

ALL MY DANCING SEASONS

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## Chapter 1

I had reached the age when men are hinted at—sometimes indirectly, but more often directly, and by some particularly sincere individuals even quite sharply—that they should get married. Most people looked at me as if I were strange. Some, even among this majority, envied me. They said, you've had enough fun, so now get married, after all, why should you have it better than us?

It is the age when men begin to be called old bachelors. Not that I was too old; I was thirty-five. And as I discovered from studying marriage certificates dating back several centuries, most of my male ancestors, with the exception of a few extremists, married many years later. Today, however, times are different. Being single is considered a rare rarity, girls marry very young, and therefore it is advisable to think about marriage early on.

In order to get married, it is important for an old bachelor, just as it is for a young bachelor—there is no difference between them—to find a suitable woman, or even better, a girl. There are many opportunities to meet someone. The situation is somewhat more difficult in the winter months, when it is dark almost all day and, on top of that, very cold. Girls are few and far between on the streets, and approaching them seems suspicious. It is also difficult to tell whether a girl is pretty or ugly, young or more mature, or perhaps already a pensioner. Therefore, it seems most appropriate to take advantage of the current ball season. There is plenty of light at balls, the girls are dressed in attractive dresses that emphasize or conceal

certain parts of their bodies, adorned with jewelry, beautified by hairdressers and the most sophisticated products of the chemical industry. In addition, some of them usually consume alcoholic beverages and are then favorably inclined to socialize. It was a brilliant idea of our ancestors to come up with this kind of noble entertainment for these inhospitable winter months.

It's not that I was particularly influenced by the opinions or snide remarks of others, but I myself wanted to meet girls to pass the long evenings. So I decided to attend one of the nearest balls. Inexperienced in this area, I spent several days looking at posters until my eyes fell on one announcing a student ball at Lucerna in Prague. The older a bachelor is, the more interested he usually is in younger girls. So I hurried to the ticket office to buy a standing ticket.

I waited impatiently for the day of the ball. I was worried about dancing, because the last time I danced was when I was fifteen at a dance class. Even then, however, I diligently attended dance classes, preferring to drink beer with my friends rather than sweat in the hall in a battle with dance-loving and often clumsy girls. I expected the biggest problem to be the combination of movement and music, because I had suffered from absolute deafness since my youth, and my relatively decent school report cards were usually spoiled by my singing grade, depending on the strictness of the teacher. Recognizing what kind of dance they were actually playing was usually beyond my capabilities.

Finally, the big day arrived. On my way to Wenceslas Square, Prague's main street, I met lots of girls in long dresses on their way

to the ball. The closer I got to Prague's Lucerna, the more girls I saw. I arrived at eight o'clock sharp. I pushed my way through the crowd at the entrance and slowly walked down the stairs. The hall was really packed to the rafters. At the cloakroom, I joined a long queue that wasn't moving. Crowds were pushing in from all sides, and they were getting bigger and bigger. The opposing pressures meant that I was still standing in the same place. After a long time, and considerably sweaty, I finally managed to store my coat, even though I had already given up hope.

Not having a ticket for any table, I walked around the balconies and only on the ground floor did the bar counter catch my attention. The atmosphere in the hall—perhaps because I was alone—seemed strange, even hostile. I told myself that it would take some time to adapt to it. I felt uncomfortable and thought the bar would be the best place to acclimatize. I lit a cigarette and ordered two deciliters of wine. I admired the dancers who threw themselves into dances that were unfamiliar to me and, from my point of view, very complicated. I regretted what I had missed in my youth. As I was sipping my second glass, someone tapped me on the shoulder.

"Hello," came a voice behind me.

I turned around and saw one of my former colleagues, who was even older than me. He had two other friends with him whom I didn't know.

"What are you doing here?" he said.

"But I also went to see the company," I replied in surprise.

"Did someone invite you here?" they asked.

"No, I'm here all by myself."

"How many balls have you been to today?"

