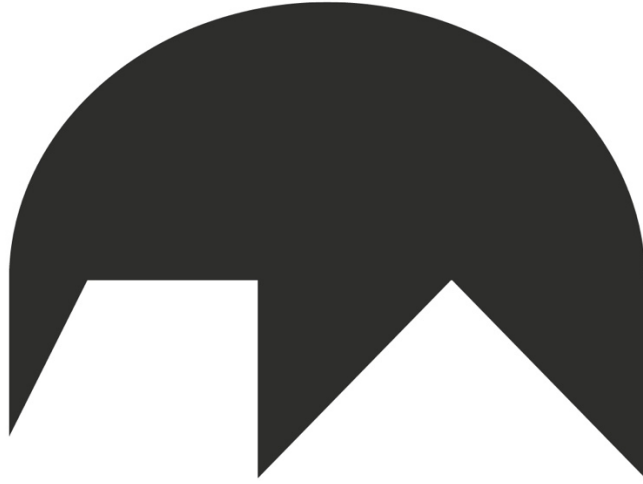


DUSAN STRAUS: WITH AN ELEPHANT ON HIS SHOULDERS



Dusan Straus

**WITH
AN ELEPHANT
ON HIS
SHOULDERS**

**Authentic story of
a former cult leader**

DUSAN STRAUS: WITH AN ELEPHANT ON HIS SHOULDERS

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With much gratitude to my beloved wife, Karolina. I finished this book with her abundant help and support in difficult and stressful moments.

Author's note

The novel is my testimony after spending nearly twenty-three years of my life in the Sri Chinmoy Centre cult. The stories and characters presented in this book are true, drawn from reality, and described as I have personally experienced and understood them. I have changed the original names in an effort not to invade the privacy of the persons.

I have retained the real names only of the publicly known persons and the cult leader, Sri Chinmoy.

11. OCTOBER 2007

Prologue

A silver Toyota Avensis was dragged in an endless motorcade down Vajnory Street to the place where he used to live. In the car, the song *God's Glory Lottery is always won by the*

seeker's aspiration flame, from the CD of the Japaka Orchestra, which he had been leading for almost eight years, was playing loudly. The pleasant tones were suddenly interrupted by the insistent ringing of a mobile phone. He glanced at the display. Anirudha is a messenger of messages direct from the Guru. He felt a chill on his back.

He switched off the player and took the call.

"This morning, Guru went to eternity." The American disciple's tone was severe, and the words seemed unusually official. "Please notify all the Centers in the country."

At the first moment, he was convinced that he did not understand the message in American English very well. He immediately pulled the Toyota over to the side of the road. He paid no attention to the honking of the car behind him, no response to the driver's wild gesticulation. Looking at the transcendental image displayed on the dashboard, he realized he was holding his breath.

Without thinking, he switched on his hazard lights. The regular sound mimicked the rapid heartbeat. His head was buzzing, waves of nausea coursing through his body. He asked Anirudha to repeat the message once more.

"Guru went to eternity and entered mahasamadhi..."

Anirudha blushed. Mahasamadhi is conscious, deliberately abandoning the body, yet the Guru is immortal!

"Sorry, you're trying to tell me..." He loudly exclaimed, "That he died?"

"Yes," the voice on the other side of the Atlantic still sounded deliberate, "but remember, only on the physical plane."

Then, a bolt of lightning struck, and something stirred inside him. The tension in his body was replaced by relief. Now, he and Kshanaprabha wouldn't have to hide. The memory of the night they had spent together in a loving embrace had not yet faded. She might have had to leave to work in Geneva for that reason, but everything would be different now. After all, to whom will the zealous disciples report the violation of celibacy today? A feeling of excitement and joy washed over him.

"Japaka, did you understand me?" Anirudha interrupted his reverie.

"Y-yes, n-n-now I do," he stammered, hoping he didn't seem suspicious. "I'm shocked... How is that possible? What happened?"

"All I know is that the Guru passed on to eternity this morning at six-thirty New York time." After a moment, he added tremblingly, "Tell all the disciples in the country that this is not a case of death. The Guru has ascended to the highest state of consciousness, to mahasamadhi... In the next few hours, everyone will be told when the official farewell ceremony in New York will begin." He concluded.

Instead of a busy tone, he perceived only a whiff of silence on the phone. Divine silence!

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MARCH - NOVEMBER 1993

Chapter 1

To come out of the ignorance and illusions of this life.

