

Mitgift

There was something in the air. Whether because of the odors outside, the first heat, an electric discharge 10,000 kilometers overhead, a dash of English spleen: the air in the hall was positively buzzing. Through great lancet windows, which reached all the way to the ceiling from about three meters up the wall, early evening light flooded four long rows of hungry students. Candleholders and great round pots were spaced evenly on the wooden tables in rows roughly forty meters long — shining old silver lit from two sides. The faces shone even brighter. Gleaming cheeks and foreheads; eyes glassy, mischievous, delighted, energetically high. There was lamb with mint sauce; one of the best meals, actually, from the College kitchen (which dripped with fat and always smelled slightly rancid), but that didn't explain the air in the hall. Broccoli soft as chewing gum. I concentrated on cutting my rather tough leg of lamb; suddenly, a loud, peremptory cry from the High Table cut through the general mumbling and the clattering of silverware. At once it was quiet. I looked up just in time to see one of the Dons standing there in his long gown with gold trim, his arm raised, his index finger outstretched; I saw it in a flash — in the next row of tables, approximately level with my own seat, a bowl of mint sauce flew through the air, spinning around, and landed with a clang — viscous green flowed slowly across the table and dripped onto a white pair of trousers, green, green. A few potatoes were already there, having obviously flown before. Again the Don's cry, a deep voice, in Latin. I didn't understand a word, but everyone else seemed to know what it meant. A hellish din broke out. Everyone, absolutely everyone, picked up silverware, drummed on the wooden tables with the handles, stamped on the stone floor with their feet, a great beat, a roar, rhythmic and fast. Karen Susan stood up. For the Don's outstretched finger was still pointing at her. Karen Susan was a large woman, a rower — a butch. Karen Susan stood there in her T-shirt, her short blond hair shining like Anita's used to, then leapt up on the table. I could hardly believe it. She's crazy!

But nothing happened. No wild outcry, no outrage. On the contrary. The leap had the same effect as the Don's cry a few minutes earlier: the hall was silent at once. And more silent than before.

The Don lowered his arm and waited. Everybody waited. I didn't have the slightest idea what for. Some people were looking toward the kitchen. You could have heard a mouse run across the floor of the hall. But even the mice were sitting in their holes and waiting. In the white T-shirt on her muscular arms and firm breasts, Karen Susan stood there, in jeans, wearing athletic shoes, on the table.

"Sconsing," Lukas whispered in my ear, "s-c-o-n-s-i-n-g."

There was a creak. One side of the swinging door to the kitchen was pulled inward by an invisible hand. Out of the crack came the youngest of the scouts in a white, floor-length apron. On a silver tray he carried one of the great pots that were on all the tables. He held the tray with both hands, walking slowly, balancing it carefully, for the pot was brim-full, just like every glass in England is always brim-full, because they don't have lines to mark how full they should be.

"Bitter," Lukas whispered to me, and when I gave him an uncomprehending look: "The beer, bitter, 5 pints, in there!"

The scout stopped by Karen Susan, as if serving a pisspot to a princess. And the Don shouted again, this time in English: "Fine for throwing food in formal hall: a hundred pounds. Imposed on Karen Susan Vetch. Unless she takes the pot."

Karen Susan screamed, even before he had finished: "And she takes it!" Simultaneously, the hellish din broke out again, more excited than ever, greedier, spurring her on and on. As if they practiced screaming for an hour every day, all the students screamed: "She takes it!" Out of control. Karen Susan reached out to the scout with both hands. She looked around, turned around once on the table, turned to face the High Table, the Don stood, she stood opposite him, the silver pot, the clanging silverware, the nervous feet, the biased feet, students against Dons, men against women, Karen Susan's friends against Karen Susan's enemies. For the moment, everyone was part of everything, feet stamped of their own accord, light shot around the tables, gleaming on pots, on eyes, in zigzags of lightning. All the cooks and butlers stood in the swinging door to the kitchen, the College held its breath, and Karen Susan lifted the goblet twice as wide as her face. She drank, drank and drank, and drank and drank. And stood, without faltering, stood there drinking, Karen and Susan, with the tight T-shirt on her firm breasts, lifting, falling, her stomach pumping, her lungs pressing, her mouth sucking, her face disappearing entirely into the pot. She drank, drank, without putting it down, beer ran out the corners of her mouth, "Ka-ren, Ka-ren, go for it, go go!"; she swayed, almost let the pot fall, no, took it again, didn't stop, we banged wildly on the table, were part of the crowd, looked at each other, Lukas's eyes shone, we banged, I screamed as Karen kneeled down, the thing, the pot, she lifted it up, turned it over — it was empty! The Don looked at it and sat down.

Everything became silent.

Karen was still kneeling, on the table. She burped. Her stomach twitched. She breathed. Burped, but kept it in. She'd done it. Karen staggered, then shoulders were pushing under her, lifting her from the table, on shoulders she danced through the hall. Karen Susan, the first woman in all of Oxford to make it through this sconsing, that's what

people were already saying — "The proof of the pudding is in the cooking," somebody shouted, and slapped red-faced and sweating Karen Susan on the one thigh he could find, which was still on a shoulder. The mint lambs had died in vain, they lay cold on the plates, Karen Susan swayed and waved, nobody thought about eating, everything was a roaring and trampling, only the Dons pretended they saw and heard, smelled and suspected nothing. Lukas looked at me; for friends or enemies, men or women — it had been good, the excitement gradually died down, but its electric mini-vibrators were still hidden in each of us, warm and comfortable, they kept humming, we took each other by the hand and went straight to Lukas's room. "The proof of the pudding is in the cooking" — I smelled of grass, and Lukas smelled like he always did, but he didn't smile this time, for it was so intense and fast that he forgot to.

trsl. by A. Shields