I was surprised by their question. When I replied that it was my first, all three of them were surprised.

"We've already been to the Municipal House, and after midnight we're going to the Park of Culture."

"How did you get here?" they asked.

This time, I didn't understand their question. And when I replied that I had bought a ticket in advance, they were even more surprised.

"How many phones do you have?" they asked.

Again, I didn't understand their question. "What phones?"

Their amazement continued to grow. "You must have some special method," said Kaderka. "Let's go for a walk. You don't know each other. This is Jarda Faltejsek, and this is Endre Toth," he said, introducing his two friends to me.

I shook both their hands, finished my drink, and followed them. We walked through the ground floor as well as the first and second balconies. The low ceilings and numerous marble columns, balconies, galleries, boxes, and bars, illuminated by rows of light bulbs, create a special atmosphere, reminiscent of an old giant theater, and make you want to walk around and discover what is hidden behind each column, in each box, on each balcony, at each

table, at each bar, in each corridor, and on each staircase. You always meet someone you haven't seen before. The impression is enhanced by the polished marble and the alternating dim light and bright light, spotlights and darkness. It reminded me a little, on a smaller scale, of Catherine I's ballroom in Pushkin, where gold, marble, and mirrors were enhanced by the lighting of up to seven hundred candles at once. While walking through, you can stop, lean on the railing, and observe the entire hall. The undulating mass of bodies, like a mixture of nudity, and carpets of all colors, shades, and combinations, spreading in all directions, at times erupting into trance, fanaticism, a kind of loss of consciousness, ecstasy from the reality of everyday life, makes a powerful impression. One can then feel like a captain on the bridge of a ship in a stormy sea, overlooking the surrounding ships and determining the course of the voyage and the attack.

We met a lot of beautiful young girls, blondes, redheads, brunettes, with milky translucent and bronze skin, slim and full-figured, tall and short, wearing dresses of all lengths, colors, and styles.

Kaderka approached several of them walking cheerfully towards us and chatted with them for a while. Then he suggested that we sit down at the bar on the first balcony near the ladies' restroom. "This is the best place in the whole Lucerna," he said, "it has the best view and everyone has to pass by here."

"Plus, we can sit here," added Faltejsek, whispering to me that this spot is called Kaderka's place. He then urged me, as the

newcomer, to go get a bottle of wine.

"Well, that's enough, you won't be drinking beer anymore," Kaderka told him, then turned to me and explained: "He always drinks beer, then he sweats, and when he sees a girl he likes, he has to go to the bathroom, and then he's sleepy and doesn't pick up girls. He can't fully understand the advantages of wine as a drink particularly suitable for balls and picking up girls, which aids in philosophizing and ignites spark and wit.

"Well, you're probably right," said Faltejsek, "but nowhere else is thirst as beautiful as it is with beer." Then he thought for a moment and advised me: "Go to the bar on the right, they have Rhine Riesling there, and get two sodas to go with it."

I brought a bottle and sodas, which cost almost as much as the wine. Faltejsek immediately grabbed them and poured us full glasses. This angered Kaderka, who insisted that the wine should be left in an open bottle for a few minutes before pouring and not poured to the brim: "We're sitting here in a nice setting and a pleasant atmosphere, and the wine has to absorb that, and in turn, we have to absorb it when we drink it. And you're ruining it."

Faltejsek apologized that he could no longer stand the thirst, raised his glass, and clinked glasses with us. Finally, we drank, lit up, and watched the girls flowing by.

Kaderka, although he was around forty, looked older. He had a growing belly, a chubby face, a small bald spot on his head, and his

hair was turning gray. He was wearing a dark, elegant suit with a bow tie.

Endre Toth was also in his forties, but he looked younger. He was shorter and thinner, with a suave demeanor, also wearing a bow tie and black suit.

Faltejsek was a little younger, with black hair, a beard, and a slim, athletic build. He would probably have been good at soccer, because he had beautifully shaped legs. Toth joked that he had grown a beard so that Faltejsek's neighbor wouldn't notice how much his son looked like him.

