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## TADAS

KAZYS ALMENAS\*

At this time, I think three girls are in love with me, at least that many. Of course, I am not taking Mara into account. With Mara, brother, all is over. No, after all, one must be a gentleman, one needs standards, as I always say — one must insist that a girl have something more than just beautiful legs. In fact, what sort of a great beauty is she anyway? When she laughs, she sounds almost like a horse.

I never would have liked her, never. I can see straight through such as her now, however, we met at a very bad time. I was still young then, as well as a freshman. This took place a good six months ago.

As I said, it was a bad time. Spring. Right after exams, and Graze was away. What can a man do with himself at such a time?

We went swimming with Rimka and Rūta. It was she who introduced me to Mara. In other words, here is a girl, hold her hand, be quiet and be happy. Rūta, you see, had her affairs with Rimka. Well, all right. At the time, to tell the truth, I was not kicking. The girl had lovely legs, Was evenly tanned, well put together, but ' not overdone, as is said. One could be seen with her, and not be ashamed. We spent a nice half day, splashed and shoved — in a word, as is fitting. But I did not pay much attention to Mara, a girl and no more.

The trouble started on our way back. Perhaps the sun had overheated my head, for usually I am a cool and deliberate person. Of course, I was younger then. Whatever the case, I saw her then in an entirely different way —as if I were seeing her for the first time. I remember I was surprised by the gentle appearance of her face; the hair cut short, somewhat tousled around the head, as if by accident; the lipstick, almost worn away — fine lips, so comfortably pale.

I thought it would be nice to kiss them.

The blouse was completely transparent and was trembling in the stream of air. She had put the blouse right over her bathing suit.

She raised her eyes and we exchanged glances. It seemed as if she was scolding me that it was taking so long.

The eyes were blue. Lightly blue, and bright.

"Do you know that you have blue eyes?" I said.

"I noticed. You know, that yours are green?"

"Really? That is news. In the morning, when I look in the mirror, they are red."

"Really green," she leaned closer. "Somewhat greyish green and...."

I do not remember what more she said. For me, that moment all things became totally confused. The thought struck me that I should kiss her now, but also a kind of fear, I don't know. And that second I froze. She was looking right in my eyes, as if seeing my thought and my delaying ... An uncomfortable situation. Well, I blushed. Blushed completely ... Very stupid, of course, but then I was still young. Besides, this was just after exam week. An engineering exam, brother, that's not an exam in something like French or literature. Anyone could lose his nerves. For usually, I know how to talk with girls. It's not

that hard, all one needs is style. But style was exactly what I was lacking that time. I remember, I asked her, out of nowhere, and I sounded real serious, even to myself:

"Why are you so different?"

She leaned back in her seat, smiled and did not reply, and again I felt as if I had missed it, really said the wrong thing and in the wrong way. I tried to play it off for laughs. I'm just kidding and that sort of thing, but this did not work. It was difficult and that's all.

This lasted all the way home. I could find no place for my hands and eyes, I talked nonsense, laughed without reason and out of place, and felt her sitting there all the time, her hair just blowing loose and that pale, gentle smile on her face. Only at the very end, was it any better.

Mara got out of the car.

"We'll have to get together," I said and shook her hand. I felt the wetness of my hand and hers.

"Will have to," she said without that smile and seriously.

In other words, adding everything up, things were looking up.

After she got out, I fell silent. At once. There was no reason for speaking. As if I was not feeling well. Rimka, of course, noticed this immediately. After all, usually I am not short of words.

"You can close your mouth now, she's gone," he began.

This stung me.

"Fool," I said. "So what? A girl, and that's all."

He only whistled, rolling his head foolishly. You can never really talk to him, he has no understanding of the meaning of life. I say: If he were not my best friend, I would have nothing to do with him. "What the hell," I thought, "Whistle all you want, it does not cost me a thing!" Everything will be fine with Mara, I saw clearly that it was fated that I should meet her, and meet her in the spring, when Graze was gone.

But almost at once, I decided that I had begun badly. In essence, I am a serious person, serious, calm, one who ponders about life. That is what you have to do with women. It is especially important to remain on the composed side.

