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Works: *The Ebony Box*, a novel, 1960; *The Biography of the Drowned Woman*, a novel, 1962; *Persons Departed*, *Persons Dead*, short stories, 1963; *Patterns of Hate*, a novel, 1964; *Nightmare*, a novel, 1966.

BRANKO BELAN

Noises on the Stairs

FROM A NOVEL

FOR SOME DAYS now I have been trying to exclude this possibility; it is too romanesque, too contrived. But nevertheless, if I am going to be thorough, I must take it into account, because nothing in this world is so impossible that it could never happen, even if a man were entirely alone; for then he would be a whole world to himself.

Mystery is inevitable.

As soon as one more person is added to the blind sequence of things, mystery becomes inevitable and painful, for he will seek to affirm himself by testing the changes he will provoke in his, that is your, time and space. He will perhaps be hampered by the memory of resistance, but not until his fingers have been burnt, and before that

happens your circles will have coincided. The new-born baby has no inkling of this; it would devour its own mother, if she were edible. It is only when he grows up and experiences resistance that he becomes a neighbour, and nothing more will happen to him according to the laws of the mathematics with which he is familiar, and sooner or later he will accept the consequences of sudden crises as something that is inherent in existence. Even a mere flatworm remembers. Give it a thousand or ten thousand electric shocks to make it choose the direction you want, and eventually it will choose it. Cut it up into little pieces; each fragment will compensate for what it has lost. Even a tail. It will acquire a new body with a new nervous system, it will acquire a new head with a completely new brain, and there, the new flatworm will contain the experience of the old one, it will move in the direction you have chosen, for you are stronger than it is.

Even inanimate matter remembers, if you take it from a point of reasoning that is beyond it as well as beyond animate matter.

I would like that to be recorded so that no-one could suspect me of including my neighbour from the attic because of my innate tendency to hair-splitting, although — I admit it with some conceit — you will not find many who have acted as I did with so little tangible cause. I do not know anything about him, I have never seen him, and he does not know anything about me either, he has never seen me. Our circles do not coincide in the physical world. I know he exists, and he knows only that. We have in common the fact that we are alone, that we are separated only by a ceiling and ... Not so fast! All in good time!

First of all I want it to be known how slowly I reconcile myself to the shocks that predetermine my orbit against my will, perhaps more slowly than an ant in the hands of a cruel boy whose fingers, hungry with curiosity, hinder its movements along cosmic paths. Before I looked back, before I was compelled to look back, I did not know I was like that. Shutting myself up in myself, I flattered myself that I had cut the umbilical cord that connected me to my past. Now I know that that was only a little pause during which I considered myself chosen or exceptional. What a delusion! The past is covetous and does not let its victims go so easily, even those with closed accounts, for their unstable numerals are a component part of innumerable visible and invisible neighbours. I do not reconcile myself although the outcome is inexorable, and inexorability deprives presentiments and resistance of any sense. I do not reconcile myself because of the beauty of the game which compensates for all pain and all mistakes.

That is why I am including my neighbour from the attic.

He never left the building, and the people who came to see him behaved in the courtyard and on the stairs as though they were in the street; they rejected every attempt to intercept them with questions. Such were his mother, his sister, and the little nurse with the slightly hunched spine, hidden in indifference and a calculatedly large overall, probably paid to keep quiet, as the caretaker was, because they are occupations in which the ability to whisper is a condition of suitability for employment. He in particular must have known a few things, because he paid my neighbour from the attic's subscriptions and such; he used to go up to him with the money collectors, open his door with the key that was given him for this purpose and then go down with

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them. He must certainly have known a great deal about him, but he remained persistently silent. Once I could not contain myself and I asked, looking towards the attic: »How is he?« The caretaker replied: »What can we do?« That was all. I was once by chance present when the theatre prompter who shared the second floor with me intercepted the nurse. The prompter always spoke under his breath, but shrilly so as to be audible all the same: »Still the same?« he asked, looking towards the attic as he spoke, his neck twisted as though he were in the prompter's box. Not only did the nurse not reply, but she hastened her steps so that the question should not reach her. They must have paid her more than the caretaker. It is well-known that nurses earn on average at least double their salary in the undivided confidence of other people's secrets. I remember how much my masseuse cost me, or rather the »confidence« that she »granted« my wife, exposing »only to her« the dirty linen from her other clients' houses, I can easily imagine how much the nurse gets as compensation for the lost income she would otherwise have earned through some »confidences«, for her employers know the price of silence. I did not pay more than I would have done for a good play, a gala concert or a well-bound book, but I provided my wife with considerably more than that: the masseuse brought into her room an exhaustive daily chronicle of the lives of all her acquaintances, and of many strangers too who gradually became acquaintances. Of course, she took things away with her as well, because my wife would expend her entire supply of words in conversation with her and pay me back with silence. It is impossible that nurses should be different from masseuses. Obviously, as they have to do with the sick their chronicles are bound to be more interesting and consequently more expensive, and their silence more expensive too.

