The Love of Marcel Faber-Fabriczy for Miss Laura Warronigg

Twenty years later, when all that was to happen had happened, when Laura and Marcel stood in life like two shipwrecked persons, there emerged in their conversations the old recollections of their Bukovec adventures, distant and faded as old English rubbings in half-darkened rooms. Marcel, who had just returned from Russia, was lingering for a while in Zagreb, anchorless in the mist of his Croatian homeland. He and Laura would meet in the front room of Laura's fashion shop, Mercure Galant. At that time Laura was already doomed to commit suicide, but the somber and sad conversations about all their past involvements were infused with the silent, golden light of the bygone days of Bukovec.

Their conversations about the Bukovec drawing room! Its enormous old-fashioned sofa in the corner with the oriental rugs, the sofa piled high with too many red, black, pale blue, and yel-

low cushions, and above, on the golden console, the gilded baroque saint with outstretched arms. The embroidered designs on the silk cushions, the vases and the jars in the Viennese glass cabinet, the clocks on alabaster pillars, and the tabouret where the old butler set the silver tea tray: all this stood before Marcel like the silent replica of an afternoon with sun shining through the green crests of linden trees under the balcony. . . .

The door of the balcony is open. One can sense the soft, warm, palpitating blue distance of the Maksimir and Dubrava horizon. The half silent movement of the leaves on the faded linden trees and laughter in the vineyard! Below on the lawn, near the fountain, under the yellow and red sunshade, Laura's friends are laughing: the Ballochanska and the Wagner girl, Melita Szlougan, some naval ensign and Laura's escort, Lieutenant Fabiani. They play crazy games in the vineyard, and all are impressed by Lieutenant Fabiani's fine talk about his recent admission to the Vienna Military Academy, while upstairs, in the drawing room, Marcel lies on the sofa and like a tired dog strains to hear Laura's voice! The mere echo of Laura's voice! The slightest quiver of air exhaled through her lips that would enter by the open balcony door and circle in perfumed incense-like whiffs around the drawing room. Silence. In the distance, somewhere on the Remete path, a girl sings. On the road an oxcart creaks. A bird flies from the tree. Marcel is in love; yet not for the first time.

Before Laura there was a certain Darinka, a girl two years older than he, a girl who had so overwhelmingly taken hold of his life, his existence, and his fifteen-year-old destiny that Marcel's wound did not heal for two entire years. Only when his cousin Laura Warronigg arrived in Zagreb from Vienna did he use Laura as an antidote to Darinka, thus creating new complications that were to follow him for many more years, throughout the haze and daze of puberty.

Darinka was approximately the thirtieth woman in his life. Marcel was as conscious of this gallery of female figures then as he was to remain faithful to their memory ten or twenty years later. At the time of Darinka, Marcel was a shy but perfect lover in whose eye Woman loomed more portentously than she would later, after all his sad experiences. He then sought in Woman a supernatural, spiritual mission; he thought that Woman's role should consist in making life easier for us in a "higher sense," in transporting us away from the futility of Latin and Greek and mathematical complexities. Naturally, "inferior as only an eleventh grader can be," Darinka could not have had the faintest idea of what storms were raging in the ninth-grader Marcel Faber, who waited for her like a faithful dog day after day near the tramway station to trudge behind her down the street named after a famous Dubrovnik writer of comedies on which she lived. As he was to find out later through experience, everything had been then as it would be with all women: the woman had not understood, and the woman would never understand, for the simple reason that woman is incapable of understanding. But in the case of Darinka (as so many times later in life), Marcel believed that this was not so and that it was possible that woman might understand after all; indeed, Darinka was not Marcel's first love experience, but she was his first entirely conscious encounter with frustration.