Kaderka urged me in a fatherly way: "Show me which one you like, and I'll go get her."

So I looked very carefully to choose the best one. After a while, I pointed to one who was walking by with a friend. Kaderka quickly ran out, stopped them on the stairs, and said something to them. After a while, however, he returned alone. "Some guys are waiting for them around the corner," he said, adding, "It wasn't great up close. I'll bring some others."

We continued to sit, smoke, and drink. Kaderka would always run after some girls, sometimes bringing them to the table, and we would chat with them for a while. Then Kaderka would write down their phone numbers and let them go. This happened several times.

Once again, he ran out quickly and brought back a young girl with slightly thicker and even slightly hairy legs, which I, like most men, don't like. However, she was extremely exciting in the upper

part of her body. Perhaps it was her beautiful blonde hair and the slightly immodest look in her large brown eyes that made her so attractive. She was wearing a perfectly tailored dress made of fine white damask, which accentuated her bust. Her upper eyelids were shaded with saffron yellow, and beneath them was fiery red lipstick.

He sat her down at our table. She was a third-year student at the University of Economics. Toth, who taught accounting, immediately offered his services. However, she had already taken her exam. Someone pointed out that her name—she was called Andrea—was not suitable for accounting. Kaderka replied that he did not choose a wife based on her name.

"Then what do you choose them by?" she asked tensely.

"According to the strength of personality. According to how it affects a person, how a person enjoys it, how it charms them, what mutual sympathy is created, there simply has to be mutual spark. It doesn't even matter about beauty or physical proportions, but about the effects it evokes."

Then he asked if she could fall in love with an older man who is a little gray, intelligent, talkative, and knowledgeable.

"Yes, I could," she replied, almost dreamily, blushing a little. After a moment, she added, "But there are few like that; few people have those qualities."

I reminded her that Kaderka is far from being an older man, yet he has those qualities. She looked down at the ground.

After a moment, Kaderka continued: "It's a pity I'm not three years younger, I'd like to live with you for a day, a month, a year, or even a whole lifetime."

" But you're not three years younger," she replied quickly, seemingly with a sense of relief.

Kaderka added a story about Zeus arguing with Hera about whether it was better to be a man or a woman. They called someone who was both a man and a woman and could therefore compare the two. And he thanked the gods for turning him into a woman between the ages of seventeen and twenty-four and then back into a man again. He confirmed that the years between seventeen and twenty-four are the most beautiful for a woman. During this period, she lives very intensely, is fawned over, adorned, and showered with gifts, while a man lives extensively, flitting from flower to flower, seeking their favor. However, a woman's life is only beautiful for those seven years, then it ends and worries begin. Unlike women, men are never old.

"Well, I haven't heard that story before," she said, looking surprised. "If I remember correctly from history, there really was a man who was both a man and a woman, what was his name?" she thought for a moment and continued, "I think it was Teiresias or something like that. Zeus and Hera summoned him and asked him whether men or women derive greater pleasure from lovemaking. He replied—and I remember this because it surprised me quite a bit—that women derive greater pleasure, nine-tenths of it, while men derive only one-tenth of that pleasure."

"Does that really surprise you? With age, you will find that this is indeed the case. But I see that you are not only beautiful, but also intelligent. And that is truly a rarity, it is rarely the case. Either a girl is beautiful and not very intelligent, or vice versa. That's just how nature has fairly arranged it. But you are truly a gem," Kaderka looked at her admiringly. "Although, on the other hand, they say that in almost every woman we can find some opinion or wisdom that some witty lover has left behind. Then he took a drink and continued: "Andrea, I would like to write you a letter. Would you like me to write it to you?"

"Yes, that could be interesting," she whispered.

"I would write to you: If I were as wise as King Solomon, I would write a poem about you even more beautiful than he wrote about his Sulamith. You know, I never understood the poet when he spoke of perfection, but now I know that it was a confession of his wonderful being: a WOMAN like YOU. You approached me from the horizon of Prague's Lucerna to fulfill my old dreams with your presence. I believe that one day you will come to my words as a beautiful and pure woman comes. I love you so much and believe in you, Mirek."