At home, I tried to make my plans. "I'll not call her at all, at present," I thought. "Neither will I call tomorrow. I'll call her in a few days, by then she will have missed me sufficiently and then things will be different. I'll ask her to some dance, we'll go someplace far, away from the usual crowd."

Well, a good plan? If this were happening now, this is what I would do. But that time it was difficult. My thoughts jumped here and there and back again. What if she is waiting now? Of course, she is waiting. That's exactly why one needs composure.

Let her wait.

Well, I should have gotten drunk, or some such. But that did not come off. Stasys was out of town, and there was none to buy beer. For students, America is a cursed land. How the devil can you study engineering when they do not sell you beer? "But in any case," I said, "beer or no beer, it is totally impossible to call her."

I called her about eight.

I tried to be completely calm, as if I were calling for no reason, just out of boredom, among other things, I picked up the phone and called. Mara, of course, was very pleased, and it became easier for me. The girl was in love, I could tell that from her voice and laughter. We talked for a long time. Mara even left for a minute to get something to drink and came back. I joked about the teachers, the past year, and generally talked about various complicated topics. When I begin, I have no trouble talking, all it takes is style. Afterwards, I asked very casually what she was doing tomorrow night.

"Oh," said Mara, "I don't know. I think, practically nothing."

"Good," I said, "perhaps it would be worthwhile to go, so to speak, to a dance?" Mara, of course, quickly decided that it would be very worthwhile. I was on the point of asking to meet that very evening, but I refrained from this. "That's all" I said to myself, "after all, there are limits. From now on you will be composed and with style, as befits an engineer."

That night, for a long time, I did not fall asleep. I thought about what Graze would say. Well, that's tough. I was finished with her. A fine girl, but there was no point in dragging things out with her. Most of all, to tell the truth, I thought about Mara. Mara of the graceful legs, the light hair tousled by wind, gentle, soft lips. I was sure that they were soft. Tomorrow, I thought, I would find out. I will kiss her not only when saying goodbye at the dorm, where everyone kisses and this is almost obligatory, but even before that. And I will kiss her as is proper. But before that, I will be fully composed. That night I decided many things. Every detail. What we will talk about and how, that after the dance we will go to "Tony's," after that, across the park to the dorm. I decided everything. In essence, I am a very systematic person.

The next day I prepared very carefully. I pressed my pants, borrowed from Rimka his tie. I polished my shoes enough to please even an army sergeant. I had shaved only a few days before, but I shaved again. I smoked a cigaret.

I met her in the lobby of the girls' dorm. She came down a wide staircase in a blue dress, almost white at the waist and getting darker towards the bottom. "Yes, the dress was good, aesthetic, one might say." I told her this. Women need compliments. She lighted up like a violet and said thank you. I myself felt somewhat more at ease. I was in some ways nervous just before her coming. But everything went well afterwards. I dance very well, especially the tango. Well. With proper twists and turns, with style.

I must say: Mara became used to me quickly and, generally, somewhat fooled me. I really thought that she was a fine girl. Well, to tell the truth, I thought that she was the best. Alas, a person's brain becomes very confused at times. That evening, the girl looked nice. Real style. I remember her tilted little head, and her hair so carefully combed at first. I remember her eyes, blue and as if smiling. Gentle lips. I remember how the blue dress suited her, how it spun around and hugged her legs. Slim legs. And she danced well.

We found a table under a pink light, made ourselves comfortable and everything seemed in order. We ordered some soda: you can get nothing else at those blasted yankee dances. But alright, we drink those sodas, while Mara laughs at everything I say. In general, I talk well, and that evening I myself could hardly keep from laughing. Especially when I talked about our professor of drafting, a real card that one. In principle, according to my serious belief, engineers have no need to engage in drafting. Afterwards, I described to her how Rimka, while drunk, tried to convince some female biologist that buffaloes and salmon belong to the same gender. Well, and she kept insisting that that was not the problem. More important is the question to which gender Rimka belongs?

We conferred on such important matters, and they all seemed quite funny. That evening.

Already the orchestra was playing the last dance, and we almost felt sad. We danced slowly, romantically, and afterwards, as I had already planned, we went to "Tony's."

From the dance to "Tony's" was not far. Everyone goes to "Tony's" after a dance. Perhaps, because one must pass through the dark part of the campus. I always went there.