Between Miss Darinka and the dark, uncertain totterings preceding her, many bleeding and sorrowful loves had faded away. Miss Darinka was, in fact, only the first conscious climax in the rich love instrumentation that orchestrally accompanies every Godsent childhood—from fighting and quarreling over Karlsbad omelets, variegated marbles, red balloons, and punch cakes to hide-and-seek games in wine cellars where in the darkness girls' tresses smell like linden blossoms to boys. In the love history of Marcel Faber there existed prior to Darinka girls of inferior social standing, who smelled of humid scrubbed floors and bread soaked in creamy coffee. While Marcel Faber-Fabriczy walked about in his fine Kiel-made sailor suit with a red silk anchor on the left sleeve, these girls (daughters of charwomen, servants,

and janitors), dressed in ordinary homespun, envied Marcel's little brass bells, lacquered hoops, and tennis balls in woolen nets. In his benevolent attitude toward the lower social strata, there was always something perversely merciful about Marcel's tender feelings for these "poor little ones" while, at the same time, he was attracted to them by his certainty of success; among these girls of his who admired his clothes and toys, great respect for the "upper social bracket" was noticeable at all times. The noble Fabriczy child, often spotted at his mother's side in the Glembay carriage, the doctor's son, the little gentleman and rich boy, was sure of a lordship's victory over these "miserable creatures." In a superior Don Juan-like manner, he mistreated the ugly, myopic cross-eyed girls with their thick glasses and greasy braids; being the only one in the group who had ever been to the gold rococo theater where musical comedy stars sang with heavenly voices amid violet lights and brocaded costumes, only he could fascinate the girls with tales of what love adventures unfolded on the stage. In the days before Darinka Marcel had taken much interest in the limping, tubercular widow of a suicide (said to have been deaf) who, day after day, locked in her attic room, embroidered gigantic, blooming La France roses on wool cushions and made covers for pocket watches. Servant girls and chambermaids in the service of his mother's friends in the city struck Marcel as mysterious beings, naked under their skirts like Titian's Venuses framed in green plush in Aunt Agatha's drawing room. . . .

Like an Impressionistic aquatint, its colors spilled from a most audacious palette, the enormous space in the interior of the cathedral seems permeated with light, perfume, organ music, and incense. At the altar of St. Jerome with the Lion Marcel assists the priest and Genoveva Rochard-Flieder stands in the second row among the girls of her class. A golden light shines upon all things. In the right nave, in front of the altar of St. Jerome, the entire school is assembled for the Holy Sunday Mass—the old director with his white waistcoat and gray umbrella, the

teacher in her bell skirt tightened at the waist, falling in rich folds like a train and looking like the tube of some poisonous flower. The teacher's hat is enormous, like the nest of some unknown tropical bird, and under that hat, under the rich, black, Empress Elizabeth hair-do, next to that bell skirt, in the second row stands Genoveva Rochard-Flieder, a pale, anemic girl with an ebony prayer book, a rich girl for whom a carriage and an old top-hatted coachman are sent to school every day. . . .

Marcel was struggling through his paper on the Subject. For more than half a year now he had worked on this treatise based on Schopenhauer's epigraph, "The Subject, the Comprehending, never Comprehended," and when his work had attained sufficient clarity so that he had dared show it to Laura, she had returned his manuscript because "such things don't interest me; indeed, they truly bore me!" He had appended to his treatise several charts drawn in different colors of ink. The Table of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Modality, the Table of Receptivity of Impression, and the Table of Observation. From the little Toldt Anatomical Atlas (from the library of his late father), Marcel had skillfully enlarged the anatomical cross section of the eye, colored the small brain in yellow, the lines of the *nervus facialis*, the nervus opticus, and the *nervus oculomotorius* in red, whereas the eyeball and lids he outlined like a symmetrical globe, in blue. The Table of Observation, with the red line of optical stimulation (from the pupil to the point of association), drawn in three colors on a double sheet of the finest cardboard, was a particularly decorative addition to Marcel's treatise on the Subject, and yet Laura had returned it all with the superficial observation that none of it "interests me in the least!"

The question of the difference between pure and empirical apprehension, the problem of pure Reason, the problems concerning the analysis of notions, the problem of Existence and of the Thing in Itself, these are naturally boring questions for Laura, but flirting with Fabiani. naturally, does not bore her.