The nurse, who knows everything about him, did not respond to attempts to extract any kind of facts from her through surprise questions. The brusque caretaker allowed almost everyone to believe that he knew nothing. The mother and sister (how do I know they are his mother and sister?) succeeded in making their way up to the roof and down again with magnificent indifference to the other tenants' constant stopping, the opening of doors and waiting, to the movements that were the prelude to questions. No response! As though a draught had caught a newspaper advertisement page that had been thrown away! They did not even make any observations to each other as they came and went. As though they were ashamed or afraid of something.

The prompter undertook every conceivable measure in order to glean some information. The dumb show of daily visits to the tenant in the attic irritated him. I think he simply could no longer bear not to bring it to life in some way, by prompting. The visitors felt that; they avoided him more than the other tenants, if it is at all permissible to distinguish between different modes of conduct when it is a question of avoiding something. However... I had occasion to observe that, as they went past his and my floor, they somehow kept more closely to my door, they were somehow turned more towards me. Perhaps they would not have been if they had known how avidly I was watching them through the peep-hole, but they did not know. They knew only that the prompter was watching them through his peep-hole because they could hear his excited breathing. I could hear it as well. The

prompter breathed as though the visitors were actresses who had forgotten to breathe, and he was trying to remind them of their rôles. The prompter was crammed full of dialogues from plays that had been on the theatre repertoire for a long time. I used to avoid him because of this dialogue, although I often felt like exchanging ideas with someone. Unfortunately he had no ideas, and I was not interested in losing out in competition with the eloquence of Ibsen or Krleža, which he was concerned in passing off as his own. Once I did ask him something nonetheless. I wanted to ascertain whether the tenant in the attic's name was Adolf. That is to say, I considered that that was what he ought to be called. The prompter launched into a discursive answer which amounted to the observation that he thought he had seen him the previous evening in the darkness of the landing, up in the attic. Why do you think you saw him? I asked. He replied: Because I think I heard him.

It was a blatant lie. It is true that prompters see what they only hear, particularly if they hear it *indistinctly*, but I did not believe him, because although I am not a prompter, my hearing is not to be scoffed at either.

A few days later I learned by chance that he is not called Adolf.

Something exciting must have happened in the attic, because the mother and the nurse did not maintain their usual silence on their way down. Perhaps they thought no-one was about. It was three o'clock in the afternoon, when people are generally on their beds digesting their lunch.

»There was too much salt and too much pepper in the meat,« piped the mother.

»I am following the doctor's instructions exactly, madam. On the contrary...« the nurse denied the accusation quietly.

»Perhaps you weren't concentrating.«

»I was.«

»Then why was he so irritated?« said the mother reproachfully.

»You know yourself that he didn't say anything about food.«

»I know how Alfred feels even when he says nothing at all...«

As soon as they had gone, the prompter opened his door and came over to mine.

»He's called Alfred!« he said, chuckling, looking at me through the peep-hole eye to eye, although he could not see me from outside. I pretended not to be there, but he waved me a greeting all the same, and then went away delighted, as though he had laid a bet on that name.

Alfred! The name suited him. Just as well as the one I had chosen for him; even a little better. You cannot make much distinction between Alfred and Adolf, since they have got four letters in common, of which one is the first letter and two come in the same order. So there is no reason for me to alter anything in my other conjectures about him. He must have watery eyes that betray a malignant emptiness, a long thin and pale face, uncertain legs, and arms... thin, colourless, but very, very clean hair that it is impossible to comb. This face had existed in me before I recognized it in the mother and sister. Everything would have fallen apart at the seams if that had not been true, plus the fact that he shaved every day and that the nurses distur-