I remember — the evening was beautiful, romantic, one might say. Without a moon, but full of stars. We went arm in arm. Things no longer seemed so funny, but were of more melancholic cast. This too without any reason. Everything was taking place without any damned reasons.

The lights at "Tony's" were dim, with atmosphere, the music very sad, everyone seemed so serious. The place was crowded, mostly with students.

We did find a table, however, almost in the center of the cafe. The waitress immediately brought us a menu. I let Mara have the honor of choosing. "Choose," I said, "Whatever you want. For both. What is good for you, is good for me."

Mara smiled.

"We need something special tonight, a special night..."

On the very top of the page, a truly huge, photogenic hamburger was shown, with a red heart for a background. "The speciality of our hearts," it was written underneath. "Hamburger for two — 95 cents."

"Look," suggested Mara and seemed very pleased with the thought. "Both of us can eat it."

We would have drunk our coffee from a single cup, but they did not have suitably large cups. We had to order two.

We did not have to wait long, it seemed that everything that evening was going quickly.

The hamburger, almost as big as the plate, which the waitress brought, was really something to look at. The roll was also large. And in addition, some salad, cucumbers, and tomato slices. Eating this was a real ritual! I put some ketchup on, and the tomatoes on top of it (I like tomatoes), also the salad, and pressed everything down with the roll. I wanted to cut it in half.

"Let's eat this way," suggested Mara. "You take one bite, and I another..."

Carefully I lifted the whole show. Mara observed intently and it seemed that the whole cafe was doing the same thing.

And then it happened!

The meat slipped out!

I still do not understand why. Perhaps, the ketchup was too thick, or I was not holding it right.

It slipped out. Brushed against my tie, splashed on the corner of the table, fell to the ground, and rolled down the aisle, tottering lazily. It rolled for several steps, splash — turned over, and lay there steaming on the clean red floor.

Mara snorted.

Everyone turned around. A very fat student elbowed the girl sitting next to him and with his fat finger pointed at the piece of meat on the floor.

My God, I wanted to sink into the ground! My whole face became red, I felt my ears getting hot. I wanted to say something, anything. Mara broke out in a loud laughter, almost hysterical.

The fat student was also laughing. The waitress was bringing coffee to a nearby table. Carefully she stepped over the steaming meat, making a move to raise her skirts. While Mara could not stop. I wanted to kick her foot, but she only had to glance at the bun in my hand, to break out all over again.

I placed the bun on the plate. What can you do with an empty bun? Mara bent over and with her finger pointed to my blue tie. A lettuce leaf was still hanging upon the tie. That too I placed on the dish.

The waitress returned and carefully picked up the meat with a white napkin. She turned in our direction and biting her lip, stared at us, as if asking what should be done. While Mara, out of breath from laughter, kept on laughing. I was not only red, but began to turn blue.

One hell of a situation.

Mara was still laughing, and everyone was still looking at us.

At the cash register, we had to pay for the meat we had not even tasted. An old man took my money and smiled. Let him have one in the teeth, that will fix him! In the rear, the fat student was still laughing.

"Goodnight," the old man said with special courtesy.

Once outside, I finally caught my breath. I was literally trembling with rage. Mara too quieted down. I think, only from exhaustion. The girl then became agitated, tried to begin a conversation and not to hurry on the way. She even tried to apologize. But this time, I was really completely calm. I took her straight to the dorm, and left her standing at the door. Through the windows, all the girls saw that I did not kiss her.

I turned around and quietly strode off into the night.

One must maintain at least the minimum standards.

\* The story was translated with the permission of the author, from his collection *Bėgiai (The Railroad Track)*, Nida Press, London, 1965. Almenas is also the author of another collection of stories *Gyvenimas tai kekė vyšnių (Life is a Cluster of Cherries)*, 1967, and a long novel, *Upė į rytus, upė į šiaurę, (River to the East, River to the North)*, 1964. Kazys Almenas was born in Lithuania in 1935. He attended the University of Nebraska and Northwestern University. Between 1965 and 1967, he studied at the University of Warsaw and received a doctorate in physics. Almenas is currently teaching at the University of Maryland.