"Well, you're good, did you prepare that in advance?"

"No, it was your beauty that inspired me. If you don't mind and allow me, I would love to toast to it with you, and since we don't have anything to drink here anymore, we can do it at the bar."

The girl just shrugged. Then they got up and left.

"Well, she was pretty good," said Faltejsek, "but I have to tell you that she has a dark past."

"How so?"

"She used to be a brunette."

We smiled, and Faltejsek continued: "But there really is nothing left to drink. Endré, go get a bottle."

"I have my car here, I can't drink," replied Endre.

"But that doesn't matter, we have to have some wine for the girls. Kaderka will bring something, or I'll go get something."

Endre was reluctant, but then resigned himself: "Well, but you really have to bring some girls, I'm very curious."

He returned with a bottle shortly thereafter. Faltejsek immediately took hold of it and began pouring according to Kaderka's recipe. When we had a drink after a while, he pointed to a girl sitting nearby: "Go dance with her!"

"The dance floor is still empty, I can't dare to do that, I would stand out too much with my lack of dancing skills," I objected, "only when the dance floor is full would I get lost in the crowd."

"Yeah, but by then all the pretty girls will be taken," they told me. "That's how it is, if you want a pretty girl, you have to go dance quickly. The longer the music plays, the more the less pretty girls remain seated. It's a very simple rule."

And they were right. The one Faltejsek was showing me had already been asked to dance by someone else.

"I'll probably have to study some literature on dancing so I can get on the dance floor earlier," I remarked. "What about you, aren't you going to dance?"

"It depends on the situation," said Faltejsek, "sometimes it's better to chat up girls in the hallway. You exchange a few words with her and see how it goes. Now the music plays for a long time without a break, maybe an hour, and it's really loud. There's a terrible racket on the dance floor, you can't even have a proper conversation or hold her close because you're dancing maybe two meters apart. And when you realize she's a bitch, you don't even know how to get rid of her because the music never stops. You have to make excuses that you have to go to the bathroom or somewhere else."

"And sometimes even that doesn't help," said Endre, "one girl told me she would come with me and wait for me. Then she hung on me as if she had come with me, and I didn't know how to get rid of her."

After a while, Kaderka returned, saying that the girl had already left because she had to be home early. "When I helped her put on her boots, she was trembling all over," he said. "I talked to her the whole time, going from Nietzsche to Freud. She was completely blown away."

"How old was she?" we asked.

"Twenty-one. I told her I was thirty-five," he laughed and continued: "You know, you have to fool girls somehow, and all means are good for that. Like Don Juan or Casanova, they used all kinds of

tricks and intrigues, pretense and deceit, flattery and false promises. They said that Don Juan did it because he had low self-esteem. We have high self-esteem. But sometimes it's good to boost it even more. Like athletes, footballers, or tennis players, or I don't know who else, sometimes blame their failures on a lack of self-esteem. And they have a lot of psychologists. We don't have any psychologists, but in order to pick up beautiful girls and be successful with them, we need to have enough self-confidence. And nothing boosts it like a pretty young girl."

Faltejsek poured him some wine and Kaderka continued: "You need to have what is now often referred to as a professional approach, as in everything you want to be successful at, including picking up girls. And an important aspect of this approach is self-confidence. Being more daring, using various tricks, is a sign of healthy confidence in your own abilities. I say healthy because you mustn't overdo it. You can't be overly arrogant, girls don't like that, but of course you can't be unhealthily insecure either. Sometimes it's good to practice picking up girls at a dance where there's nothing that particularly interests us. This is so that we can develop the right style, hone our conversation skills, or even practice dancing. Just as an athlete or artist cannot perform well without training or long-term practice, the same applies to pick-up artists. They have to gain confidence so that when they chat up exclusive women such as actresses, announcers, ballerinas, and models, they don't fall to their knees.