"He's gone crazy!" Ivan Perger thundered through the receiver. "He's teamed up with some stupid idiots... brainwashers!"

"... I guess he'll listen to you!" Libusha jerked her head and quickly ran her gaze down the hallway. She hoped their conversation would be overheard in the next room.

With a shaky hand, she put the phone down. She felt understanding from her father-in-law for the first time in seven years of marriage. A low murmur and a mock singsong came outside her husband's studio door. She knew he was still sitting before the box he called an altar. In doing so, she stared at the photograph of the dubious Indian who supposedly ran their society.

But that one would soon disappear, she promised herself in her mind. It will fly away like all the white rags she produces in a piece. She'll throw away the candles and scented sticks, too. She's had enough of that!

She looked in the mirror by the door and adjusted her dark Mikado with her palms. Only then did she step firmly into the kitchen.

It was Saturday morning. Matej was still asleep. Outside, it looked like a beautiful sunny March Day. They could finally take a family trip to the surrounding forests of Devinska Kobyla. Or go to the Old Town for ice cream. Today, they would do everything possible to get their lives back on track. With a smile on her lips, she started to prepare breakfast.

Half an hour later, she gazed regretfully at the still-closed studio door. Although he had risen at six o'clock, he did not go out for some reason. Today, when she had made plans, they would murmur. Modeless, she dug into her roast, which had long since cooled. She felt an uncomfortable tightening in her stomach. She had a hundred urges to take the full plate she had prepared for him and throw it through the glass door. But she must keep calm. Victor's words resonated in her head as he and Matej frolicked in the kitchen the night before yesterday, "Finally, understand that I need complete calm during meditation!"

Deep breath in, deep breath out. She was determined to wait. She had to. She was glad she'd shifted some of her burden to her father-in-law today.

An hour later, he walked into the kitchen. She swallowed a comment about the white T-shirt and pants. Even so, he'd answered the same way he had for the past three months, with the bitter smile of a misunderstood seeker how she hated that yoga, meditation, or something of the sort guild! She put on a smile with the last of her strength.

"You're not hungry?"

Without answering, he dropped into the chair across from her.

She took a sip of her coffee and watched him for a moment. "I'm sure you're not going to get enough to eat from all the wailing this morning," she couldn't stand it and snapped at him.

The seeker's gaze was directed above her head. Slowly, he closed his eyes.

"Can you hear me?" Already, she felt the pressure in her stomach again.

A moment later, he bowed slightly, grabbed the teacup, and sipped from it. Only then did he look at her. "You know I need time after each meditation to digest the inner light."

She squeezed the cup hard and mentally counted to ten. His dreamy expression and absent smile irritated her even more. "Do you even notice what I'm saying?"

"The question was about chanting mantras," he was still looking somewhere over her shoulder.

"I was asking if you were starving from it."

"Sorry, I know you have good hearing. You were the best singer in Presov..."

"What are you pulling now?" She struggled to catch his gaze, though the comment about her success in the student choir pleased her.

"I'm singing falsely, but that's not important at all. It's mostly about the consciousness I'm in when I do it," he continued half-loudly.

She nodded resignedly but thought to herself.

"Um, the tea is a little cold..." He finally looked into her eyes. He frowned. Libusha's fighting stance could have bode better. "But it doesn't matter... I'm late for breakfast. I'll explain everything to you. You know I'm a seeker..."

She stood up so she wouldn't spill the rest of her coffee in his face. She turned her back to him and leaned against the kitchen counter. "I wish you were looking for something else!" She was startled by her own raised voice. She turned around. He had his eyes closed. His lips moved noiselessly. "Helloooo... do you sense us yet?" She leaned in to get within his line of sight. "We're still here, too. Me and your son!"

He slowly opened his eyes. "Of course, I sense you," he smiled. "You're my karma; I made peace with that long ago!"

"God, what kind of husband are you? Today is Saturday if that tells you anything! I hope you spend it with us and not those assholes!"

The abrupt response surprised him, but he didn't respond. He didn't want to kill time with mindless talk or aimless walks with his family. She wouldn't understand him. As always, she

would press him until he relented. Maybe today, for Matej's sake, he could make an exception. But he remembered the Guru's words.

If you have children, you can't give God enough attention. You must constantly think and take care of your offspring. It is as if you are carrying a big elephant on your shoulders.

