

CAGING

CHRISTINE LEUNENS



SKIES



Table of Contents

- [Title Page](#)
- [About the Author](#)
- [Copyright Page](#)
- [Acknowledgements](#)
- [Dedication](#)
- [Part I](#)
 - [Preface](#)
 - [Chapter i](#)
 - [Chapter ii](#)
 - [Chapter iii](#)
 - [Chapter iv](#)
 - [Chapter v](#)
 - [Chapter vi](#)
 - [Chapter vii](#)
 - [Chapter viii](#)
- [Part II](#)
 - [Chapter ix](#)
 - [Chapter x](#)
 - [Chapter xi](#)
 - [Chapter xii](#)
 - [Chapter xiii](#)
 - [Chapter xiv](#)
 - [Chapter xv](#)
 - [Chapter xvi](#)
 - [Chapter xvii](#)
- [Part III](#)
 - [Chapter xviii](#)
 - [Chapter xix](#)
 - [Chapter xx](#)

- [Chapter xxi](#)
- [Chapter xxii](#)
- [Part IV](#)
 - [Chapter xxiii](#)
 - [Chapter xxiv](#)
 - [Chapter xxv](#)
 - [Chapter xxvi](#)
- [Part V](#)
 - [Chapter xxvii](#)
 - [Chapter xxviii](#)
 - [Chapter xxix](#)
 - [Chapter xxx](#)
 - [Chapter xxxi](#)

Caging Skies

Christine Leunens

v

Christine Leunens has a Belgian father and an Italian mother. Born in Hartford, Connecticut, she moved to France at a young age and became a top international model — the face of Givenchy, Paco Rabanne, Nina Ricci, Mercedes Benz and House of Fraser. She has a Master's Degree in English and American Literature and Language from Harvard University. Her first novel, *Primordial Soup* (1999), published in the UK, was described by the *Sunday Times* as 'a remarkable debut novel'. An earlier version of *Caging Skies* has been published in Spanish, Catalan, Italian and French, and the latter edition was shortlisted for both the Prix Médicis and the Prix FNAC. Christine and her family now live in New Zealand, where she is working on her third novel.

This eBook is copyright material and must not be copied, reproduced, transferred, distributed, leased, licensed or publicly performed or used in any way except as specifically permitted in writing by the publishers, as allowed under the terms and conditions under which it was purchased or as strictly permitted by applicable copyright law. Any unauthorised distribution or use of this text may be a direct infringement of the author's and publisher's rights and those responsible may be liable in law accordingly.

ISBN 978 1869792299

Version 1.0

www.randomhouse.co.uk

National Library of New Zealand Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Leunens, Christine.

Caging skies / Christine Leunens.

ISBN: 978 1869792299

Version 1.0

I. Title.

NZ823.3—dc 22

A VINTAGE BOOK

published by

Random House New Zealand

18 Poland Road, Glenfield, Auckland, New Zealand

www.randomhouse.co.nz

Random House International

Random House

20 Vauxhall Bridge Road

London, SW1V 2SA

United Kingdom

Random House Australia (Pty) Ltd

20 Alfred Street, Milsons Point, Sydney

New South Wales 2061, Australia

Random House South Africa Pty Ltd

Isle of Houghton

Corner Boundary Road and Carse O'Gowrie

Houghton 2198, South Africa

Random House Publishers India Private Ltd

301 World Trade Tower, Hotel Intercontinental Grand Complex

Barakhamba Lane, New Delhi 110 001, India

First published in English 2008

© 2008 Christine Leunens

The moral rights of the author have been asserted

This electronic book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

Design: Elin Bruhn Termansen

Cover photo: gettyimages

Cover design: Clint Hutzulak, Mutasis Creative

Author photograph: Tanguy de Montesson

Acknowledgements

For research material, my gratitude remains with Axel de Maupeou d'Ableiges, Florence Faribault and Carole Lechartier from the Memorial Museum for Peace in Caen, France; the late Simon Wiesenthal and the Simon Wiesenthal Center, Vienna; Paul Schneider from the Foundation of the Memory of the Deportation; Georg Spitaler and Dr Ursula Schwarz from the DÖW (Foundation of Austrian Resistance Documents Archives); Eva Blimlinger from the Historical Commission, Vienna; Jutta Perisson from the Austrian Cultural Forum in Paris; Dr James L. Kugel from the Harvard University Faculty of Divinity; Vera Sturman and Elisabeth Gort from RZB Austria; as well as Anneliese Michaelsen, Amélie d'Aboville, Dr Antonio Buti, Monique Findley, Dr France Grenaudier-Klijn, the late Dr Morris Weinberg, Andreas Preleuthner and his father, the late Johannes Preleuthner. I am much indebted to Harriet Allan for her critical insight, and to Rachel Scott and Claire Gummer for their editing suggestions. For their faith in the long adventure from first draft on, I wish to offer my affectionate thanks to Laura Susijn and Berta Noy.

To my husband, Axel

Part I

The great danger of lying is not that lies are untruths, and thus unreal, but that they become real in other people's minds. They escape the liar's grip like seeds let loose in the wind, sprouting a life of their own in the least expected places, until one day the liar finds himself contemplating a lonely but nonetheless healthy tree, grown off the side of a barren cliff. It has the capacity to sadden him as much as it does to amaze. How could that tree have got there? How does it manage to live? It is extraordinarily beautiful in its loneliness, built on a barren untruth, yet green and very much alive.

Many years have passed since I sowed the lies, and thus lives, of which I am speaking. Yet more than ever, I shall have to sort the branches out carefully, determine which ones stemmed from truth, which from falsehood. Will it be possible to saw off the misleading branches without mutilating the tree beyond hope? Perhaps I should rather uproot the tree, replant it in flat, fertile soil. But the risk is great. My tree has adapted in a hundred and one ways to its untruth, learned to bend with the wind, live with little water. It leans so far it is horizontal, a green enigma halfway up and perpendicular to a tall, lifeless cliff. Yet it is not lying on the ground, its leaves rotting in dew as it would if I replanted it. Curved trunks cannot stand up, any more than I can straighten my posture to return to my twenty-year-old self. A milder environment, after so long a harsh one, would surely prove fatal.

I have found the solution. If I simply tell the truth, the cliff will erode chip by chip, stone by stone. And the destiny of my tree? I hold my fist to the sky and let loose my prayers. Wherever they go, I hope my tree will land there.

i

I was born in Vienna on March 25 1927, Johannes Ewald Detlef Betzler, a fat, bald baby boy from what I saw in my mother's photo albums. Going through the pages, it was always fun guessing from the arms alone if it was my father, mother or sister holding me. It seems I was like most babies: I smiled with all my gums, took great interest in my little feet, wore prune jam more than I ate it. I loved a pink kangaroo twice my size that I troubled to drag around, didn't love the cigar someone stuck in my mouth, or so I conclude because I was crying.

I was as close to my grandparents as to my parents — that is, my father's parents. I never met my grandparents on my mother's side, Oma and Opa. They were from Salzburg and were buried in an avalanche before I was born. Oma and Opa were great hikers and cross-country skiers. It was said that Opa could recognise a bird from its song alone, and a tree from the sound of its leaves moving in the wind, without opening his eyes. My father also swore that Opa could, so I know my mother wasn't exaggerating. Every kind of tree had its own particular whisper, he said Opa once told him. My mother talked about her parents enough for me to grow to know and love them well. They were somewhere with God, watching me from above, protecting me. No monster could hide under my bed and grab my legs if I had to go to the toilet in the middle of the night, nor could a murderer tiptoe up to me as I slept to stab me in the heart.

We called my grandfather on my father's side Pimbo, and my grandmother Pimmi, then added on the suffix '*chen*', which signifies 'dear little' in German. These were names my sister made up when she was little. Pimbo first set eyes on Pimmichen at a ball, one of the typical fancy Viennese ones where she was waltzing with her handsome fiancé in uniform. The fiancé went to get some *Sekt* and my grandfather followed to tell him how beautiful his future wife was. He was told he was her brother, after which Pimbo didn't let him in for another dance. Great Uncle Eggert sat twiddling his thumbs because, compared with his sister, all the other

ladies were plain. When the three of them were leaving, my grandfather led the others to the Benz motorwagon parked just behind the carriages. Resting his arm on the back of the open seat as though he were the owner, he then looked up at the sky dreamily and said, 'A pity there's only room for two. It's such a nice evening, why don't we walk instead?'

Pimmichen was courted by two fine matches in Vienna society, but married my grandfather thinking he was the most handsome, witty, charming of all, and wealthy enough. Only the latter he wasn't. He was in truth what even the bourgeoisie would call poor as a churchmouse, especially after the expenses he suffered taking her to the finest restaurants and opera houses in the months prior to their marriage, compliments of a bank loan. But this was only a white lie, because a week before he'd met her he'd opened with the same bank loan a small factory that produced irons and ironing boards, and he became wealthy enough after some years of hard work. Pimmichen liked to tell us how lobster and champagne transformed to sardines and tap water the day after their wedding.

Ute, my sister, died of diabetes when she was four days short of twelve. I wasn't allowed to go in her room when she was giving herself her insulin shots. One time, hearing my mother tell her to use her thigh if her abdomen was sore, I disobeyed, caught her with her green *Tracht* pulled up past her stomach. She forgot to give herself her shot once when she came back from school. My mother asked if she had, and she said *Ja, ja*, but with the endless shots her response had grown into more of a refrain than a confirmation.