With all the impassioned enthusiasm of his intelligence, Marcel defiantly skimmed through the leaves of his manuscript with a Copernican craving for beauty and with contempt for the unkind Laura who had no understanding whatsoever of all the pitfalls one stumbles across in reasoning and in the quest for truth. What is transcendentality of Space and Time to such a Viennese brat; what are all of Marcel's intellectual efforts when the only important questions for her are the Coronelli dance and the party at the Szlougans?

"The thinking of my Subject, the pure perception of my own inner consciousness and self-assertion, this transcendental inner power of mine, this heaven in me—this is what thinks in us. Our thinking must be like the finest yarn, covering everything that exists because it encompasses all that comes forth and appears to us, for otherwise, if something appeared to us of which we were unable to think, we would not be able to comprehend this unknown, and it would remain forever unimaginable and incomprehensible to us."

Marcel had copied his philosophical treatise for the ninth time and thought how unable we are to imagine a phenomenon without a category and how Schopenhauer approves of transcendentality in aesthetics but refuses to accept it in categories, how we encounter in notions something that is not a notion but something commonplace and sensual, how everything disintegrates into a mass of contradictions, how all thoughts evaporate like smoke, how nevertheless there remains beyond it all the terrible reality of Laura and the Idea of Laura. What are his tables and treatises when they don't interest Laura, why does he so persistently copy them when they lead nowhere and he should be working instead! Whenever he thought of his schoolwork, he was assailed with worries, feeling like the sleeping traveler who has no strength to awaken and to hasten despite the certainty that his ship is going to leave and that he will be late. This obsession with Laura was indeed a game played to the limits of endurance. Marcel knew how wise it would be to consult certain

obscure chapters that he had ignored since the beginning of the semester, and yet, constantly torn between reality and illusion, he felt utterly powerless to resist his somber instincts and to confront facts. What did he care for the formula

$$\frac{x^2}{a^2} - \frac{y^2}{b^2} = 1,$$

when tomorrow in the concert hall some sort of Spanish virtuoso would perform and when in twenty hours he would see Laura. All right,

$$\cos x\, i = \frac{1}{2}(e^x + e^{-x}), \text{ or } \frac{x^2}{a^2} + \frac{y^2}{b^2} - \frac{z^2}{c^2} = 1.$$

To hell with all the hyperboloids and functions and written and oral work, when in twenty hours he will see her! Tomorrow Brenner, that disagreeable old man with fishy eyes and hairy hands, will stand at the back of the class and watch to see that nobody hides a book under the bench or copies from his neighbor. There he will stand, his back against the wall, drumming on the wall with his heavy butcher's hand. His fingernails are uncut, tough, black; his pockets reek with the stench of extinguished cigars. Then comes Latin. Cornelius Tacitus: "Whereas the worshipers of antiquity usually place the ones who were active before Cassius toward the end of the olden period and accuse Cassius of having abandoned the direct old style of expression, I claim that Cassius did not adopt such a style because of lack of talent or ignorance in matters of literature, but on purpose and in full cognizance of what he was doing . . ." (Tacitus, *Dialogus de oratoribus*, 19). And thirty-five other such idiocies; then physics with a dirty wet sponge, humid chalk breaking between one's fingers, superfluous formulas $\frac{h^1 - ho}{ho} = \frac{v^1 - vo}{vo}$. But all this is for tomorrow. It's all for tomorrow only, and until then there is plenty of time and it's all of no consequence when in twenty hours he will see Laura.