"How can I make inner progress like this?" Inadvertently slipped out of his mouth. He felt her steady gaze on him. She could not understand it. He lowered his eyes and took the fork in his right hand. With his left, he broke the bread. He momentarily poked at the yellow eggs with some brownish bits, hesitating to put them in his mouth.

"A little bacon won't hurt you," she pulled back mildly. "Do you know how good it is? Scrambled eggs are so much tastier!" She provocatively took a bite from his plate.

He preferred not to respond. He picked chunks of meat from the dish and put them on the edge of his plate. After cleaning the eggs, he put the first portion in his mouth. Slowly, he chewed it, and then the unpleasant smell of bacon grease washed over him. He had to do his best not to swallow the eggs and spit them back onto the plate. He put down his cutlery and ate only the clean bread. He looked off into the distance again.

"Do you realize how far away you are from us? Matej keeps asking why you're not even with us one night..."

His apathy stifled another resolve in Libusha. "It's not like that..."

"Am I doing something wrong to you? What about your son? Do you have any idea how he's learning?"

"Let me explain..."

She took a deep breath to gather her courage. "Do you know what your father said when I told him you were meditating?"

He stopped chewing and snapped, "You told him?"

"He should know about it!"

"You shouldn't have." He imagined his mother now having to listen to her husband's curses about her son.

"And what do you think I should have done?"

"Dad will never understand. He's an atheist!"

"Hey? But I'm not an atheist, and I don't get it either."

His thoughts once again took him somewhere far into the ether.

"Your dad's pissed; he says you're completely out of your mind," she added triumphantly with a challenging look.

He got up judiciously, opened the fridge, and sat back down at the table, butter in hand. "I guess it was meant to be. I've been meaning to tell them everything for a long time. But first, I wanted to invite them to one of our lectures."

"Tsss, do you think they'll go? I bet they think exactly what I do about that guild of yours!"

He bit into the buttered bread. He chewed for a moment. "Speaking of which, I wanted to tell you something too..."

"Forget it; I'm not interested in your actions!"

"It's important to my progress," he continued as if she hadn't said anything. "I'll move the rest of my stuff from my bedroom to my room. I won't sleep there anymore."

It startled her. "Am I hurting you somehow?"

"No, but I can't stay in the same room with you."

"Excuse me?"

"Understand, I need to cleanse myself and eliminate the bad vibes."

"Of what? Are you bothered by my vibes? Are you normal?"

She started pacing around the kitchen. He waited silently for her to finish.

"I know it bothers you," she continued, "that I'm telling you the truth!"

He burst out laughing. He knew her, knew that she needed everything to be her way every time. Now that he'd decided something independently, she couldn't deal with it.

"So, you can't even touch me anymore because of my bad vibes?"

"Libusha, it's not about whether or not I can touch you. Understand, I'm no longer contented to live as I used to. It doesn't make me happy. I want to live differently! *I want to break free from the ignorance and illusions of this life...*"

"From illusions?" She repeated ironically. "And that's why you can't eat a piece of meat anymore..."

He sighed. How to explain this to her? A vegetarian diet played a very important role in the new life he was trying to enter. It was one of the basic rules.

When we eat meat or fish, an aggressive animal consciousness enters us. Our nerves then become restless, which can hinder our meditation.

"This is what I have decided; this is my free will!" He declared, anticipating the next lunge.

But she merely shook her head. "It's worse with you than I thought. Someone else is dictating to you how to live. Do you realize how ridiculous you are? Bacon has bad vibes, even I..."

"Yeah, you guessed it!"

"Okay, let's leave it at that. I'm willing to believe you're in a delirium right now. It'll pass you by in time," she remembered her mother-in-law's words. A college-educated man like Victor couldn't hopelessly fall for some nonsense.

She took the plate from him and finished her scrambled eggs. Then she threw the dishes in the sink until it rattled and sighed aloud. "While you're flying around in your worlds, I'm wondering every day what I'm going to cook and, more importantly, for what!"

"You're only thinking about money and food again! Do we only have to dwell on material things all the time? Don't you miss joy and happiness in your life?"

She walked over to the window and gazed out in a fighting stance. Even though it was a beautiful spring morning and people were slowly climbing out of the apartment blocks in the Long Parts, she wanted to cry. She envied them the ordinary comfort of family life. They had lived like that until recently, too.

"I know, you're an artist, and you need freedom. That's why I've never forbidden you anything. If your behavior is part of another experiment, I'll try to understand it..."