bed him sexually, that he masturbated: inflaming himself, imagining holding them naked in his arms, and that he retaliated for his lack of courage by refusing to eat, and that he became irritable when his mother or sister (particularly his sister) arrived just as he had summoned the strength to ask the nurse to wash his feet while he sat naked in the bath. That must have been the beginning that preceded further well considered moves. The mother and the sister (particularly the sister) knew that perfectly well, and that is why they selected ugly nurses, not taking into account the fact that they were thereby facilitating his intention, because the ugly ones were likely to be more approachable, more inclined to give in. They needed only to be dirty and then nothing could have stopped him. But they were not! On the contrary! The nurse who is now in his service leaves an aroma of pungent perfume and disinfectant that lingers in the air on the stairs a long time after she has gone. I am convinced that it is precisely that aroma in fact that gets in Alfred's way, and not perhaps her hunched back and small stature. This pungent aroma somehow intimidated him that she would resist his petty but intoxicating tricks that were the prerequisite to fulfilling the desires of his body that cried out to be quenched. That pungent aroma stayed in his nostrils even when she had gone. If he is impotent or if he pretends to be so only in order to force her into physical proximity then she washes him while he is lying down, washes him — as they do in hospitals — under the sheet, with the expert and indifferent grip of experienced hands, her eyes looking only at purposeful articles: soap, glove, brush... Ah, how Alfred suffered in temptation, on the razor edge between desire and obstruction!

I do not know whether I thought about him like this before or only after the event that is the direct cause of my analysis. I ask myself this question because I often considered myself particularly penetrating merely because I would have forgotten that experience preceded comprehension. I should not be surprised if that were the case in this instance as well, but the fact is that the nurse did not amaze me six months ago when she ran agitated down the stairs, stopping all the time as though she ought to be doing something, but could not because something else was forcing her to run. Have I already mentioned that my hearing is unnaturally acute and unnaturally capable of distinguishing sources and discovering causes? Have I or not? If I have not, do not, nevertheless, doubt my conviction that she was stopping to tidy herself and at the same time to look round to see whether Alfred was following her, Alfred whose fear had given way and so deprived her of protection.

I assumed that Alfred did not leave the attic either because his people were afraid his secret would be revealed in contact with third parties, or because he himself realized that the joy of risk would cost him more than there was advantage in hiding. And the nurse must have known that, but if Alfred had tried to extort by force more than the agreed nursing services, then he is taking the risk; regardless of the damage that would follow only later; the barrier had burst and no longer contained the murky waters of frustration. Nothing prevented him any longer from not considering himself an invalid, and, complying with instincts hitherto restrained by his secret, he acted according to the demands of a blind force, entirely forgetting the long established

taboo. He was an object and as such merely an arrow without choice of direction.

The nurse had stopped for a moment outside my door. I heard her sobbing and panting, sometimes more distinctly, sometimes more faintly, as she kept turning round to make sure no-one was chasing her. I do not know what she would have done if Alfred had appeared on the stairs. She was paid to deliver him from all temptations, and for this last temptation she had a hunched back, severe face and belated virginity that was no longer disturbed by curiosity. She probably calculated that time would reinstate the taboo, but still she waited not daring to go further before silence in the attic proved that she had not been mistaken in her calculation.

Then came an indistinct hum of voices approaching from somewhere downstairs; someone was coming up.

The nurse was compelled to choose: either to return to the attic or to meet the people who were coming up. Either decision discouraged her. My door was the third possibility. I looked through the peep-hole. She was actually examining the third possibility. We would meet. If nothing else, she could discover from this encounter that I was serious and harmless, perhaps, even worthy of trust. I took advantage of this and opened the door, pretending that I was just going out. Not to embarrass her, I spent some time jangling my keys as though I intended locking the door, then I glanced at her and feigned surprise:

»Do you want anything?« I asked her as casually as possible.

She was looking anxiously now towards the attic, now downstairs, to where the voices were coming from.

»If I can be of any assistance?« I added.

She opened her mouth to say something, but could not find the right words, and I moved away from the door and invited her:

»Do come in!«

She hesitated for a moment longer, then accepted the invitation, for what she could no longer hide from me she could still hide from others.

When I had closed the door behind her, she said:

»I should stay here a minute or two, just to make sure...«

She stopped suddenly, trying in her fear first to be sure of me.

»To make sure Alfred doesn't try to follow you—« I said.