Sadly, I remember her violin more than I do her, the glazed back with ribbed markings, the pine smell of the resin she rubbed on the bow, the cloud it made as she began to play. Sometimes she let me try, but I wasn't allowed to touch the horse hairs, that would make them turn black, or tighten the bow like she did, or it could snap, or turn the pegs, because a string could break, and I was too little to take all that into account. If I was lucky enough to get as far as drawing the bow across the strings to emit a noise that delighted only me, I could count on her and her pretty friend bursting into laughter and my mother calling me to help her with some chore she couldn't manage without her brave four-year-old. 'Johannes!' I

gave it a last try but could never move the bow straight the way Ute showed me; it ended up touching the bridge, the wall, someone's eye. The violin was wrenched from my hands and I was escorted out the door, despite my enraged wailing. I remember the pats on the head I got before Ute and her friend, in a fit of giggles, shut the door and resumed their practice session.

The same photographs of my sister stood on the side-table of our living room until one by one, with the passing years, most of my memories were absorbed into these poses. It became hard for me to make them move or live or do much other than smile sweetly and unknowing through the peripeteias of my life.

Pimbo died of diabetes less than two years after Ute, at the age of sixty-seven. He had never been, to his knowledge, diabetic. When he was recuperating from pneumonia the disease had arisen from a dormant state. His sorrow was incurable; he felt he was the cause of my sister's death by having passed it on to her. My parents said he let himself die. We took Pimmichen in a month after. She was against the idea because she felt that she would be intruding on us, but she didn't want to die like Pimbo in hospital. She reassured my parents at breakfast every morning that she wouldn't bother them long. This didn't reassure them or me — none of us wanted her to die. Every year was to be Pimmichen's last, and every Christmas, Easter, birthday my father would lift his glass in the air, blinking his moist eyes, and say that this might be the last year we were all together to celebrate this occasion. Instead of believing more in her longevity as the years went by, we strangely believed in it less and less.

Our house, one of the older, stately ones painted that *Schönbrunner* Yellow common in Austria, was in the sixteenth district, called Ottakring, on the western outskirts of Vienna. Even though it was within the city limits we were partially surrounded by forests, Schottenwald and Gemeindewald, and partially by grassy fields. When we came home from central Vienna it always felt as if we lived in the countryside rather than a capital city. This said, Ottakring was not considered one of the best districts to live in; on the contrary, it was, with Hernals, one of the worst. Its bad reputation had come about because the portion of it that extended towards the city was inhabited by what our elders would call the wrong sort of people. I think that meant

they were poor, or did whatever one does not to remain poor. But we lived far away from all that. From the windows of our house we could not actually see the hills covered with vineyards, famed for the fruity *Weißwein* they'd produce after the grapes spent a summer of basking in the sun, but if we took our bicycles we would be zigzagging along the roads just below them in a matter of minutes. What we could spot from our windows was our neighbours' houses, three of them, in Old Gold or Hunter Green, the most used alternatives to *Schönbrunner* Yellow.

After my grandfather's death, my father ran the factory. When Pimbo was the director my father had worked under him, supervising the workers. My mother warned my father of the dangers of the firm getting too big; nevertheless, he decided to merge the company with Yaakov Appliances, which was not bigger than Betzler Irons but exporting all over the world, bringing in impressive profits. My father argued that one hundred per cent of zero was zero, whereas any way you looked at it, a thin wedge of a lot was more. He was satisfied with his partnership, and soon Yaakov & Betzler was exporting its modernised irons and home appliances to strange lands. My father bought a globe and, after dinner one night, showed me Greece, Romania and Turkey. I imagined Greeks, Romans (I thought Romans were what one called the people who lived in Romania) and Turks in stiffly ironed tunics.

Two incidents from my early childhood stand out, although these moments were neither the happiest nor saddest in those early years. They were superlatives of nothing, and yet they are the ones my memory has chosen to preserve. My mother was rinsing a salad and I saw it first — a snail housed among the leaves. She threw it in the rubbish. We had several bins, one of which was for rinds, peelings and eggshells, which she buried in our garden. I was afraid the snail would be smothered; it could get quite juicy in there. My mother wouldn't let me have a dog or cat because she was allergic to animal hair. So after some begging on my part and some hesitation on hers, she, with a queasy look on her face, consented to my keeping the snail on a dish. She was as sweet as mothers get. A day didn't go by without me feeding my snail lettuce. It grew bigger than any snail I ever saw — as big as a small bird. Well, almost. It poked its head out of its

shell when it heard me coming, swayed its body, moved its antennae at me, all this at its own slow rhythm.

One morning I came downstairs to find my snail was gone. I didn't have to look far to find it. I detached it from the wall and put it back on its dish. This became a habit: every night it escaped and went further. I would spend the onset of my day looking for and detaching it from table legs, the Meissen porcelain on display, the wallpaper, someone's shoe. I was running late for school one of these mornings, so my mother said I could look for it after breakfast if I had enough time. Just as she said this, she set the tray down on the bench. We both heard the crunch. She turned the tray over and there was my snail. I was too old to cry the way I did. I didn't even stop when my father came running, thinking I'd got myself with the carving knife. He was sorry he couldn't help, he had to leave for work, so my mother promised to fix the snail for me. I was in such a state, she finally conceded I didn't have to go to school.

Iran for the glue to stick the pieces of shell back together, but my mother feared the glue would seep through and poison the snail. We kept it moist with drops of water, but within an hour my poor pal had shrunk to something miserable. Then Pimmichen suggested we go to Le Villiers, a French delicatessen in Albertina Platz, to buy escargot shells. We rushed back and left a new shell on its dish, but nothing happened: my snail wouldn't come out of the old one. Eventually we helped the withered bit of life into the new shell, with fragments sticking to its back. After another two days of care and grief it was clear my pet was dead. If I took its death harder than I had my sister's and grandfather's, it was only because I was older — old enough to understand I'd never see it or them again.

The other incident wasn't really an incident. Friday evenings, my parents went out to dinner parties, exhibitions, operas, and Pimmichen and I would melt a whole bar of butter in the pan with our schnitzel. Standing in front of the stove like that, we'd dip bits of bread into it and bring them directly to our mouths, our forks getting devilishly hot. Afterwards, she made us *Kaiserschmarrn* for dessert, scooping and sprinkling into the pan each ingredient I wasn't allowed to have and could, in a jiffy, feast more than my eyes on. Normally I was forbidden even to dream of such things — my

mother was afraid anything rich could cause diabetes. If only she'd known. But somehow it tasted better without her or anyone else knowing.

One day in mid-March 1938 my father took me with him to a shoemaker who specialised in shoes for the handicapped. I remember because my eleventh birthday wasn't far away and there was a calendar on the shoemaker's wall. As we waited on the bench I couldn't stop counting the days to my birthday because I knew my parents were going to give me a box kite from China. You wouldn't call my father's flat feet a handicap, but it was painful for him at work standing all day. Pimmichen bought her shoes there, and held Herr Gruber in the highest esteem. He changed people's lives, she insisted, claiming sore feet stole from old people the will to live. When Herr Gruber made a pair of shoes he took it as his duty to compensate for the bunions, corns, and bumps that come with age. He was in demand, as we saw from the half a dozen others waiting that day in his narrow shop, which smelt of leather and tanning oils.

I kicked my legs to make the time go faster. Suddenly there was a tremendous noise outdoors, as if the sky was falling. I jumped up to see what was happening but my father told me to close the door, I was letting the cold in. My next impression was all of Vienna shouting the same words, but it was too huge a sound to make out the single words they were saying. I asked my father and neither could he, although he was getting madder the further the big hand moved round the clock. Herr Gruber ignored what was going on outside; he continued to take the measurements of a boy who'd suffered from polio and needed the sole of his left shoe to compensate ten centimetres for the stunted growth of that leg. By the time Herr Gruber got to my father, my father couldn't stay still, especially as Herr Gruber finished with his feet and continued to fuss around measuring his legs to see if there was a difference, because if there was, it wasn't good for the back. Herr Gruber was the same with everybody; my grandmother said he cared.

On the way home we went by Heldenplatz, and there, I'll never forget, I saw the most people I'd ever seen in my life. I asked my father if it was a million people; he said more likely a few hundred thousand. I didn't see the difference. Just watching them, I felt I was drowning. Some man on the Neue Hofburg balcony was shouting at the top of his lungs, and the mass of

people shared his fury as much as his enthusiasm. I was astounded that a hundred or so adults and children had climbed up on the statues of Prince Eugen and Archduke Karl, both on horseback, and were watching from up there. I wanted to climb up too — begged my father, but he said no. There was music, cheering, flag-waving; everyone was allowed to participate. It was amazing. Their flags had signs that looked as if they would turn if the wind blew on them, like windmills turn their four arms.

On the tram home my father looked out the window at nothing. I was resentful that he hadn't let me join in the fun when we had been so close to it. What would it have cost him? A few minutes of his time. I studied his profile. His features on their own were gentle enough, but his sour mood made them, I was ashamed to observe, ugly. His mouth was determined, his face tense, his nose straight, severe, his eyebrows knotted irritably, his eyes focused on something not present to a degree that nothing would divert him, or me either as long as I was with him. His neatly combed hairstyle suddenly seemed merely professional, a means by which to sell better. I thought to myself: my father cares more about his work, his profits, his factory, than his family having any fun. Slowly, my anger subsided and I felt sorry for him. His hair didn't seem quite so nice — it stuck up in a few places at the top where it was thinning. I took advantage of the tram going around a bend to lean on him with more weight than was really called for.

'Vater,' I asked, 'who was that man up there?'

'That man,' he answered, putting his arm around me without looking in my direction, squeezing on and off affectionately, 'doesn't concern little boys like you, Johannes.'

ii

Some weeks later two men came to carry my grandmother off on a stretcher so she, too, could cast her vote in the referendum concerning the Anschluss; that is, whether or not she was in favour of the annexation of Austria as a province of the German Reich. My parents had been gone since early morning to cast theirs. My grandmother was in the best disposition she'd been in since she'd slipped on ice and broken her hip on her way back from the pharmacy after purchasing a menthol cream to work into her knees.