He last saw her on Sunday before Mass, in St. Catherine's Square. She was with her two intimate friends, Melita Szlougan and Blanka Balloczanska. They did not see him. He had shuddered and been unable to breathe. His throat and chest had tightened; a yellow mist blinded him. He was also with friends; then, noticing her hat (what redness, no young lady in town wears such a shade of red), his words stuck. He was talking with his friends of oil paints, of the Berlin blue tube and the shellac he had purchased for a good price at the stationer's in Duga Ulica, when he spotted her red hat and froze. He continued talking of yellow chrome and Berlin blue; he continued to walk erect; he moved forward mechanically, as one always continues to move, as if nothing has happened, when, in fact, the utmost of what can happen in life has happened: her red silk hat, with its ribbon and varnished cherries, was revealed to him. Tired, pale, exhausted, with trembling lips, listening to the voices of his friends as if they came from a distance, only seemingly present, Marcel Faber watched the red color of his cousin Laura Warronigg crossing St. Catherine's Square, and all those pigeons, telephone wires, closed blinds on the windows, and sunlight achieved a greater clarity, a tension deep as unconsciousness. This high-powered stimulation was surely bad for his health. Marcel spent an entire semester in desperate circumstances, with F's in Latin, Greek, and mathematics and two dubious D's in logic and physics. The unread material constantly grew in volume and there was no chance whatever that something could turn in his favor; in this already almost certainly lost game, in this compromised existence, in all this trouble, he sensed his slow sinking and ruination. But under the magic spell of a single thought of her, all that was black would change into a bewildering white light, and these thoughts of her would play over him like the vibrations of a bow on a fiddle. As Marcel thought of Laura, his gloomy moods brightened like a mirror in a darkened room suddenly hit by a ray of distant light. For more than half a year he was no more than a mirror of her as such. As he knew his

Handel by heart, so he knew by heart her walk in its every rhythm, the way her body was bent (in the hip, a little on the right), the tender pliability of her waist, the movement of her elbows, the scrubbed glow of the flesh on her bare arms, the curve of the nape of her neck, her Greek hair-do, and the nonchalant swaying of her hips from left to right, winding and restless. He knew her time schedule, the books she read, the expressions she used, and he knew Fabiani whom she adored, that goose, that eleventh-grader, that snob! On Sunday he had seen her for the last time in St. Catherine's Square, and on Monday he had waited for her for a whole hour in the rain in front of the house in which her piano teacher lived. On Monday from four to five; but she had not come. On Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday he had thought of her continuously, day and night, for twenty-four hours, of how on Friday at eight o'clock he would see her at the concert of the Spanish virtuoso. She would come in her new dress (of which Aunt Angelique Barboczy had talked last time at tea), in her splendid new dress and a Greek hair-do: clean, white, slender, with her oval face and dimples, her half profile (which Marcel was unable to draw). She, Laura, his cousin, accompanied by her mother and that chasseur Fabiani. He would stand in the concert hall, backed up against the wall so as not to collapse from fright, and for two and a half hours, as if hypnotized, he would watch her, her Person, among all those ladies, officers, chairs, and chandeliers, amid the warmth and scents of female bodies. He would watch Laura for two and a half hours—only her and no one else—with sweaty fingers, swallowing bitter lumps of terror, asking himself: would she perhaps after all turn around and honor him with a single look, kindly returning his greetings, openly, intimately, as is customary among relatives, the way eleventh-grade cousins are supposed to return greetings in concert halls when escorted by army officers facing promising careers? With this one single glance of hers he would go out into the midnight darkness, stroll through the streets and parks, and finally stand in front of old

Glembay's one-story house until the last light went out in that glorious room of hers next to the balcony. Her glance would be a sign that somewhere on earth one can begin living in different spheres, unlike the ones he has known thus far. From her Marcel, in fact, needs absolutely nothing—just to look at her, to contemplate in her the embodiment of some outer, more perfect world, some higher order that lies stretched out beyond his vain agonies and school entanglements. Her gaze suggests some sort of infinite possibility, a confident island that we are going to reach someday after all. Her gaze means the end of being hurt, and painful and difficult as this expectation is since last Sunday, it is nonetheless a grandiose event for Marcel, shining above, cold and green like a polar light.

Everything around Marcel is quite black. He is plunged into constant depression by the three F's, the clash with the religion teacher, the sixteen-hour detentions, the numerous warnings and unexplained absences; but above it all, like a glimmer of hope amid a dark shipwreck, are his thoughts of her. In them Marcel is totally immersed, lost in those fantastic regions as cold as a starlit night. It is bitter to dream about her and know that she does not understand. Her look, her conventional look, the look of a relative, of a Glembay, is vague and empty. In conversation and in touch with her beauty, in the too great nearness of real contact with her as a living person, in that passionate turmoil and hazard, Marcel suffered for nearly a year a hell of rapture and doubt. This is a vulnerable state, anatomically exposed to everyday, hairy, idiotic, logical school facts; yet compared with the heavy and repulsive smells of the classroom this state is a perfumed and other-worldly veil. At night Marcel would awaken, disturbed by a somewhat louder tick of the clock, and immediately his first thoughts would be: She, she, Laura, Laura, she is living together with him on the same planet, on the same continent, in the same city. She breathes the same air, she, Laura Warronigg. She exists, she is, she sleeps, great Lord, she is alive!