She was obviously taken aback by what I knew, but not wanting to give me a chance of learning what I could not possibly know because it had taken place up there, with no witnesses, she pulled herself together, or at least tried to give me that impression.

»Forgive me for being like this...« she said, embarrassed.

»I shall be glad if I can be of service to you,« I said to calm her, I said it quite, quite softly, because at that moment the people who had compelled her to accept my invitation reached the second floor.

At the sharp sound of the bell I quickly signalled to the nurse to be quiet and that I would be. I did not dare peep through the peep-hole to see who it was, because the noise of an awkward movement could have given me away and they were listening attentively to see whether I was going to answer. Then they rang again and waited for a reply. Then once again.

An unfamiliar voice said: »He can't be at home!«
And they began to go down the stairs.
I never found out who they were and why they were looking for me.

In the meantime the nurse had managed to calm herself. She was of indeterminate mature years. In her thirties? Or perhaps forties? It was hard to make out because her face was weary with perpetual severity, but not ugly. Excitement had put life into her otherwise dead expression. As though fire had been lit in her eyes which were now engaged in examining the place where she found herself and the movement in accordance with which she had to decide how to behave. At the same time her hands came to life as well, her unnaturally long hands, long fingers, and long, cared-for nails. The balletic agility of these hands and fingers that did not belong to the other parts of her tiny body (as though they were on loan), betrayed dexterity and reliability. Without looking, her long fingers discovered that her blouse was still a little pulled out of her skirt and that one of the buttons had come off. Stopping at the place where they had established the lack, her fingers trembled recalling that unpleasant experience in the attic of a short while before. It was then that I noticed that her shoulders were rounded and her breasts firm and full. The mother and sister could not have been aware of the provocation of those shoulders and breasts, that must often have been within reach of Alfred's teeth, hungry for skin. I could understand him; particularly at those moments when it was only a torso.

»Now I must go. Thank you!« I heard her say, preparing to walk towards the door.

»I should prefer you to stay a little longer, I mean, until you feel perfectly calm.«

I moved away to show her the living room I was inviting her into, but she stayed where she was not understanding why I was going to the trouble of being more than necessarily obliging.

»I would like to be of service to you, and nothing more«, I said.

»I feel very awkward...« she stammered. »You were just on your way out.«

»I'm a retired man. I sometimes go out from boredom. I go out so as to be pleased to come back.«

»Aren't you surprised that I came in just like that?«

»No. I'm glad you trusted me.«

Her face remained stern, but her eyes were becoming less and less a part of her face. There was an unspoken sadness in them, as though they were lamenting the fact that they did not unconditionally offer up her whole being for which caresses and love were merely the expression of quivering joy in the annihilation of the unit in duality. All weak and unhappy beings are like that for they are incapable (and that is the reason for their loneliness) of victory, which drives them sooner or later into retreat and senseless waiting that becomes stunted in its fruitlessness. Should they be given the chance, however, they will not be satisfied with crumbs, for their particular pride can still give them a certain self-satisfaction, although there is a grain of self-vindictiveness and a little masochism in that kind of pride. Afterwards I learned things about her that somewhat alter the first impression, but not radically, and I do not even need to alter the

fact that I thought her a virgin. I retained my conviction that she must have been terribly hurt when a man who had no other choice tried to rape her, although that might also have flattered her in some other cell of her brain. She knew that she had been selected only because the mother and sister considered that she would not disturb Alfred's dormant instincts. It must have offended her, but she submitted.

I have only been in this building three years and I do not know how Alfred behaved towards the nurses who were in his service before this one, but I do not doubt that there had been similar attempts already, perhaps even towards the sister; since I have been here—she has never been to see him on her own. It is impossible that there should be no special reason for such caution. I shall discover it. Perhaps I shall talk to the prompter about it, because the nurse does not come to see me any more, and when she did... No, that does not belong here. Only the beginning and the end belong.

The beginning, that real beginning, was her question:

»Aren't you surprised that I came in just like that?«

I replied:

«No. I'm glad you trusted me.»

Her face remained stern, but her eyes were becoming less and less a part of her face. That reassured me.

»Did he hurt you?«

»Oh, no, no, that's not it,« she hurried her answer, to stop herself remembering.