'Lucky I went to the pharmacy that day,' she told the men. 'It healed my arthritis — it did! I don't think about my knees any more because my hip hurts more! It's the best remedy for an ache — find another ache somewhere else.'

The men did their best to smile at her joke. They were elegant in their uniforms and I was embarrassed because I could see that to them she wasn't Pimmichen, she was just an old woman.

'Ma'am, before we leave, did you remember to take your identification papers?' asked one of the men.

Pimmichen could talk more easily than she could hear others talking, so I answered for her. In her excitement she didn't hear me either. She carried on as they lifted the stretcher — she was Cleopatra being conducted to Caesar — until one of the men nearly dropped her; then she joked she was on a flying carpet over Babylon. She told them how different life used to be for her and her parents, before the boundaries and mentalities had changed, how she'd dreamed of seeing Vienna once again the flourishing capital of a great empire, imagining that the union with Germany would somehow restore the lost grandeur of Austro–Hungary.

Later in the day my Grandmother returned exhausted and in need of a sleep, but by the next morning she was back on the sofa grappling with a newspaper, its pages like a pair of insubordinate wings. I was on the rug,

crouching naked in front of my mother, who removed a bee sting from my back and another from my neck with tweezers before pressing cotton, cool with alcohol, on the spots. She examined me for ticks in the most unlikely places — between my fingers and toes, in my ears, my bellybutton. I protested when she looked in the crease of my buttocks but she took no heed. She'd warned me about going to the vineyards to fly my kite.

Afraid of the newly set restrictions, I explained exactly what had happened. I'd gone to the field, but there wasn't enough wind so I was forced to run to get the kite to fly, then I had to keep running if I wanted it to stay up in the air — if I stopped just a second to catch my breath it made the strings droop which made it fall down more, so I ran and ran until I found myself on the edge of the vineyards, where I stopped obediently, I swear, but then, Mutti, it landed in the middle, all by itself, and I had to go get it. It was your and Vati's nice present to me.

'The next time there's not enough wind,' my mother replied, pulling a wisp of my hair every few words, 'try running in the other direction, away from the vineyards. There's plenty of room in the field for you to run the other way.' Looking down at me, she lifted an eyebrow sceptically, dropped my balled-up clothes on top of me.

'Yes, Mutter,' I sang, glad not to have received any punishment. I couldn't dress fast enough. She slapped my bottom, as I knew she was going to, called me '*Dummer Bub*' — silly boy.

'It's 99.3 per cent in favour of the Anschluss,' read Pimmichen, her attempt to wave a victorious arm less effective than anticipated: it fell back down involuntarily. 'That's almost a hundred per cent. My, my.' She handed the ruffled-up pages to my mother before shutting her eyes. My mother set the paper aside, saying nothing.

There was much change and confusion at school. The map changed. Austria was scratched off and became Ostmark, a province of the Reich. Old books gave way to new, just as some of our old teachers were replaced by new ones. I was sad I didn't get to say goodbye to Herr Grassy. He was my favourite teacher and had been my sister's six years earlier. During the first day's attendance call he'd realised I was Ute Betzler's little brother. He

had scrutinised me, trying to find the resemblance. My parents' friends used to tell us that our smiles were alike, but I wasn't smiling just then. Ute was his student the year she'd passed away. I couldn't help but think that he probably remembered her better than I did.

The next day he kept me after class to show me a coconut ark containing tiny African animals carved in exotic wood — giraffes, zebras, lions, monkeys, alligators, gorillas, gazelles, all in pairs, male and female. I bent over his desk in admiration. He said he'd found the ark in 1909 in a market in Johannesburg, South Africa — like my name, Johannes — and then he gave it to me. My happiness had a streak of guilt. It wasn't the first time Ute's death had brought me gifts and attention.

Fräulein Rahm replaced Herr Grassy. The reason, she explained, was that many of the subjects he used to teach us — ninety per cent of the facts he had made us struggle to memorise — were forgotten by adulthood, and thus useless. All it did was cost the state money that could be better used elsewhere to the greater benefit of its people. We were a new generation, a privileged one; we would be the first to take advantage of the modernised scholastic programme, to learn subjects those before us hadn't had the chance to learn. I felt sad for my parents, and told myself that in the evenings I must teach them all I could. Now, we learned less from books than we had before. Sports became our primary subject. We spent hours practising disciplines to make us strong, healthy adults rather than pale, weak bookworms.

My father was wrong. That man did concern little boys like me. He, the Führer, Adolf Hitler, had a great mission to confide in us children. Only we, children that we were, could save the future of our race. We were unaware that our race was the rarest, the purest. Not only were we clever, fair, blond, blue-eyed, tall and slender, but even our heads showed a trait superior to all other races: we were 'dolichocephalic' whereas they were 'brachycephalic', meaning the form of our heads was elegantly oval, theirs primitively round. I couldn't wait to get home to show my mother — how she'd be proud of me! My head was something I'd never cared about before, at least not its form, and to think I had such a rare treasure sitting upon my shoulders!

We learned new, frightening facts. Life was a constant warfare, a struggle of each race against the others for territory, food, supremacy. Our race, the purest, didn't have enough land — many of our race were living in exile. Other races were having more children than we were, and were mixing in with our race to weaken us. We were in great danger, but the Führer had trust in us, the children; we were his future. How surprised I was to think that the Führer I saw at Heldenplatz, cheered by masses, the giant on billboards all over Vienna, who even spoke on the wireless, needed someone little like me. Before then, I'd never felt indispensable. I'd felt like a child, something akin to an inferior form of an adult, a defect only time and patience could heal.

We were made to look at a chart of the evolutionary scale of the higher species. The monkeys, chimpanzees, orangutans, gorillas were on the lowest level, and worked their way up. Man was at the top. When Fräulein Rahm began to lecture to us, I realised that some of what I'd taken to be primates were human races drawn in such a way that certain traits were accentuated so we could comprehend their relationship with the simians. She taught us a Negroid woman was closer to the ape than to mankind. Removing the hairs of the ape had proven to scientists to what extent. She told us it was our duty to rid ourselves of the dangerous races halfway between man and monkey. Besides being sexually overactive and brutal, they didn't share the higher sentiments of love or courtship. They were inferior parasites who would weaken us, bring our race down.

Mathias Hammer, known for asking oddball questions, asked her if we gave the other races time, wouldn't they eventually move up the evolutionary scale on their own like we had? I was afraid Mathias was going to be scolded, but Fräulein Rahm said his question was essential. After sketching a mountain on the chalkboard she asked, 'If it takes one race this much time to evolve from here to there, and another race three times as long, which race is superior?'

We all agreed it was the first.

'By the time the inferior races catch up to where we are today, the peak, we won't be there any more, we'll be way up here.' She drew too quickly

without looking. The peak she added was too high and steep to be stable.

The race we were to fear most was called Jüdisch. Jews were a mixture of many things — Oriental, Amerindian, African and our race. They were especially dangerous because they'd taken their white skin from us, so we could be easily fooled by them. 'Don't', we were constantly reminded, 'trust a Jew more than a fox in a green field.' 'The Jew's father is Satan.' 'Jews sacrifice Christian children, use their blood in their mitzvahs.' 'If we don't rule the world, they will. That's why they want to mix their blood with ours, to strengthen themselves, to weaken us.' I began to fear the Jews in a medical way. They were like the viruses I'd never seen but had learned were behind my flu and suffering.

One storybook I read was about a German girl who'd been warned by her parents not to go to a Jewish doctor. She disobeyed, was sitting in the waiting room hearing a girl inside the doctor's office screaming. Knowing she'd been wrong to come, she got up to go. Just then the doctor opened the door, told her to come in. From the illustration alone, it was clear who the doctor was. Satan. In other children's books I took a good look at the Jews so I'd know how to recognise one in a heartbeat. I wondered who on earth could be fooled by them, especially clever Aryans like us. Their lips were thick, their noses big and hooked, their eyes dark, evil and always turned to one side, their bodies stocky, their necks adorned with gold, their hair untidy, their whiskers unkempt.

Only at home I didn't get the credit I deserved. Whenever I showed my mother my fine head, all she did was mess up my hair. When I declared to her how I was the future — *Zukunft* in German — in whom the Führer put his trust to one day rule the world, she laughed and called me 'my little Zukunft' or 'Zukunftie', to make me cute, rather than serious and important as I was.

My new status wasn't accepted by my father either. He wasn't at all grateful for my willingness to teach him important facts. He diminished my knowledge, called it nonsense. He objected to my greeting Pimmichen, my mother or him, with 'Heil Hitler', instead of the traditional 'Guten Tag' or 'Grüß Gott', which came about so long ago in the Middle Ages, no one

really remembers any more whether it means 'I give my greetings to God', 'Greetings from God', or 'You greet God for me'! By then it was automatic for everyone in the Reich to salute each other 'Heil Hitler', even for minor transactions — buying bread, getting on a tram. That's just what people said to one another.

I tried to talk sense into my father. If we didn't protect our race, the logical outcome would be catastrophic, but my father claimed he didn't believe in logic. I found that unbelievable for someone who ran a factory — how could he not believe in logic? It was so dumb what he said, surely he was pulling my leg. He insisted he wasn't, that emotions were our only trustworthy guide, even in business. He said people think they analyse situations with their brains, think their emotions are nothing but a result of cognition, but they're wrong. Intelligence isn't in the head, it's in the body. You come out of a meeting not understanding — 'Why do I feel angry when I should be jumping with joy?' You walk through the park on a sunny day and wonder why your heart is heavy, what on earth could be bothering you. Only afterwards do you analyse it. Emotions lead you to what logic is incapable of finding on its own.