We toasted the success of our business. Kaderka opened up and apparently enjoyed giving me fatherly advice: "And it's good to prepare some rhymes. Something from history. Maybe ancient Rome or Greece. That's what Spinka does. You don't know him, but if you go to balls, you'll definitely meet him. Well, he's very old, and back then they taught it over and over again in school, so it's still school knowledge for him, and then you have to take action. Women like that. I recently read somewhere what women like most about men. It was some old research, probably from the 1930s, but it's generally valid. It said that women find the most appeal in a man's social courage, independence, ability to act, enterprise, and energy. And you have the perfect opportunity to show that at a ball. In how you approach her, how you talk to her, what you tell her. If you show courage and wit, you will win her over and she will remember it for a long time. Intelligence comes second and physical appearance third. You know, it takes inspiration and motivation. I need a woman to have a nice butt and teeth like a horse, and perky breasts. Then all the nonsense in the world comes to mind. Sometimes I'm too aggressive, which puts some people off.

"Look, there's Bláha," Faltejsek called out, "he's picked up a pretty girl here." Faltejsek introduced us. Bláha was over forty, tall and slim, with an athletic build. He was wearing a blue velvet dress, a blue shirt with a bow tie, and a red bow tie. The girl next to him was cute, slim, dark, and looked to be around eighteen. We chatted for a while, and then Bláha excused himself to go dancing.

"He's a famous songwriter, he often goes to balls," said Faltejsek.

"But it annoys me," said Kaderka, "when I call him to tell him there's a ball, he always says he's busy—as if we weren't busy enough—that he has to go to the radio station, the TV station, Supraphon, Barrandov, and who knows where else."

"We haven't seen him today," said Endre.

"Well, he always does that when he picks up a girl. Maybe he's afraid we'll steal her away from him. He goes with her to the other balcony in the corner, and when we happen to walk by, he acts like he's never seen us before," said Faltejsek, finishing his drink in one gulp and turning to Kaderka: "Go get a bottle!"

"Man, you drink like water. That's not how you drink wine," Kaderka protested. "You have to smell it, stir it, watch it, roll it around."

"Yeah, but in this sauna, I'm terribly thirsty. Havel and Bechyně made Lucerna for fifteen hundred people, and today there will be three or four thousand here. Go get it and I'll bring some girls," said Faltejsek.

"I'm very curious about those girls," Kaderka retorted and got up, "so you don't say I didn't bring the bottle."

"You go to balls often, don't you?" I asked.

"Well, what else can we do?" said Toth, "it's better than watching TV at home. At least you get to see pretty girls here. But

I'm getting tired of it. Once I get married, I'll never go to a ball again for the rest of my life."

"Well, I do," said Faltejsek, "I really like it here. Sitting in a pub watching old drunks is no fun, it's better to be here."

"But it must cost a lot of money to go to balls so often," I objected.

"Well, you know, it costs something," he said, pointing towards the bar, "I've left at least one favorite here. "It's fun and we have to get married eventually, so what can you do. But we don't buy tickets. Today, a ticket to the ball costs a lot of money, we have a few drinks and sometimes we go to more than one ball in an evening, even several times a week. We couldn't afford that. We always manage to get in somehow, either for free or by slipping him something. The best thing is to start running and walk confidently, so that before the ticket collector can react, you're already gone."

At that moment, Kaderka returned with a bottle of wine and a girl. She was a little overweight, and I didn't like her very much. Kaderka introduced her to me, the others already knew her, and he sat her down at our table. Faltejsek kept telling her that I would dance with her. But I didn't feel like it, so I always made some excuse. After a while, she left.

"I'll give you her phone number and you can call her," said Kaderka. "But don't just call her, you have to say you have tickets to the theater."

"She's nothing special, there's nothing sexy about her," I objected.

"You're too picky," Kaderka replied indignantly.