»May I say that you are a very likeable person?... Perhaps you won't believe me, perhaps you will think I have special reasons for saying so out of the blue, but I'm really happy I helped you. That is, I do have a reason, but when I say you're a very likeable person, it has nothing to do with that.«

I waited for her to ask what my reason was, but she was reluctant, and I went on:

»It is true that we pensioners are superfluous people, and that drabness in the eyes of others often makes us ostentatious, for we are insufficient to ourselves. That is why you should not be surprised that I am glad. You have brought colour into my grey morning, otherwise like every other morning. I wanted to keep you here longer, to prolong that pleasure, not only because you deserve it...«

»How do you know I deserve it?« she asked me in surprise.

»Solitude develops a feeling for what is hidden.«

»Now I really must go.«

»Besides, I think you are a lonely person too.«

She did not like what I said, and she opened the door faster than was necessary, then muttered a goodbye and set off without looking round. That aroma of perfume and disinfectant I knew so well lingered after her in the hall, as did the sadness of unspoken thoughts.

Alfred could have heard her footsteps continue from here, and I was present in his thoughts perhaps more than he in mine.

The nurse did not come for several weeks.

I listened to the noises on the stairs in vain, in vain rushed to the peep-hole. The mother and sister came every day in the morning

and afternoon; sometimes only the mother, sometimes the doctor was with her as well.

Once I heard the mother say:

»God grant it stays like this.«

The doctor mumbled without conviction:

»There's no reason why it shouldn't.«

The day before the nurse came back, the doctor ran out of the building and returned half an hour later, also running. That day they all stayed up there till late at night.

The nurse came with the mother for some time after that, and they stayed up there together. She came twice with the sister. After that unaccompanied. The old order of things was re-established. I adapted my movements so that I could meet her on the stairs, and greet her as an acquaintance, but she did not stop, did not look at me, she would answer my greeting, and quicken her step.

This all happened a few months before the lame man appeared on the pavement under the acacia, with a view to observing my behaviour, or with some task in which I was merely incidental: the man had possibly been engaged to stop Alfred should he try to go out or do something else that might have threatened him. If that were so, the question remained: why this new cautionary measure? An acceptable answer would be that they had found out what I did before I retired. People often live in the conviction that Home Affairs pensioners continue to be committed informers. In that case it is as well to know in advance, they think, who knows, I might attempt to undertake something in connection with Alfred, particularly if he had told his mother and sister that the nurse had visited me, which he could have seen if he had watched her secretly that time when she ran away from him. He could have interpreted it as a trap I had set for her. There was no reason to question his hearing, which, like mine, had been developed by solitude, nor his capacity for deduction, which danger could sharpen to produce very probable or even certain conclusion. He could not be aware of her subsequent visits to me, because she was very careful. She used to go quickly past my door to the first floor, and then return bare-foot, or she would go out of the building and return later in a different pair of shoes that she would carry in her bag for this purpose. If she had not acted like this, she would certainly have lost a lucrative job.

It is surprising, however, that the lame man did not appear immediately after that occurrence, but it is not out of the question that he had been guarding the house the whole time, from a distance, and that he had become careless and bold only after he had ascertained that my movements were limited to the familiar, innocuous neighbourhood.

The possibility that the lame man had been taken on as some kind of discreet bodyguard was not only one of the alternatives I am taking into consideration because it is—a possibility: it was based on some solid reasons as well. Alfred's family was not poor: they paid for a separate flat for him, a special nurse (with a supplement for silence), the caretaker's services (also with a supplement for silence), the doctor... That family could have paid for a bodyguard as well

without turning a hair. And that would go with the well-chosen, expensive clothes of the mother and sister, perhaps a little old-fashioned, but is that not a sign of prosperity or past prosperity that continues to exist? Could anyone nowadays possess an ant-cater skin coat? But they each had one. Former upper class, in other words. People who had not managed to escape or had not had sufficient courage, and were now existing, turned in on themselves like some secret sect, full of contempt for the world around them, making contact with their surroundings only by force of inconvenient circumstance, foolishly proud that they have rather chosen an exile that no-one has forced on them than an equalizing that would to them have represented humiliating submission. They say: they (that is: we) can do what they please with us, for the power is in their hands, but we remain what we are!

Alfred must have committed some crime which does not seem a crime to them, but they knew it entails retaliation.

That is why they hid him.

Victims from former times now walk through the streets. They do not remember the name of the criminals but their faces are deeply engraved in their memory.