I wasn't quick enough in finding a good example to show him he was wrong; I found it later in bed. The only one I came up with then was: 'If a stranger gave you proven figures for your business, don't tell me you'd throw them in the rubbish simply because you felt they were wrong? You would rather trust illogical feelings than proven facts?'

He answered with a bunch of numbers between 430 and 440 Hertz, asked me what these figures meant logically. I didn't answer, frustrated that he was avoiding the subject and on top of it being corny, because 'Hertz' sounded like '*Herz*' — German for 'heart'.

'To your brain, these figures will mean nothing, just some sound frequencies. You could stare at them on a piece of paper all you want and no understanding would come out of them. But . . .' He walked over to the piano, pushed down some keys, looked at me so I had to glance away. 'Just listen to the notes, my son. They will mean what I feel when I hear you speaking. Logic will take you nowhere you want to go in life. It will take

you many places, far and wide, yes it will, but nowhere you really want to go, I assure you, when you look back on your life. Emotion is God's intelligence in us, in you. Learn to listen to God.'

I couldn't keep it in any longer. I blurted: 'I don't believe in God any more! God doesn't really exist! God is just a way to lie to people! To fool them and make them do what those in power want them to do!' I thought he'd be angry but he wasn't.

'If God doesn't exist, neither does man.'

'That's just *Quatsch*, Vater, as you well know. We're right here. I'm right here. I can prove it.' I tapped my arms and legs.

'Then what you're really wondering is whether God created man, or whether man created God? But either way, God exists.'

'No, Vater, if man made God up, God doesn't exist. He only exists in people's minds.'

'You just said, "He exists".'

'I mean only as a part of man.'

'A man creates a painting. The painting is not the man that created it, nor an integral part of that man, but entirely separate from that man. Creations escape man.'

'You can see a painting. It's real. You can't see God. If you call out, "Yodiloodihoo, Gott!", no one will answer you.'

'Did you ever see love? Have you ever touched it with your hand? Is it enough to call out "Hey, Love!" for it to come running on its four swift feet? Don't let your young eyes fool you. What's most important in this life is invisible.'

Our argument went on in circles until I concluded that God was the stupidest thing man ever made. My father's laugh was sad. He said I had it all wrong; God was the most beautiful thing man ever made, or man the most stupid thing God ever made. We were about to go at it again, for I had a very high opinion of man and his capacities, but my mother insisted she

needed me to help her hold a pan upside down for her while she worked the cake out. Distracted, she'd cooked it too long. I recognised her old tactics.

The most serious disagreement I had with my father concerned our conception of the world. I saw it as a sickly, polluted place that needed a good bit of cleaning up, dreamed of seeing only happy, healthy Aryans there one day. My father favoured mediocrity.

'Boring, boring!' he cried. 'A world where everybody has the same doll-headed children, the same acceptable thoughts, cuts their identical gardens the same day of the week! Nothing's as necessary to existence as diversity. You need different races, languages, ideas, not only for their own sake, but so you can know who you are! In your ideal world, who are you? Who? You don't know! You look so much like everything around you, you disappear. A green lizard on a green tree.'

My father was so upset this time, I just left it at that, decided not to bring up the subject again. Nevertheless, after I'd gone to bed, I overheard my parents talking in their room, put my ear against the door to hear what they were saying. My mother was worried that my father shouldn't be having these discussions with me, because the teachers in school asked their students what they talked about at home. She said they'd ask in a way I wouldn't realise the danger. I was too young and naïve to know when to keep my mouth shut.

'There are enough people out there to fear,' my father said. 'I'm not going to start fearing my own son!'

'You must be careful. You must promise me not to argue with him like that any more.'

'It's my role, Roswita, to educate my son.'

'If he adopted your views, imagine what kind of trouble you could get him into.'

My father admitted that sometimes he forgot it was me he was arguing with — he felt more as if he was talking to 'them'. He said language was more personal than a toothbrush: he could hear it straight off when someone

started using someone else's, in a letter, in a conversation, and hearing 'their' language in his little boy's mouth disgusted him.

iii

On April 19th, the day before Adolf Hitler's birthday, I was admitted into the Jungvolk (the junior section of the Hitler Youth), as was the custom. My parents had no choice: it was obligatory. My mother tried to cheer my father up, told him I had no brothers, was turning into an only child, it would do me good to get outdoors, be with other children. She pointed out that even the Catholic youth groups were learning to use weapons, shoot at targets, so it wasn't as if it was the Great War and I was being sent to Verdun. My mother, I could tell from her face, found me handsome in my uniform, despite herself. She readjusted my brown shirt and knotted scarf, tugged on my earlobes. My father barely looked up from his coffee to acknowledge me. I couldn't help but think, had I been on my way to the War to End All Wars, he probably would've acted as indifferently.

That summer we, the Jungvolk, were assigned our first important task. All the books that had promoted decadence or perversity had been collected up from throughout the city and we were to burn them. The temperature that month was hot — at night it was impossible to keep bedcovers on — and with the bonfires we were making it grew intolerable. We, the younger ones, were supposed to carry the books over to the teenage boys from the Hitler Youth, who had the actual privilege of throwing them in. I and the others my age envied them, for that was obviously the fun part. If one of us tossed a book in on our own, just for fun, we were smacked.

Soon the air around the fire was hot and hard to breathe. The smoke was black, and stank of burning ink. The books didn't take keenly to being burnt; they made eardrum-breaking pops and fired out red-hot bits that threatened clothes and eyes. The established hierarchy didn't last long. In no time, tossing in the books became the task of the pariah. What trouble and toil it was for me with my thin arms to cast book after book, volume after volume, far enough into the blaze. One name caught my eye: Sigmund Freud. I'd seen it before on the shelves of our own library. Kurt Freitag, Paul Nettel, Heinrich Heine, Robert Musil followed, as did a history

textbook of mine, probably obsolete. Clumsily, I dropped it close to my feet. The fire knew no limits and that one, too, was promptly smoking, withering, pages flying up in the air, a few somersaults, a last zest for life, glowing, frittering away.

When I came home there were gaps in our library, leaving me with a vague, uncomfortable feeling, as if the keys of a piano had been pressed down and weren't coming back up. In some places a whole shelf full had collapsed like dominoes to cover up for the missing books. My mother was having trouble carrying a load of laundry upstairs. Trudging back down, she jolted when she saw me. I thought it was because I was black in the face but, going to help her up with the next load, I was shocked to see the basket was chock-full of books. She stumbled over her choice of words, told me it was, um, only in case we didn't have enough newspaper in the winter to start our fires — there was no use burning them now in the hot weather. I was lost for words. All I could think was didn't she know the trouble she could get us into? She told me to take my shoes off, go and have a bath.

Oddly enough, once my mother was made to attend motherhood classes, the family atmosphere lightened. My father liked to tease her at dinnertime. He hit his fist on the table, held his plate up for another serving, bellowing that it was about time she attended her wife classes! Pimmichen and I loved it when he complained that she was miles away from getting the Deutschen Mutter Orden, the medal mothers received if they brought five children into the world. Mutter blushed, especially when I joined in, 'Yes, Mutti, more brothers and sisters!' — and Pimmichen, 'Should I begin knitting?' Our encouragement redoubled when my mother tucked her thin brown hair behind her ears, softly remarking she was getting too old to have more children. She was fishing for compliments and got them. My father said he hoped they taught her how to make nice, plump babies in motherhood school. Pimmichen slapped his hand but it was no secret to me. I'd already learned all there was to know about these scientific workings in school.

My father sighed, saying he'd married her too soon — if only he had waited they would have received a marriage loan, a quarter of which would be cancelled with each newborn child. Financially, my mother could've been beneficial. Maybe they could divorce and start again? My mother

squinted her eyes in mock anger. Only if she was allowed to buy some new dresses with her play-money, she said. What she meant was the *Reichsmark*, which still felt foreign in our hands. Her cheekbones were wide and her mouth thin and pretty, but it didn't stay still long; it twitched and contorted until my father's laugh freed her smile. I liked it when my parents were affectionate with each other in front of us. Every time my father kissed my mother on the cheek, I did likewise to my grandmother.

The gay mood didn't last long. I think it was only the next month, October possibly, that trouble began. It started when a few thousand members of the Catholic youth groups gathered to celebrate a Mass at St Stephen's Cathedral. There were more outside than could fit inside the old stone walls. Afterwards, in front of the cathedral, in the heart of Vienna, they sang religious hymns and patriotic Austrian songs. Their slogan was: 'Christ is our guide' — *Führer* in German. This demonstration was in response to a call by Cardinal Innitzer.

I wasn't there, but heard about it at an emergency meeting of our own youth group. Andreas and Stefan, having seen it, gave us vivid accounts. I am honest, as I have taken it upon myself to be, so I will admit that Adolf Hitler was by then as important to me as my father, if not more so. He was certainly more important than God, in whom I'd lost all belief. In the biblical sense, 'Heil Hitler' had a connotation of 'saint, sacred'. We were enraged by the Catholics' bad conduct; it was a threat, an insult to our beloved *Führer*, a sacrilege. We would not stand around and tolerate it. The next day some of us from the *Jungvolk* joined in with the older boys from the Hitler Youth to burst into the archbishop's palace and defend our *Führer* by throwing to the floor whatever we could get our hands on — candles, mirrors, ornaments, statues of the Virgin Mary, hymn books. The efforts to stop us, outside of praying, were minimal, and in some rooms non-existent.