She turned away. Victor's eyes were closed, his lips moving, and he was mouthing words she didn't understand. Her hearing had gone blank.

I love my Guru; I love my Supreme: one day, one week, one month, one life.

She wondered if she should grab him by the shoulders and shake him hard. Maybe she should burn him from behind his ears so he'd finally wake up!

"Victor, stop it!" She exclaimed at last. "I don't need to know anything about your meditations, energies, and other nonsense. At least one of us needs to stay sane!"

He groaned. He opened his eyes and slowly stood up without looking at her. Libusha blocked his path and grabbed his shoulders to hug him. A memory flashed through her mind. Once upon a time, when he was preparing for his exams at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, she had regularly sat for him as a model.

"Won't they forget me?" Victor asked as he painted Libusha's portrait.

"Who?"

"That committee at the school and then... the whole world!" He laughed.

"Hmm, I don't know about that, but it's beautiful," she smiled and pressed a long kiss to his lips. He was so sweet. She had always admired and loved him. Everything he did. She knew he was very talented. The more people admired his art, the more he rose in her eyes.

Now, Libusha walked up to him. "Even though you're weird, I still love you!" She tried to squeeze him. She needed to feel his closeness, his touch, his embrace. Not to mention that they hadn't slept together in weeks. He was tired. Stupidity! Indeed, the rules of that fraternity of fanatical people were behind it.

He froze. He couldn't answer or return the woman's gesture. The presence of a stranger confused him. The full-figured figure he had so adored not so long ago seemed fat. Her dark eyes are vacant and expressionless, her mouth crooked, full of insults and venomous saliva. Until recently, he had seen in her an attractive woman; now, a hostile demon stood before him, intent on destroying his spiritual life.

"Viki, look at me!"

He reluctantly obeyed. They stared at each other for a moment. After five years of dating and seven years of marriage, they stood face to face like two strangers today.

"Your eyes... ..they're not as blue as they used to be. They're gray. I need my Viki back!"

He smiled awkwardly at her. He looked away and slowly pulled away. Finally, he went to his room. The key jangled in the lock as he closed the door behind him.

Chapter 2

Faster than the fastest progress.

He leaned his back against the door. His heart was still pounding wildly. His gaze searched the poster for a photo of a smiling, dark-skinned man in a pink satin collarless shirt. In his hand, he held a tulip. He closed his eyes for a few seconds and felt a place in the center of his chest - the spiritual heart.

"I breathe in peace; I breathe out restlessness..."

He had recently mastered this concentrative exercise in a meditation course. He was proud of himself. During the whole period, he had attended every lecture or course of their association as a disciple in Bratislava. They claimed that he would make *faster progress than the fastest in this way*.

When he had somehow calmed down, he pulled a book in Czech, Death and Reincarnation, from a folder by the window and collapsed on the bed. He wanted to read, but his mind returned to the scene during breakfast. Inwardly saying his prayers at the table didn't help. Libusha's last statement struck him. Had he changed that much? He jumped out of bed, unlocked the door, and walked quickly to the hall mirror. He tried to smile at his reflection. But it remained just a forced grin. His eyes seemed bigger and bluer than ever.

They were now grey. What a crock! He laughed inwardly.

He took a step back to better assess his appearance. Earlier, he had noticed a visible change not only in his face but in his entire figure. And it wasn't just the lost pounds he'd gotten rid of by running every day and switching to a vegetarian diet. He had read that this was how the body cleansed itself of the deposits of harmful toxins, especially the low animal vibrations of a meat diet. He looked at himself carefully once more. He saw a strange gleam in his eyes. His regular meditations certainly caused it. Was it a reflection of an inner light? He noticed it especially in the older disciples who came to Slovakia to lecture from the West. *The more you meditate, the more the light of your soul comes to the fore, guiding you safely through life.* So said the lecturer at the last course. Victor agreed with him.

He had changed. Intentionally and positively. The long brown wavy hair had been replaced by a severe buzz cut, which he had last worn when he enlisted for his compulsory military training at college.

When men wear their hair short, their dynamic qualities immediately come out. I get infinitely better vibes from them... I insist that boys have short hair.