And side by side with this heavenly joy dimly bellows an entire complex of ruination and terror. In his nocturnal dialogues with her, Marcel has logically analyzed and discussed these things for hours. He is slipping downhill because of her, she does not understand him, he cannot concentrate on Greek or mathematics—she has totally hypnotized him. Yet when he meets her he blushes, sweats, panics, and with blood pounding in his brain, his heart in his throat, collapses in front of this cool, superior, rational eleventh-grade goose. He knows perfectly well that her horizon is compressed between the Szlougan party and the Coronelli dance, that her mother Olga Warronigg née Glembay is a lady who reads Kellermann, believing that Kellermann is a serious writer, that Laura seriously discusses Schopenhauer with Fabiani. But what? Where to? How? Pale, trembling, timidly sweating, Marcel knows and feels how truly unworthy of a man it is to sit silent, sad, and alone at parties, in a corner of the drawing room, while the pack of Glembay youth dances and rumbles through all the rooms of the apartment. But what is the use of all the reasoning power in him when he cannot stop dreaming of the slightest detail concerning her? They spent last summer in Rimske Toplice—his mother, Laura's grandmother, and Laura. Now, in the cold of winter, as he looks back on the sunny Rimske Toplice, Marcel comes close to choking with tears. The dawns and morning promenades. One can hear the first cocks and see the miners marching in the near darkness and the first light coming on in the mills. The icy morning air streams down from the brown chain of mountains, and poplars sway in the morning wind in the green and blue light of the forest. And Laura has come, still warm and transparent, in an orange-red sweater, in her hiking shoes, and has given him a bar of Suchard chocolate to store in the knapsack. The pine trees give off their scent, a superb silence reigns among the silver firs. And there, in the silver fir wood, Marcel first saw Laura's knee. In the company of boys and girls her age on excursion from Vienna

(the children of generals and lawyers at court), she stopped to rest on an enormous tree that had been felled by lightning, and Marcel saw her knee.

He wakes up at night, sits up in bed, and thinks of that faraway afternoon, of Laura's knee, of her voice, of the colors in the wood, and of how strangely the flies buzzed in the stillness. As he remembers, his throat tightens and he sighs, sad and broken. Laura is a stupid Viennese general's daughter. She is limited; she reads stupid novels; she is more interested in the light cavalry officer Fabiani than in a student from Croatia who is flunking and who happens to be her cousin. She has no idea of what is going on within him, and even if she knew, she could not understand. She thoroughly enjoys Fabiani's jokes, and she does not know who Burckhardt is! He is tired of her; she bothers him; she is ruining his life, and it most certainly would be best for him if he could let it all drift away—let it evaporate and disappear!

In the course of his nocturnal meditations there come moments when he feels superior, proud and confident, strong enough to resist and to annihilate her in his thoughts, since it is only too clear to him that it makes no sense whatever to submit to her with such servility; after all, who is she and what has she given him? It's so simple! He should rid himself of this state of mind; it is all a phantasmagoria, and Laura knows nothing about it. In such moments of complete lucidity Marcel even senses hatred and scorn for that sweetly smiling Viennese doll; what a foolish and rotten way to suffer. But the next morning, when he would meet her, dewy, supple, and soft, her tan skin transparent in the sunlight, he would clearly understand that she is a shadow and that she does not really exist, but he knows also that should she order him to do so, he would unhesitatingly jump from the third floor.

Days went by in this debilitating fatigue and futile gloom.