A few days later I stood in Heldenplatz amid a crowd comparable to the one my father had pulled me away from more than half a year earlier. The banners — *Innitzer and the Jews are one breed! Priests to the gallows! We don't need Catholic politicians! Without Jews and without Rome, we shall build a true German Cathedral!* and others, all on a vast scale — flapped in the wind, creating sounds I imagined a great bird could make. It was too

tempting. I decided to climb one of the monuments this time too, fancying Prince Eugen's horse more than I did Archduke Karl's. I elbowed Kippi and Andreas but they reckoned the crowd was too dense to cross. It didn't stop me. I was willing, and small enough. I edged my way between people, and, after some slipping and sliding, succeeded in climbing all the way up the horse's cold front leg. I wrapped my arm around it and held on tight so I wouldn't be pushed off by others who had got up there before me. From above, the yelling was different, almost magic. I watched the mass of tiny individuals below. They reminded me of a tree, noisy and alive with sparrows one cannot see until some enigma sets them off, then no more singing, only a tremendous flapping and it emerges out of the tree, a body composed of countless vacillating points held together by some perfect, infallible force as it turns and twists and dives in the sky, and raises its head as one great creature.

Shortly after these incidents I have just described, the November cold came to stay. The sky was clear, the sun a distant point of white, the trees bare. Tension was in the air. It was that November, I remember, that word went around about a Jewish student who'd gone to the German Embassy in Paris and shot an Embassy official. Rumours snowballed, people in the streets sought revenge and many Jewish shop windows across the Reich were smashed. I wasn't allowed to go outdoors to see but I heard about it on the wireless. It was called Kristallnacht and I imagined crushed crystal like snow covering the streets and footpaths of the Reich, hollow clinks and chimes as more fell, stalactites of glass holding fast to window-frames, an arctic decor both shimmering and ominous.

Afterwards, my father was absent for days on end and whenever he wasn't, his mood was so sour I wished him gone again. There was no more joking at home, especially once the factory, Yaakov & Betzler, abruptly changed its name to Betzler & Betzler. Even my mother and grandmother were careful how they spoke to him. They lowered their voices, enquiring whether maybe he would like some coffee? A little something to eat? They tiptoed in the room he was brooding in, left trays within his reach, didn't

bicker about a nibbled-on biscuit put back in the dish with the others. They were acting like mice; he was eating like one.

I was the only one having fun, away from home and the many complex tensions there. Across future fields of sunflowers, wheat, corn we walked, we sang. To the jealous cries of crows we enjoyed our rations of bread and butter. It never tasted so good as then, with the weak sun just warming our backs. Beyond the vast brown was another vast brown, then still another. We marched further each time, ten kilometres and the sack on my back was heavy, my feet blistered — how they smarted — but I wouldn't complain. Neither would my new friend, Kippi. If his limping grew perceptible, he fought harder to hide it. We were going to conquer the world, for the Führer we would, though I couldn't help but think sometimes that the world was a big place.

One weekend we went to a special camp to learn how to survive in nature. With less skill than happy chance we found unripe blackberries, caught some small trout, trapped a hare. Our bellies weren't full but our heads were bloated as we sang songs of victory around the campfire. Our night under the open sky was trying; luckily the truck that followed provided us with a more thorough breakfast in the long-awaited morning.

Our leader, Josef Ritter, was just two years older than us but knew much more. He taught us a new game. He divided us into two colours, distributed bands to be worn around each boy's arm. Pushing someone on the ground made him a prisoner. He designated the terrain before letting us loose.

I ran as though my life depended on it; it was great fun. Our team, the blues, caught four more prisoners than the reds, so we won. Kippi was heroic — he captured three prisoners, whereas I hadn't caught a single one, just dodged attacks. Then a red began to push Kippi, so I came to his rescue and, with his help, took my first prisoner. After that, I ran about the terrain trying to find Kippi, pushed over two more boys, and was made a prisoner myself. We, the prisoners, were supposed to sit under the skirts of an old spruce, and it was there I saw Kippi with his shoes off, his broken blisters red and raw. I hadn't thought of looking for him there. He cupped his shoe

over my face to overpower me, but I got him with the stronger weapon: the smell of mine.

I came home exhausted, could hardly make it up the steps without tugging on the rail. My mother was alarmed when she saw me, calling me her poor baby, her tired little boy, but I was in no disposition for hugs and kisses. I sat on my bed to take off my hiking shoes, then lay back so I could undo my buckles with my legs in the air . . . they were so heavy. I woke up in the morning still sticky but in clean-smelling pyjamas with a puppy pattern that made me feel silly, partly because I had no memory of undressing myself. I thought I was in someone else's room as I looked from wall to wall and saw apricot instead of olive green. My combat maps, knot chart and gas mask had been replaced by framed posters of blossoming cherry and apple trees. I had soft, cuddly toys in my room then, but they were kept inside a chest. Now they had emerged out of it and were sitting atop my desk: kangaroo, penguin, buffalo, their heads hanging feebly to one side, their expressions apologetic, as if even they didn't take their newly regained status seriously.

I didn't say anything to my mother, despite her expectant looks. Finally, all I did was ask her where she'd put my pocket-knives, and she took the opportunity she'd been waiting for to tell me, in a manner that came off as well rehearsed, how my room had looked more like a soldier's than a little boy's, a home wasn't a military barrack, and it disturbed her every time she went by my open door because with all my absences she sometimes felt she was a mother who'd lost her son in the war, and after Ute's death she was sensitive, I must understand; she thought I'd be happy about the nice decorating she'd done in my absence. Pimmichen was nodding at each point she made, as though they'd already discussed the issue at length and she was making sure my mother didn't forget any item off the checklist.

I didn't want to argue, and even thought about not saying anything so as not to hurt her feelings, but I couldn't stop some lower instinct inside me that had to say it was my room. She agreed it was my room, but reminded me, in turn, that my room was in her house. Thus came about a knotty discussion of territorial rights, who was allowed to do what, under whose roof, behind whose door, between what walls. Our respective rights and territories seemed to overlap over that small square considered my room.

We argued less rationally in the end, she citing her motherly sentiments of goodwill, and I alleging violations of privacy until she at last concluded, 'The Führer is making war in every household!'

I came home from school one day to discover Kippi, Stefan, Andreas, Werner and, of all people, Josef, my camp leader, seated around the table, each wearing a pointed paper hat my mother had distributed. I didn't do a good job at hiding my embarrassment, especially when I saw my grandmother wearing one too. She'd fallen asleep in her armchair and was snoring, the hat pulling her hair to one side in a way that made her pink scalp stand out. If my mother had chosen pink balloons to string across the room it was only to match the pink cake, but I would've preferred any other colour, including black.

My mother was the first to cry happy birthday and throw confetti, dancing about from side to side. Josef, our camp leader, smiled but didn't quite join in, and I knew exactly what he was thinking. Those boys in the Jungvolk, ten to fourteen years old, were called *Pimpfe*. Just as the word sounds, a *Pimpfe* corresponded to that awkward age, full of complexes — too old to be a child, not yet a man. My mother was cheering me for candles that could have been blown out by a wink of the eye, swelling with maternal pride as if I'd just achieved the impossible. I felt as though I — and my big twelve years old — were shrinking faster than the melting candles.

After our second servings of cake we actually began having fun, talking about our previous survival camp. That's when my mother insisted I open up my gifts in front of them all. I tried to get out of it but the others wouldn't let me. I knew my mother's and father's gift from the fancy paper and avoided it, first opening those of my friends. The twins Stefan and Andreas gave me a torch; Josef, a poster I already had of the Führer; Werner, the music sheets of the 'Horst Wessel Lied' and 'Deutschland über Alles', practically sold out in Vienna. Pimmichen offered me handkerchiefs with my embroidered initials. Kippi gave me a photograph of Baldur von Schirach, the Hitler Youth Leader of all the Reich. This pleased Josef, which made me feel more at ease until my mother wanted to see it. She asked Kippi if it was his big brother, or wasn't it his father? Instead of

dropping it, she insisted she saw some resemblance; but maybe, she guessed, after Kippi had turned every shade of red, it was only the uniform.

Eventually I had to unwrap my parents' gift, and I must say if I'd received it a year earlier I would have adored it. It was a toy bull-terrier that could bark and jump. I don't know where they found it: supposedly no more toys were being sold in the Reich. My mother had chosen it because I'd always wanted a dog but couldn't have one because of her allergies, so this was a symbolic gift, a compromise. My friends smiled as best they could, but we'd outgrown toys, no matter how cute. I slouched and said thank you, secretly wishing my mother hadn't come to give me a kiss; on top of it all one that sounded moist.

The boys thanked my mother for her invitation and gathered their belongings. Josef reminded us that the forthcoming weekend we must meet well before daybreak because we had extra kilometres to walk. It was at that moment that my father stepped into the house, tearing off his tie, undoing his neck buttons in a way that made me think he was about to put up his dukes.

'Johannes will be unable to attend,' he interrupted.

'Heil Hitler.' Josef's greeting was followed by four echoes.

'Heil Hitler,' my father muttered.

'Why?' Josef looked at me, surprised.

'Why? Have you seen the shape his feet are in after the last time? I don't want him getting an infection.'

'Who said?' I protested.

'Blisters are not an acceptable medical reason for absence. He must attend.'

'My son will stay home and rest with his family this weekend. No more coming home like that, not able to walk, passing out from fatigue. An infection can lead to gangrene.'

'I didn't pass out from fatigue! I fell asleep! Vater, you weren't even home!'

My mother, ill at ease, shifted from foot to foot and told Josef I would attend the next camp.

'I'll have to report it if he doesn't attend this one. You give me no choice.'

'But he can't walk,' she pleaded. 'My poor little boy.'

'Yes I can! It's just blisters — who on earth cares?'

'He should change his shoes. I have already told him they're inappropriate.'

