comforting; they felt for his little body through the baggy pants as though it were not forbidden, as though she had every right to do so, as though in such unexpected friendliness he had nothing to fear. Even when she unfastened the tin buttons of the ugly garment that was not his own, and thrust her entire hand inside his pants, going so far as to lift him slightly off the floor with that thick hand in his pants, still he was not afraid, but rather was surprised, confused, and so elated that the other half of the smile came to his face. Anna Kossowski grunted. She was moving her thumb and first two fingers inside his pants as if rolling between them a wet pebble. Now she was holding his little body so close to hers that, when he glanced down for a moment, he could see nothing except the top of his open pants entangled in the rags that were bunching and shifting in the woman's lap that was no longer still. Yet he knew that there, where they were both naked and hidden from sight, there they were pressed one to the other. But down there did Anna Kossowski the woman look like Anna Kossowski the horse? He did not know.

He heard a splash. He heard the light careless voice of Kristel: "You should not do that to the child."

"No? No? And you? You would not do the same if I gave you permission?"

"Kristel is not interested in children or village idiots."

Anna Kossowski laughed through her nose, lolled her head to the side, and imparted a stronger motion to her naked massiveness beneath the rags, all the while watching the girl through half-closed eyes. As for himself, he who was now held firmly in place between the great white thighs of the legs that were outstretched, he who was happily baffled to know and not know that in his open pants his own small nakedness was now inseparable from the woman's sandy nakedness still hidden from sight, now, suddenly, he was both elated and shamed as Anna Kossowski slowly raised one of her calloused hands and, with a sudden tug on the cloth on her chest, exposed one fat breast as if to give suck to an angry infant. She was smiling, the single breast was parading its nakedness on the field of cloth. As for himself, his mouth was dry, with his two hands he was gripping the naked forearms of the woman, in the distance he who was no longer a trumpeter heard the shrill heraldic cry of a silver horn. The fat breast was dancing; then the fast breast was lying inert where it shamelessly emerged through the folds of the cloth: the corners of the straining woman's eyes were wet.

"So, Kristel," said Anna Kossowski in her firm drowsy voice, "you can watch me over your shoulder and yet pretend that you care about nothing but onions? Even now you can be so bold as to deny that your little locomotive is already oiled? But haven't I taught you always to tell the truth to your mistress?"

"I am telling the truth," came the now sullen, now complacent, voice of the girl at the sink. "I am not aroused. For Kristel there must be more than an old woman and a pathetic child."

"He is almost as large as you," said the woman, who was now pushing against him so that with every heave he was forced to hold her forearms with a still tighter grip in order to retain his footing. His fine-spun hair had fallen into his narrow face; he was smiling but he did not know where to place his attention: on the hand that was clutching insistently the seat of his pants, or the nakedness of himself and the woman wrapped together in cloth, or on the fat breast that was preening itself beside its shrouded twin. "You are not very large yourself," continued Anna Kossowski, controlling her voice and smiling through the strain on her face. "You, the impure girl, are as small as a child. But of course you are rubbing your little thighs together there at the sink. I am not deceived."

"You may play with the child. But you may not play with Kristel! Even in words!"

As the young tree remains insensible to the twig that sprouts overnight from the slender trunk, so he himself remained in ignorance of what the secret portion of Anna Kossowski's body was doing in his open pants. His mouth was dry, his forehead was wet, his fingers ached, the offensive baggy pants were sliding down on his bare hips and thighs. Now Anna Kossowski's determined hand was squeezing not the seat of his pants but the flesh inside; as he shook to her efforts he began to wish that his hands

were free to pull up his pants, while he hoped that at least the girl behind him at the sink would keep her back turned.

"I play with whom I wish," murmured the woman, smiling and jerking her shoulder so as to impart a similar motion to the naked breast. "Now lift up your skirt so the child may see. That's what he wants."

"But you shall not trick Kristel!" cried the girl, stamping her foot. "It is you who wants to look upon little Kristel's nudity, not the child!"

The sun, the sound of the knife falling onto the wet slate, the sight of the great fatty thighs applying their terrible pressure on either side of him, the certainty that behind his back Kristel had abandoned her onions and was now watching how Anna Kossowski was making him dance, which she was doing with her thighs, her hands, and by butting him repeatedly with her sandy flesh inside his open pants: even in this strange condition of turmoil and tranquility, while he was helpless and incapable of making so much as a sound, nonetheless, and quite suddenly, he wanted to understand the anguish that was pinching him in the front of his pants and wanted only to ask Anna Kossowski to pause for a moment and to speak a few words to him rather than to Kristel, so that he might catch his breath, relieve the anguish, and all the better enjoy what was happening. Desperately he wanted to pull up his pants or be free of them.

In the next instant he thought that Anna Kossowski had heard his unvoiced appeal. She stopped moving. Her hands and hips were still. She continued her deep breathing; she continued to squint in the direction of the watching girl; she continued to hold him in the grip of her two hands. Her face and the naked breast were gleaming. Her hair was loose. The muscles in her throat were tight. She was not smiling.

Then slowly she spread her thighs still further apart, thus releasing him. In his surprise he tottered and felt her two hands climbing up his body and to the top of his head; he felt his nakedness become unstuck from the still unseen sandy nakedness of the waiting woman; he felt his baggy pants fall to the stones; he felt her two hands exerting a slow and tender pressure on the top of his head. Elated, confused, exhausted, nonetheless he did his best to follow the will of the woman and to understand the message of the hands so strangely placed on the top of his head. He complied. He yielded. He closed his eyes and sank to his knees. Between his thin bare legs his anguish was still unrelieved, as if it were a small stone tied to him by a length of thread.

"Stop!" said Kristel in the silence. "No more! You must not teach the little child wickedness."

In the darkness, in the silence, despite the sensation of Anna Kossowski's hand smothering his large pointed ears on either side of his head, suddenly he realized that now Anna Kossowski was going to give him on her own body the sight of what she had so long ago attempted to deny him on the body of the great horse. He opened his eyes: he was overwhelmed with

disappointment at the sight of the thick hair; then he was sickened as, behind the hair, he saw not at all what he had seen on the horse but instead the briefest glimpse of what to him was a small face beaten unrecognizable by the blows of a cruel fist. But then, in terror, he saw that from this hidden and ruined face between Anna Kossowski's legs there were streaming two long single files of black ants. The large black ants were marching out of the face and down the inner sides of Anna Kossowski's thighs. The ants were glistening. The two thin columns were already proceeding toward the knees.

He screamed, he freed his head from Anna Kossowski's hands, he crawled from her as from the lair of an animal until he was able to gain his feet, pull up his pants, and run out of the room and into the sunlight where the well, which he had not seen for weeks, for months, stood gleaming. He drew a bucket of water. It fell on himself. He drew another. Then hardly conscious of the rest of Anna Kossowski's children grunting in the distant fields, he ran back as best he could with the immense bucket swaying and splashing in his hands. But no sooner had he once more reached the kitchen, in all possible haste, when he heard the sound of Anna Kossowski's voice and, somehow, knew enough to stop where he was and put down the bucket. Anna Kossowski's position was unchanged. He was unable to look.

"Little Konrad Vost," she said, "you are distracting me. You are not for women. Go back to your horse."

He did as he was told.