As he thought about Laura, he became very frightened. He wished and desired to see her; yet he was somehow pleased

when she was absent. Then he would spend two or three peaceful days in the negative delight of his ardent longing. In the passive lyricism of uninterrupted dreams there was more vivid happiness than in direct contemplation. This very afternoon he will ring the bell at the old Glembays, enter old Angelique Barboczy's open drawing room, and there, in the twilight, kiss his aunt's hand and learn that Laura is not at home, that "she is at the Szlougans." In the moments between his apprehension and the realization that he need not be afraid, since she is "not at home," he will fully perceive the vanity of his love. Then for a while it will seem as if his Laura had never existed, as if she were an optical illusion and no more. She would often vanish from his field of vision, and he would be unable to reconstruct her. Her dress yes, the knee too, also the left joint, the hair, the color of the cheeks, the movements, but not her. He saw her in the Glembay carriage, but was that really she? That was no more than her lingonberry red coat and peach-colored parasol. Frantically he tried to master her, to subdue her, to be the stronger, to overcome his obsession, but he could not. Instead, he found himself all the more entangled in these golden veils, and a merely superficial confrontation with the presence of her person sufficed to provoke a swelling throughout him that was like church bells ringing, and those bells would ring for days and nights. Indeed, Laura was not there. She was no more than his fancies! While she was absent, while she was only his Idea, while skyborne in his imagination, she was a glorious and unique feeling. As long as he feared that he might not see her, panicked that she might not be what he believed her to be, as long as he suspected her inferiority and thrilled over her existence, her incredibly beautiful eyes, the transparence of her hand, and the color of her voice, he floated upon the most sublime of waters. But when he saw her in the flesh at a party, all smiles for that idiotic Lieutenant Fabiani, talking in the clichés of a pseudo-fashionable education, a silk scarf from the Maison Chapeau d'Or more important to her than Schiller, then Marcel's

sublime visions paled and only visions of death remained. She was inane and unintelligent, and there was really nothing beneath her Viennese veneer. On closer examination she really was rather short and her eyes were hazy, her voice weepy, and her spelling miserable, and there was no chance it would ever improve; so why should he lose time on such an eleventh-grader and such a goose? When she stood alive near him in the drawing room, under the lamp, surrounded by laughter, the clatter of plates, the click of spurs, and the piano, he looked at her and it struck him that Laura was a terrible carnivorous beast. Indeed, her teeth were strong, her incisors rapacious; she was unintelligent, unworthy of his sacrifice, too stupid and weak to understand and sustain the stream of yearning, dreams, desires, illusions, fever, and nightmares in which he reveled with increasing passion and lunacy. Laura was absent—the passionate, wild, sensual, grotesque, panicky feeling that Laura was absent!

Five days have passed since Sunday, since he last saw her, time enough to destroy himself on a number of counts. He has not worked at all; he has not read at all; he has thought of her the whole time. He has gone for walks in the streets, waited for her at street corners, looked at the passers-by as if they were a funeral procession; he has gone to the opera and visited the cemetery, and uninterruptedly, for five days and five nights, he has carried her in his every step and heartbeat, in mist and in rain. And finally, with her mother and Fabiani, she came to the recital of the Spanish virtuoso. During the entire concert Marcel stood in a solitary niche in the wall, deaf to all sounds. Laura did not turn once. Laura did not notice him. After the concert, the General's wife left first; Laura and Fabiani followed her. Fabiani bade good-by to the ladies in front of the carriage and was lost in the crowd. It was raining. Somehow Marcel managed to bring himself to the front of the one-story Glembay house, and there, tired and wet, he remained standing under the foliage of a tree like a dead man. In the quiet one could hear the rustle of rain drops among the leaves. At the end of the street a gas lamp

gleamed, and there was Marcel looking into the apartment of old Glembay. His heart pounded as if it were jumping now to the left, now to the right. On the second floor of the house next Glembay's a woman in a nightgown moved the curtains aside and opened the window. In the green light of the room thus disclosed, Marcel saw a clock and a pendulum in a black frame and a potted palm on a chest of drawers. A bitter taste invaded his throat and tears came into his eyes. A frightful pain burned and hurt him all over; he felt like a dog on a heap of ashes. He was craving for her, but in fact she did not exist.

Translated by Branko Lenski