'I beg your pardon?' asked my mother.

'They are not in keeping with our style. They must have shoelaces, like ours. His are too dark, too big and bulky. These are Land shoes.'

He meant peasant shoes. I guessed how hurt my mother must be — anyway, one look told me she was doing nothing to hide it. She had been proud to let me wear her father's old hiking shoes, the ones he wore as a boy. Now Opa's shoes weren't good enough.

'My son is not aware of the long-term dangers of abusing the feet,' my father cut in.

'Does he have flat feet like you?' Josef questioned.

My father, at first taken aback, scanned me from head to toe with his betrayed expression. Flat feet were just a subject Josef and I had talked about once around the campfire, and if I'd mentioned my father's, it wasn't in a way as to say anything bad about him the way he made it sound.

'Not to my knowledge.'

'Then it's in his — and your — interests that he come.'

Josef was determined. Young as he was, in his uniform, he came off as a military authority. My father, I could tell, was tempted to speak his mind,

but my mother's pleading eyes just managed somehow to keep him from doing so.

iv

After three years of impatience, Kippi, Stefan, Andreas and I were old enough to join the Hitlerjugend. We were euphoric, especially Kippi and I, who dreamt of getting into Adolf Hitler's personal guard when we grew up, because we'd heard that the selection was so elitist, a cavity in your tooth was enough to have you rejected. We liked to come up with all the faults that could disqualify us and remedy them. Lack of strength, stamina, courage, certainly, but more often petty reasons such as the tooth decay one, against which we, among the few, would go so far as to brush our teeth in camp. I had an ingrown toenail and Kippi would perform operations on it. No way was I going to have a minor defect mentioned on my medical records. We were supposed to tolerate pain without flinching, but we were not exactly a picture of stoic endurance: we both laughed as soon as I saw the scissors coming. Kippi added to it by making them open and close like a hungry beak and the look on my face made him bend over in two. Sometimes he had to wait minutes before he could stop laughing enough to restart.

Kippi, at fifteen, had hairs growing out of his ears. We both agreed that the Führer could interpret them as primitive traits relating him to the monkey. The humiliated look on Kippi's face was enough for laughter to cut off my breath. That's when I got my vengeance: the tweezers had a hungry beak of their own, capable of opening and closing before tearing his hairs out three at a time.

The boyish days of fun and adventure reached their end and we said our goodbyes to the Jungvolk. The Hitler Youth camps were rough, the competition in sports equally so. No one said, 'It's only a game' any more. It wasn't — it was a trial of superiority. Moving up had its drawbacks. From being the oldest, I was now the youngest, and likewise in strength. The older boys could fence well. I came at them slashing my foil wildly and, after a few minor movements of their wrists, found myself empty-handed. They could ride and jump. I had to hide my fear when I was supposed to

saddle my horse, and every time I made a move to tighten the straps the tetchy creature warned me against it with bared teeth. I dreaded those days.

The older boys plagued the younger ones — made them clean their shoes, tend to their groins. No one liked to do it, but they beat you up if you didn't. Sometimes one of the boys told on them and they got into trouble. No form of homosexuality, however slight, was to be tolerated in Adolf Hitler's regime. But tattling was answered with getting even, getting even with fresh tattling, a threat with a bigger threat: it never ended. When we went to collect money and items for the poor, in the Winterhilfe from October to March, some boys pocketed the money, used it for women.

In one exercise we were to kill a pen of ducks with our bare hands. It was stressful because once we freed the latch they came to us in trust, quacked as if we could understand exactly what it was they wanted. One of the ducks was followed by a dozen ducklings and they had to be killed too. It was as if they were asking us to kill our own childhood, somehow. If a boy cried after the deed was done he was so thoroughly mocked that no one wanted to be in his shoes. He ate fowl like everybody else, would enjoy the duck once it was on his plate after others had worked to prepare it, wouldn't he? He was nothing but a whimpering hypocrite, a good for nothing! Were there any others like him? Speak up! In some corner of my mind I slammed my fists down on the piano I had never learned how to play. Maybe that's what helped me not hear the necks cracking.

Kippi asked me afterwards, if I had to kill him for the Führer, could I? I looked at him. His face was so familiar, I knew I wouldn't have been able to. Neither would he have been able to kill me. But we both agreed this wasn't good — we were weak, and would have to work on it. Ideally, a leader told us, we should be able to hit a baby's head against the wall and not feel anything. Feelings were mankind's most dangerous enemy. They above all were what must be killed if we were to make ourselves a better people.

What spoiled the atmosphere most were the pirates who began turning up from everywhere. The more we talked about how much we didn't fear them, the more we really did. There were the Roving Dudes from Essen, the

Navajos from Cologne, the Kettelbach Pirates, gangs our age proclaiming eternal war on the Hitler Youth. It was unsettling. They moved about the Reich at will, infiltrated the war zones.

We were just outside Vienna on one of our routine marches — it must have been late summer — and suddenly there was a considerable addition of voices to our song. I lifted our flag higher, so the newcomers could spot the red-white- red bands and swastika emblem. There was no one in sight. We stopped singing and it became clear that the correct words of our song

*Honour, Glory, Truth,
We seek,
Honour, Glory, Truth,
We reap,
Honour, Glory, Truth,
We keep,
In the Hitler Youth!*

had been changed to:

*Untruth and dishonour,
They seek,
Yes, it's true,
They reek,
And we, we beat,
Hitler's Babies!*

From behind the hill they emerged. They were wearing chequered shirts, dark shorts, white socks, which struck me as inoffensive enough. But soon we were surrounded, outnumbered. Close up, the metal edelweiss flowers they wore on their collar, the skull and crossbones, were unmistakable. They were the Edelweiss Pirates. Some girls were with them. They looked us up and down in contempt, for we were an all-boy group. One girl, looking our leader Peter Braun in the eyes, fondled the privates of the young man behind her.

They poked fingers in Peter's nose and eyes, and were in no time kicking him in the ribs, the face. We came to his rescue, though not as efficiently as we'd have wished. It wasn't long, at least not as long as it seemed to us, before we were all on the ground, twisting and groaning. Only one of them didn't get away as easily as he'd thought — we had his shirt and a few of his teeth.

In school that year the crucifixes were replaced by posters of Adolf Hitler. We learned about eugenics and the sterilisation of what the Americans called 'human junk', which had been practised in thirty-something states of the United States as far back as 1907. The mentally retarded, unbalanced and chronically ill were detrimental to society and had to be prevented from bringing more of their kind into the world. Populations of low-life must be sterilised as well, for generation after generation they remained poor and alcoholic. Their dwellings were perpetually shabby. Their daughters were as bad as their mothers and grandmothers, unable to avoid teenage pregnancies that brought about yet another generation of promiscuity. Distinguished professors of leading American universities had proven that the tendency to poverty, alcoholism and low-class lives was genetic. Possessors of these traits were therefore forbidden to multiply and the mandated surgery put into practice in these states helped to limit many undesirable groups of people.

We learned more about the Jewish race. Their history was a long one of betrayal, cheating and incest. Cain killed his brother Abel with a stone in the field; Lot was tricked into having intercourse with his two daughters so they could have Jewish sons, Mo'ab and Ben-am'mi; Jacob cheated his starving brother, Esau, out of his birthright for a bowl of lentil soup. In the Great War, as we were dying by the thousands on the Russian front, the Jews were busy writing letters in the trenches! This tortured my curiosity. To whom were they writing? What was so important, that amidst the bullets and bombs, just as they were about to die, they must take pen and paper out of their pocket and write? Was it a goodbye, a final declaration of love to a fiancée or parent? Or secret information — where the reserves of jewels and gold were hidden?

We learned, too, how Jews were unable to love beauty. They preferred ugliness. We were shown paintings they had created and admired — ugly works where a person's eye was not in the right place but in front of his face, paintings where hands looked like the bloated udder of a cow, where hips joined directly with breasts, where subjects had no neck, no waist. One seemed to be shouting with all his might but had no mouth, like a scarecrow yelling silence at the crow-infested cornfields.

I admit that this knowledge kindled in me a morbid fascination with the Jews, but before that could have led to any misplaced ruminations, the time for the pursuit of learning ran out. The bombings had begun, and Vienna was a base of air defence. For boys our age it was as exciting as being in the movies. We were potential heroes for the world to see, giants whose every word and move was being projected on some big eternal screen of life entitled History. Our lives were puffed up to an immortal size. We were acting in a to-be-famous world event.

Peter Braun and Josef Ritter were old enough to volunteer for the Waffen-SS because in 1943 the minimum age had been lowered from twenty to seventeen. You only had to be fifteen to be a flak helper, but we younger ones were jealous because many of the real posts around the anti-aircraft guns were manned by boys that we'd known from the Hitler Youth, but not yet open to us, equally brave and able. It was as if they'd been given real roles while we were only thrown in as extras.

Our turn to prove ourselves came soon enough. A flock of Allied air bombers moved in a V across the sky, wings touching, like indifferent birds letting their droppings fall down on us. It was an expression of contempt and we fired back our outrage, though sometimes right in the midst of the action, I was reminded of what it had felt like as a child to be fully lost in play, only this time our toys were bigger and more costly. Watching anything fall from so high was hypnotic. The bombs whistled on their way down, the planes hummed a sad tune, spun down the hundred flights of a loose staircase. Kippi headed across a field to check the nose and tail of a plane fallen there. A bomb dropped far enough away from him, but lifted up a heap of dirt in the air. One second Kippi was standing there, the next he

was replaced by a mound of dirt that looked like an absurd improvised tomb.

If only he could have come back to life, we could have split our sides laughing about it. But without Kippi I didn't laugh or talk much to anybody any more. It was the beginning of an irrepressible loneliness, of walking around with a big old hole in my gut. I surprised myself sometimes by looking down and realising that the hole wasn't really there.