Toth agreed with Kaderka: "With girls, you sometimes have to look beyond the external effects and focus on the basics. She can always improve her appearance by dressing well, wearing makeup, and getting her hair done by a skilled hairdresser. And if she starts exercising a little, she'll improve her figure too. But what will do the most is a regular sex life, which will improve her fundamentally. The art is in finding an average girl and then improving her. Directors also choose movie stars from ordinary girls. I remember a number of girls who went to dances and were interested in us. We didn't think much of them, we weren't really interested in them, but in a few years they became real hotties. You'd be surprised. Faltejsek went on a date with one such girl, whom I knew more as just average. You don't know him very well yet, but when Faltejsek goes on a date, he always takes a friend with him. I don't know why he does that, maybe he's afraid he can't handle it on his own. He made a date with her for nine o'clock in the evening in front of Krone. He told me: be upstairs at half past eight—there's a little wine bar there—and hold the spot. Just in case I don't make it, which could happen, I don't know how it will turn out. So go downstairs at nine o'clock, she'll be standing there, take her upstairs. He's always late. He's always late. Of course, it happened again this time. So I went down there and saw some super chick standing there, rushing towards me. I didn't know who she was, I couldn't recognize her at all, she had improved

so much. We went upstairs and had a drink. I apologized for Faltejsek being late. He arrived a moment later. "Oh, it's you," she said disappointedly. "I thought you were the one who called me," she turned to me. "I thought it was strange that you were still talking about someone."

Faltejsek smiled and emptied the glass he had poured himself a moment ago. "Pass the wine," he said to me and poured himself another glass. "That one's nice," he said, pointing to a black-haired woman, "go dance with her."

I didn't really feel like dancing, and besides, she was too dark for my taste.

"I'll go get her," said Endre. He went after her, but returned a moment later. "Do you know what she said to me?"

"No," we replied.

"How do you know?"

"You're such a joker, but it was good, wasn't it? She smiled nicely."

"Yes, you could really say she was smiling under her breath."

"Some people like it when women have beards."

"Well, but there aren't many of them."

Faltejsek finished his glass and poured himself another, then stopped: "This is a good one, go get her."

We looked in the direction he was looking. She was really very beautiful. She had unusually large breasts, which immediately

caught our attention. She was rather petite, a little plump, with black hair. However, the overall impression was enchanting. She was charming and cute. Her youth completed the picture. Even though it was obvious that in a few years her beauty would be gone, that this delightful creature would probably be transformed into a shapeless ball.

"Leave it to me," said Kaderka. He ran his hand through his thinning hair and stood up. He said something to her, gesturing broadly with his hands, and after a moment he brought her over with a smile.

He pulled up a chair for her and introduced us. He looked admiringly at the upper part of her body.

"Ah, you like my necklace and the anchor on it, don't you?"

"Yes, the anchor, but even more so the harbor."

She smiled at that.

"You are beautiful, charming, you have beautiful eyes and you look intelligent. Won't you be my wife?"

"No—you want to get married. I thought that men your age only want one thing from us, always the same thing!"

"But not always the same thing from the same person. Wouldn't you like to marry me?"

"No, I wouldn't."

"Why?"

"You said I look intelligent. And I think I'm not just looking intelligent."

"Okay, you win. You're funny too. I love you."

"But, sir..."

"Please be quiet," Kaderka interrupted her. "I should know better!"

"You're not trying to tell me that I'm the first girl you've ever loved. I don't believe that."

"Well, at least you're the first one who doesn't believe it."

"Did they all really believe it?"

"Well, I don't know. Don't you want to get married?"

"Why should I trade the attention of many men for the inattention of one? But you know, I've been secretly engaged twice."

"That's nothing, I knew one who had been secretly on her honeymoon three times. But you know what, if you don't want to marry me, at least come and see my butterfly collection."

"I already paid for that once, one of them dragged me into his apartment."

"Oh, he didn't have one and..."

"Nonsense, he did have one."

Kaderka smiled and thought for a moment.

"What are you thinking about?"