No one he meets today would look for traces of the beard he's cultivated for more than a decade on his smooth, shaved-every-day face. Yes, he had gradually changed his appearance, habits, thinking, and whole life. Until recently, he had not known how or where to go next. Now, he had a new path before him. Such a change he sorely needed. After all, his life had consisted of an unclear career as an artist, a monotonous, almost meaningless job as an art teacher, or endless conflicts with his erratic wife. Even his eternally dissatisfied parents did not give him the necessary peace of mind. Only Matej was still able to give him joy.

And his friends, acquaintances? He had no close friends after they moved from Presov to Bratislava three years ago. In fact, he didn't even care about them. He always preferred art to social life.

More than twenty-five years had passed since a classmate in the second grade of elementary school came to him. "Can you draw a horse?"

"I'd better draw you an Indian on horseback, would you?" He replied enthusiastically. A few minutes later, he was delighted to see a beaming face when he handed his friend a paper with Vinnetou galloping on an Ilchi horse and waving a tomahawk over his head. He felt the satisfaction of a job well done. He didn't realize this until much later, however.

"You will be a famous artist one day," prophesied not only his classmates but also his teachers.

Even more than the drawings themselves, he was warmed by the attention of those around him, which the small artistic creations provoked. When a teacher at the Folk Art School selected his painting Dream for an international exhibition at twelve, he believed for the first time that he would be famous.

"Did you dream it, or is it your imagination?" the teacher prayed.

"I just made that up..."

"Good job, but if you fixed a few things, it could be even better."

He didn't understand what she was talking about. He'd never thought of his painting that way. He looked at his little creation and didn't know what he could change for the better.

"It's hard to repaint everything. You might as well mess it up. That's why it's best if you start a new drawing."

He hesitated. He considered the painting finished.

"You're up to it, Victor!"

With his head bowed, he looked under the bench. He couldn't contradict the teacher. He preferred to remain silent. But the praise flattered him. Very! But could he trust her?

What was that supposed to be? He heard his father's voice in his mind. *Such cunning. You can't do anything properly! Who did you get that from?*

"So, what are we going to do about it?" The teacher interrupted his thoughts.

Silence reigned in the classroom. He could feel the stares of his classmates on him. He shrugged his shoulders. He wanted to be away from her already.

"You know what? Here's the deal," she continued. "You don't have to repaint anything, but you'll get a book on van Gogh. When you read it, you'll see how often he had to draw the model repeatedly because neither he nor his teacher were happy with it."

Lust for Life read in one breath. The life story of the famous artist fascinated him. Although Sen never repainted, he repainted his paintings without prompting. And Vincent van Gogh became his most significant role model.

It was only a short time before he began to place in national and international competitions and exhibitions. It surprised no one except his father that he had his school exhibition at fourteen.

A rustle from the kitchen snapped Victor out of the thrall of memories. He slowly walked back to the altar, consisting of a cardboard box with a white piece of cotton cloth draped over it. The dark past was over; it was irretrievably gone. He no longer filled his inner vessel with dirt. On the contrary, *he had to keep it in pure consciousness to fill it with the Guru's light.* Only in this way could he make real progress in his life.

In the *Disciple's Guide*, he found the cultion *How to Associate with Unwanted People*. There it was in black and white. He had to move away from the hostile forces, the unclean people, of whom he became convinced in the morning his wife was one. Otherwise, she would drag him down, and he would be right back where he had always been. Unhappy and discontented.

Turn your inner view to the Guru. He alone can bring you out of the dark past and your failure.

He would love to meet that truly realized, enlightened man as soon as possible. The Guru, however, lived in New York. He knew deep down that one day, he would overcome the physical distance that separated them. But first, he must conquer his ignorance and shed the burden of the past. He was still not worthy of meeting an enlightened man. He had to work on himself.

He put the book down and reached for the vase of sunflowers on his desk. He'd picked the flowers yesterday near the apartment building when he'd been jogging. The bouquet on the altar next to the photograph looked precisely like the one his mother had placed on the kitchen table twenty years ago.

"Look what I brought from our garden," she greeted him with a smile after returning from an afternoon class at the Presov gymnasium. "They're beautiful, aren't they?"

It warmed his heart. He had been trying to capture the yellow, undying perfection modeled on his painterly idol with his hands for some time now.

Suddenly, he heard his father's voice behind his back, "Bring me some brushes and paints..."

"Old fool," his mother shook her head. "When was the last time you painted? In school? Now our children are painting..."

Victor stared at his mother in silent incomprehension, at his father, and then at the vase.

"My sons haven't surpassed me yet!"