I should not start from the assumption that Alfred tried the strength of the knife in the shape of a claw, but I had met that face in the corridors when they were being taken away to interrogation, and they had all merged into one: watery eyes, that betray a malignant emptiness, a long thin and white face... and thin colourless, but very, very clean hair that it is impossible to comb. That common face of theirs existed in me before I recognized it as Alfred's in his mother and sister. It is legitimate to suppose that at the time of his first crime it reflected the anticipation of its consequences: the eyes were clouded over with the enigma of change, and the lips trembled secretly. Then it calmed as it went unpunished, and rewarded by repeating the action, withholding the mercy its victims silently sought, in the sensation of its own greatness. When that sensation was expended as well, there remained the blank face and in the corridors where I used to meet it, it could sometimes smile in the same way that the victims smiled, falsely confident that they could disarm the knife-claw with charm.

But it is legitimate to believe that that smile is not a simulated proof of innocence on everyone's face, calculated to convince judges and jurors that the criminal was only the object of the hideous game of some ancient nightmare, for it might be an unconscious defence or self-defence mechanism, a distant echo of unforgotten boyhood when it was still possible to be amazed at the discovery of the blood in which life ebbs away. I am convinced that Alfred's malignantly empty face deceives with just such a smile. He could not support the burden of the crime that threatened from the depths of his consciousness to obscure his mind with its colour, scent and sound. The smile was his protection, although he knew nothing about it. The smile seemed to be constantly surprised: what is happening to him?

That is the way the cat lover smiled as well, about whom I have to write to explain Alfred and the fear that overcomes me when I surmise his intentions, or more exactly presume them.

The cat lover lived in a run-down, lonely little house in the suburbs, alone with his crime and his cats. The house consisted of a basement

and a ground-floor room divided by a partition into two unequal parts: an entrance hall and a cage. In the hall was a kitchen-range and some decrepit furniture that was a proof or better times; a table, chairs, a deep armchair, a piano covered with velvet, a wardrobe and a number of unknown objects covered with ugly cardboard boxes, weighted down with bricks so that the cats should not knock them over. Only a wax cast of a new-born baby under a glass dome, was visible, horrifying in its enigmatic presence. The cats were not allowed into the cage. That was where the occupant's bed was. Like the mysterious objects, his living quarters were protected from the cats' carelessness.

Every morning the cat lover brought his darlings milk and offal, but he did not give it to them all at once. First they had their breakfast, and he would put the rest into a little cage that he pulled on a string right up to the ceiling like a flag. Then he would light a fire in the stove, talking to the cats and stroking them, but they avoided him because they were more interested in food. That saddened the cat lover, and he reproached them mildly, almost with understanding, but pained by the fact that they cared more for food than for his insatiable love, which he was ready to offer them without reserve.

While the fire was getting going, the cat lover would take a woman's old house-frock from a hanger, and pull a dirty wig out of a box, and in an instant transform himself into his own wife. Then, in this new capacity, he would let down the little cage, separate another part of the offal, cut it up and put it to cook in milk, continuing to talk to his darlings, who would rub themselves against his legs, ingratiating themselves because they never had enough food. The cat lover had one favourite among his darlings, a white Siamese, callous and feminine, reserved towards the others. He would usually look for her and find her in some drawer, take her out and hold her in his lap, as he lay back in the armchair. The Siamese would submit to the caresses of his greedy hands for a while, but when he went beyond the permitted degree of pressure, she would bristle and try to run away, which sometimes infuriated him, and then he would throw her roughly onto the floor, blaming her for her lack of understanding and withholding of gratitude. To calm himself he would sit down at the piano and play preludes, expecting the cats to listen to him, but he soon realized that it was just a noise and nothing more to them; they were interested only in the aroma from the stove.

Oh, how the cat lover's heart ached to think that his darlings knew nothing of goodness and beauty! One could feel it in the melancholy of the piano's notes, in the weeping of the keys.

When the food was cooked, the cat lover would fill a plate and set off to the cellar followed by the envious gaze of the spoilt animals. So that they should not come with him, he would shut the door behind him and go down the wooden stairs alone. Down below, in the cellar, he would take the plate up to the wooden barrier raised an inch above the floor. Straw poked out from under it. He would leave the plate there and wait.

A short while after this a thin, gnarled woman's hand would appear under the barrier, cautiously in case of surprises, and when it came upon the plate, it would quickly pull it in.

Then a smile would appear on the face of the cat lover, a smile of liberation from sin, a smile that was extinguished only by the