More upheavals were in store. We flak helpers had become accustomed to living with each other, eating together in the refectory, sleeping in the same dormitory. Kippi had been my best friend, but there were others I'd enjoyed living with. Then from one day to the next, we were broken up and sent off to different sectors. As the war went on we were given less leave, and cut off more and more from our families. We'd turned into soldiers like all the others.

I was rarely home, and when I was, my mother didn't grieve at my leaving when it was time to do so. Barely had I sat down on the sofa when she asked me what day I had to depart. Once she knew the day, what interested her next was the hour. She never asked me what it was I was doing, whether or not I had risked my life. I resented the fact that she obviously liked it better when I wasn't home. She was nervous with me around, seemed afraid of me. If I was walking down the hall when she came out of her bedroom, she turned back into it. If she heard I was downstairs while she was, she could stay in the bathroom for hours. She stopped what she was doing if I joined her in the kitchen. Once, she was making herself a sandwich. On seeing me, she began scrubbing the sink, which looked clean to me. I deliberately stayed, but she wouldn't eat as long as I was there. At the table she pushed her food around on the plate. I thought she could at least think about me, but I couldn't bring myself to draw attention to my own empty plate without feeling like a beggar.

With the food rationed, my grandmother had grown infirm and spent most of the day in bed. If my father and I happened to cross paths he was always anxious to know how and what I was doing. If I hinted at my mother's

behaviour he denied it, sighed and rubbed his eyes, or was in a hurry to be on his way.

As the bombings intensified, I and others at the air defence posts grew recklessly brave. My mother's attitude numbed me to any sense of danger. In critical moments it pushed me to take risks. It was a freedom, having no one fearing for me; I feared less for myself, but the hole in me grew wider. During one air raid, I was running for cover twenty metres behind two new flak helpers when a line of fire made my next choice of direction tricky. It was an unexpected raid, at dawn, after we'd assumed we'd seen the last of them for the night. The way the dirt shot up high, it always seemed that the enemy was below, not above. That was a less frightening way to think about it. Once again, it would pass alongside me; I had faith as I bolted as far as I could to one side when my instinct told me to.

I was as happy as a newborn babe, I have to say, when I woke up in the hospital and found my mother crying over me, calling me her poor baby, her poor little boy again. That was before I knew the extent of my injuries. No one wanted to tell me at first, because the joy of discovering I was still alive was too great, and I wasn't noticing them on my own. The faces of my father and mother gave it away — their smiles were half smiles, hiding some unspoken regret. I began to understand that something was wrong.

I wish I'd never looked at myself again. I'd lost the cheekbone under my left eye, could no longer move my left arm, either at the shoulder or elbow, and I'd lost the lower third of my forearm. I was in a state of shock, which weakened me more, I think, than my actual injuries. I woke up in my bed at home, took swift looks under the sheets to see if what I dreaded was true, and each time it was, irreversibly true, I let myself sink back into the comfort of sleep. At intervals I fiddled with the dent in my face, the loose skin, the hardened, worm-like scars.

I slept for months. My mother woke me up to feed me. I swallowed only a fraction of what she'd hoped and slumbered again. She accompanied me to the toilet, held my head against her stomach, never complained about how long it took. If I caught a glimpse of my maimed limb or the look on her face as she was eyeing it, my will to recover took a blow.

In the end it was thanks to Pimmichen that I got better. My parents came for me in the middle of the night. I thought it was another air raid at first, but sensed the moment I saw my father putting his handkerchief to his eyes that they were taking me to Pimmichen's deathbed. Drained of all energy by the time we got down the stairs, I had to lie down in bed next to her. We both lay on our backs; Pimmichen's moans awakened and renewed mine as the hours went by. Day had brought a bright, dusty column of light into the room by the time I opened my eyes. We were nose to nose. She was looking at me through watery cataracts, her smile sticking together in places as if her lips had been stitched with saliva threads coming apart.

My mother said I should return to my room so my grandmother could rest, but neither of us wanted to be separated again. Pimmichen couldn't talk but held feebly on to my hand, and I on to hers. Our movements were uncoordinated and that created a bond between us. There was something funny about the way we each fought to sit up on our own so my mother could feed us: despite our difference in age, we were in the same boat. Each of us looked forward to watching the other. Whenever the tea dribbled down a chin, or my mother was too enthusiastic with the amount of potato she stuffed in a mouth so that most fell back out, we chuckled. Little by little, Pimmichen began to eat more — half a small potato more, two spoons of soup more — and so did I. She went across the room for a towel on her own, then so did I. I was proud of her, she was proud of me.

Once Pimmichen was able to talk again, she told me all kinds of things I never knew. Pimbo, my grandfather, used to hunt with a small falcon called Zorn, but one day when he went to feed it, it bit his finger. Luckily he was wearing a ring so it didn't hurt him much; he could have lost his finger otherwise. The beak was strong enough to snap a mouse in two — maybe it was the shining ring that had made it bite. Birds were unpredictable, she told me. One day a magpie came through the open window to her bedroom and stole a ruby necklace from her. Luckily, she saw it with her own eyes or she would have blamed the Polish cleaning woman.

My parents said that if Pimmichen could talk, she was well. It was time for me to go back to my room. That was when I noticed a host of minute oddities and wondered if my grandmother was really well, or was it my

mother who was sick? For example, every day my mother aired the house — opened the windows wide, rain and sun alike. Nevertheless, in the morning when I got up there was a sickening smell of faeces rising, which meant it could've been mother who was sick, or Pimmichen, but that was less likely because Pimmichen's bedroom was at the bottom, closest to the toilet, and she seemed to be faring fine lately. I say this too because I once saw my mother emptying a ceramic pot, but she looked so ashamed I couldn't bring myself to ask her what was wrong. She was obviously too weak to go out of her bedroom at night.

I was sure I heard steps up and down the hall in the middle of the night, wondered if it was my father pacing. If I listened carefully I could have sworn that despite the almost perfectly simultaneous steps there were two people walking, so my mother must have been with him. I mentioned it but she said it wasn't her, or him, it was my grandmother up and roaming about. I slept in the room next to my parents' room, so whatever noises I heard, they should have as well, but regularly upheld that they didn't. Out of curiosity I asked my grandmother what it was she was doing up at such hours, but she didn't know what in heaven I was talking about. I had to explain and repeat myself before realisation dawned: she told me about how she used to walk in her sleep years back. Pimbo would tell her about it in the mornings, but if he hadn't sworn it on his mother's head, she never would have believed a word.

The walking stopped. About a month later, at daybreak, my mother let out a shrill scream. At breakfast she apologised to Pimmichen and me if she'd woken us — she'd had a nightmare. She rested her head on the table, buried her face in her arms, and admitted that she'd seen me as I was injured. I realised she cared about me more than I'd assumed.

The following night something came crashing down and I hurried out of my room to see what it was. I thought my grandmother had fallen over one of the console tables bearing a lamp. But pieces of the ceramic pot were scattered across the floor, along with what had been causing the stench. My father was crouching down beside my mother, helping her collect the pieces. She couldn't bring herself to look up at me as I gaped down. I noticed her hands were trembling. If she was too unwell to go to the toilet,

she shouldn't have been trying to carry the pot on her own; it was foolhardy of her.

My father put his arm around her, told her she'd be okay, she should've woken him up so he could help, he was sorry he hadn't heard her. In her nightgown my mother looked thinner than when dressed. Her breasts had diminished, her feet were bony, her cheekbones protruded in a way that crossed the fine line from beautiful to afflicted. My father lectured, in summer, that I'd catch bronchitis or pneumonia if I didn't get back into bed fast, fast, fast. He helped me back, his arm around me, then stalled at my door as if he was going to own up to something. For the first time I was worried sick my mother might be dying of an incurable disease such as cancer. He took a breath and told me to sleep well. Sleepiness came, but sleep didn't.

V

My father came home less from the factory, and when he did, it was usually at noon, in and out, just enough time to get some papers. He was poorly shaven, his eyes haggard and bloodshot. Then he stopped coming home at all. For an hour or two of sleep, he said, it wasn't worth it. If possible, my mother grew more edgy: every noise made her jump. It was as though she was expecting him to come home every minute, and there were many minutes in her day.

At last he showed up with a jigsaw puzzle under his arm, concealed behind a magazine. I knew it was for me and was glad because I was bored, with little to do all day besides contemplate my wounds and read newspapers, but even good news became monotonous — the superiority of our armed forces, victory, and once again victory. He ran upstairs and hurried back down two steps at a time with some files. I thought he was checking the mail. To my bitter disappointment I realised he'd left again and had forgotten to give me my gift. I brooded on how many days it might be before we'd see him again, then decided to go and get the puzzle myself. After all, he had a lot of worries and I was sure he wouldn't mind.

I couldn't find it anywhere. It wasn't in his study or anywhere else upstairs. I had seen him go up with it, seen him come down without it. It was insane. It had to be there. But it wasn't, not even in the most unlikely places, and I stubbornly went through them all. Given that I used to be left-handed, I was understandably clumsy. Things were easier to take out than to put back properly. I stuffed the boxes, letters and papers roughly back in their places. To my amusement, I found an old picture of my father — picked his determined face out of a classroom of less mature faces. I found foreign monies, old primary school reports of good conduct, pipes smelling sweetly of tobacco, but not what I was looking for. I gave up as many times as I renewed my search.

'What are you doing up there, Johannes? Up to no good?' my mother called up.

'Nothing,' I said, and she summoned me down to keep her company.

I complained of my father's long absences. She told me she was going to go and see him at the factory. I was glad she said I could go too, for I'd have the opportunity to ask about the puzzle.