He didn't contradict or ask Ivan for an explanation. He ran away and watched his father's efforts with his brush on the canvas for the next few days. He put down his tools. He couldn't paint with it.

But he took no notice of anyone. He worked slowly and meticulously. The jutting chin and pursed lips betrayed a concentration on a job he understood. A week later, as Victor and his younger brother Vlado sat at the table, their father pulled out his creation, "As I said, my sons have not yet surpassed me!"

His mother had just walked in with a bowl of beef broth. He silenced her with a stern look. Squinting his left eye, he pulled away and gazed expertly at the painting once more. "You mean it's no good?" Then he turned to Victor, "You still have something to learn from me!"

He knew his father expected him to acknowledge him, but he couldn't muster a word.

Vlado saved him. He sipped loudly from his soup and assessed the situation in one breath, "It's pure kitsch, Dad..." And he carelessly turned his attention back to the top-filled plate.

Dad frowned. He seemed about to say something but instead got up and marched into the living room. He took down a crystal vase from the cupboard, a wedding present from his brother, and displayed his sunflowers instead. He stepped back and looked at his creation again with fondness. "It's perfect, it fits right in!"

The painting stayed there for ten years until they moved to Bratislava. Every time he visited, my father would show the creation, saying, "Victor has his work cut out for him to reach at least that level!"

The portrait on the altar trembled. Victor resigned to the fact that for his father, he was never, nor would he ever be an extraordinary talent. But now he no longer cared.

Past is dust! Your limitations, imperfections, and darkness are now mine. I will take care of them.

All the sources of unwanted vibrations had it figured out. In spirit, he passed them on to his leader. No more evil force could emerge from the ghosts of the past to negatively affect his new life.

To fulfill his rules, he had already changed many things about himself. And he was determined to stick to his last decision. He would permanently move into his room, where he spent most of his free time. Once, for the sake of painting, he now knew how naive he had been. The art world could never satisfy him. Libusha also must come to terms with the fact that she belongs to the past. In time, perhaps she will understand and join their journey. And if not?

As if reading his mind, she suddenly appeared in the doorway. After contemplating it in front of the hallway mirror, he realized he had forgotten to lock the door.

"Tell me straight, does the Guru forbid you to sleep with women?"

The direct question took him properly by surprise. The voice of the leader echoed inside him: *In the spiritual life, you must give up sex gradually. If you want to realize God in this body, sex has no place in it.*

He searched for words to explain everything so she would finally understand. "You know, it's not so clear," he began judiciously. "If I want to make spiritual progress, I must stop this. But while I'm married, it's a gradual process..."

She fixed her dark eyes on him. The full contours of her lips turned into a thin line. "So, does that prohibit you from having sex or not?"

"It's different in my case..."

How to calm her down? He didn't want her to think of Guru as evil and hostile. Otherwise, he would have to leave her, and he didn't want to for now.

If the family is hostile to the disciple, he must choose. Either he stays ignorant of his previous life or enters the light and truth.

He swallowed. He planned to do everything he could to make Libusha and Matej accept the Guru as theirs and become part of the Centre.

"Why are you silent?" She was not to be deterred.

Embarrassment gripped him. The rules were strict but given. He had to learn to live in celibacy. He sighed. "Did you ever wonder why we live?"

Without waiting for a response, he began straightening the white tablecloth on the altar. She approached him. He preferred to close his eyes. He could feel the protective envelope of light around him, indeed sent by the Guru.

"Of course, I keep wondering why I am alive!" The unpleasant tone sent sharp arrows into his back. "Especially when I'm air for you!"

She understood nothing. He bowed his head at his own wife's haughty vanity and roundedness.

"Tell me if I'm happy!" She held up her hand. Victor waited for the blow. But she pressed her clenched fist to her lips and walked angrily back to the kitchen.

With folded arms, she stood in front of the window, the corners of her lips pointing down, her chin jutting up. He can only take! She wrinkled her brows. She cooks for him, does his laundry, irons, babysits his son...

At university, she understood he needed more time to paint. He was the boy she'd fallen in love with at first sight at the Young Artists' Circle when she was sixteen. She knew from the beginning that she needed freedom. And now she was supposed to have an understanding of some embarrassing *search*? But why can't she still understand that their life together requires more than meditation or some dubious spiritual life? Someone, after all, must bring food to the table. Someone must think about how to pay the household expenses. She didn't intend to be that "someone."