It took four trams to get to the factory, which was outside the city limits on the eastern side — the other side of town from where we lived, past the twenty-first district, Floridsdorf, which itself was a long way out. Any man can guess how humiliating it was for me when an old lady got up so I could sit, but I had to accept because it was getting stuffy and I hadn't recovered sufficiently to hold on during the stops and accelerations. The last tram came to its terminus and the handful of us remaining had to get off. I stepped down and my mother clung to my arm. I think it was the bombarded buildings that bothered her. Steel ribs stabbed out of stone guts. We had a long walk to the factory. I had to rest on benches along the way; my mother was content each time to drop the basket she was carrying. The surroundings were stripped of all joy. There were breweries, mills and other factories larger than my father's whose chimney-stacks seemed to be what was causing the rugged ceiling of stone-coloured clouds, a ceiling that looked as if it would crumble and fall down sooner or later.

Ever since I was a small child I had disliked going to the factory. It gave off smells that made me breathe as slowly as I could as if to prevent too much from entering my lungs. The nausea it gave me was as much mental as it was physical. I imagined I was stepping into a clanking, steaming, spitting machine whose stomach was a glowing pot, whose heart was a clamorous pump, whose arteries were pipes, and I was nothing but a trivial boy coming to watch it. If I couldn't be useful to its life process, it considered me waste.

My father's office was empty. Papers covered his desk, a cup of coffee awaited him. I put my hand around the cup to warm my fingertips, but it was long cold. I saw a picture of Ute and me I'd never seen before, in a boat my father was rowing. The white-capped mountains looked as real floating

on the surface of the dark lake as they did standing up to the clear sky. I didn't remember ever having been to Mondsee, or any other lake near Salzburg. Then a factory worker recognised my mother and shouted to another, who tapped the shoulder of the man next to him.

Before long a group of men, cologned though unshaven, were standing around us, ogling my mother's basket. I saw one work his elbow into the ribs of another, but no one was willing to help.

'I'm looking for my husband. You recognise me, don't you, Rainer?'

Rainer nodded his head and mumbled, 'He told us he'd be back today.'

'And?'

'No, ma'am.'

'Did he have an appointment somewhere?'

Rainer looked around for someone to answer for him; all he could get from his fellow workers were shoulder shrugs.

'Do you know where he is? Where I can find him?' my mother asked. 'I brought him some things. Should I leave them here? Will he be back?'

The man who'd elbowed the ribs of the other spoke up. 'He said he'd be back today. That's all we know.'

My mother and I sat on a discarded rusty pipe outside. We shared a sandwich. We shared an apple. The sky grew dark, threatened a downpour that didn't come, only a mist depositing transparent pinhead-sized eggs on our hair. Trains were crossing the faraway fields like a never-ending army of wormish creatures. We crumpled leaves, broke twigs, poked the ground with an old frayed feather, and even got down to playing Paper, Scissors, Rock, like we used to. But my father didn't come.

At home, my mother received a telephone call informing her that my father had been taken in for some routine questioning. She was sure that the clicks she heard were not just from the eavesdropping of those families who shared our party line. Pimmichen gave my mother all the attention she could manage — brought her slippers, pots of tea, hot-water bottles to

comfort her as she sat for hours in the kitchen asking the ceiling what they wanted with us poor people. As if to make up for my mother's behaviour, my grandmother confided to me that the Gestapo had searched our house more than once when I'd been away fighting — which was why my mother was at her wits' end. Pimmichen held her hand, kissed her on the forehead before she went to bed. My mother took no notice. She was in her own world, and the more she bawled, the more I saw her as a weak, irrational person.

I was convinced that if she seemed reluctant to support the Führer, it was only out of fidelity to my father. I took advantage of his arrest to set the facts straight, explained all over again Adolf Hitler's dream, how interfering with his plans, if that was what my father had tried to do, was a crime. If we were to become a healthy, powerful nation we had to be ready to sacrifice all who opposed us, including our families. She must stop whimpering, otherwise she, in a way, was a traitor too. She pretended to listen, but I could tell most of her was elsewhere, and the part that wasn't didn't quite agree with me, even though she nodded and repeated, 'I see, I see.'

I wanted to make her admit that my wounds were heroic, and followed her around the house to do so. The more she refused to answer my questions directly, the more I suspected she didn't really see it that way. I resented my father for having blinded her to the truth. She was slouching with her elbows on the windowsill, her mouth touching the glass, a steam sphere swelling around it. I couldn't help myself, it was still on my mind: I brought my wounds up again, told her the cause was more important than me, my father or any other individual. I told her, for her information, that if I had to die for Adolf Hitler I would be more than happy to.

She replied, 'You will! You will! If you don't be careful, open your eyes, you will die!'

I was shocked: I'd never heard her scream before — I mean, at someone. She ran to the sofa, pulled a pamphlet out from under the cushions and thrust it into my midriff. 'Here! Read this! This is what I have to look forward to! You and your dear Führer! I'm glad Ute died! I'm glad! If she hadn't, they would've killed her!'

I sat down, read as she breathed hotly over me. The pamphlet said the parents of a handicapped baby had petitioned Adolf Hitler for the baby to be killed, after which he ordered the head of his personal chancellery to kill all other infants having biological or mental defects, initially including those of up to three years of age, but later extending this to sixteen. It claimed 5000 children had been killed by injection or deliberate malnutrition. I didn't have the heart to reassure my mother that it was for the best, since I knew how she felt because of Ute.

I kept reading and came to the part concerning the unfortunate necessity to rid the community of its burdens, which included the mentally and physically handicapped, and, among the latter, the invalid veterans of 1914–18, which stupefied me. At least 200,000 biological outcasts had been killed, and a new process of carbon monoxide gas was under development. I read the paragraph over three times. It only mentioned the veterans of the Great War, not those who'd been wounded fighting for the Führer's cause in our time. But would it be extended to us later on? I felt sick to my stomach, then enraged that I'd doubted the one person I deified. I ripped up the pamphlet, shouted at my mother not to be so gullible, not to fall into the trap, it was just enemy propaganda. I would be glorified when the war was over. The ripped-up pieces remained where they'd fallen the next day and the next.

That night I had a nightmare. A group of men speaking a language I couldn't understand were going to push me off a cliff. The hate in their eyes was unmistakable. I kept begging them to explain: 'Why? Please, what did I do wrong?' One pointed to my bad arm. I looked down. It looked uglier than it really was — shreds of tissue hung off the stub, the bone was sticking out and I had to push it back in. I pleaded, 'I can fix it, I swear! Just give me an hour!' but they couldn't understand and were in a hurry to push me off because a picnic awaited them on a chequered cloth behind them and, more queerly, the Prata Ferris wheel in the distance, overloaded with children pushing each other off for fun.

I woke up and heard steps again. I listened until I was sure there were two steps each time, even if it sounded like one, because once in a while a heel to toe step had an extra heel or toe. For some reason, in the middle of the

night it was easy for me to believe that the ghost of my grandfather was walking with my grandmother as she sleepwalked, keeping her company. This thought made me too afraid to get up and look, or go back to sleep. I badly wanted to turn on a light but it was forbidden, because the bombers could spot us if I did, and anyway I wasn't about to reach my arm out of my covers through who knew what spooks.

The following morning, when my mother had gone to find some bread and I was in the toilet, I heard the knocker. By the time I got to the door I expected to see no one still standing there, least of all my father. At first I didn't recognise him because he'd lost weight, his nose was broken, and his clothing was as ragged and disreputable as a vagrant's. My next thought was why was he knocking on the door of his own house? The surprise on my face brought contempt to his.

'No, I'm not dead. Sorry.'

I was speechless. He pushed me aside and went about snatching items. I heard the drawers in his study opening, closing, furniture being scraped around. He came back down to face me. 'You've been going through my things, haven't you, Johannes?'

I should've explained about the puzzle but couldn't bring myself to. All I could do was shake my head.

'Funny, nothing's the way I left it. You can go through whatever you want whenever you want, I've nothing to hide, but if you do, at least try to put things back as they were.'

I acted as if I didn't know what on earth he was talking about, but he was holding papers I knew I'd messed up. On recognising his class photo sticking out, I averted my eyes. My behaviour confirmed his suspicions. By the time my mother came home he was gone, with files stacked up to his chin. She took the four trams without me. I spent the time hating my father for his false accusations. No, I hadn't denounced him.

Despite the newspaper columns claiming our superiority, the Allied bombings continued to inflict damage. We had no railways, no water, no electricity. I saw my mother carrying a watering can upstairs, which was

ridiculous. We didn't have enough water for ourselves — who cared about the stupid plants? She did. They were among God's creations and had a right to live like anything else. Later, she was preparing to boil potatoes and didn't have enough water to cover them. I thought about the amount she had taken for the plants and went to see if any was left over. I was surprised to find the can gone, the plants stiff, the soil dry.

I began to spy on my mother through my keyhole. I saw her carrying a sandwich and two lit candles upstairs, which could have been normal enough, but she came down too soon with only one. The next morning I saw drops spattering off the edge as she limped along under the weight of the watering can. I waited impatiently and, later on, when she was helping my grandmother wash in no more than a bowl of water, sneaked up. There was absolutely nothing, no one. I looked everywhere — under the twin bed of the guest room, in the filing cabinet of my father's study, every crack and corner of the attic — nothing.

The more I spied on her, the more I witnessed strange behaviour. I wondered if she wasn't going crazy. In the middle of the night, up she went again with candles and whatever food she hadn't eaten. Was she practising rites? Communicating with the dead? Or did she just want to eat away from me? Sometimes she didn't come back down so promptly, or at all. Whenever she was out and Pimmichen was sleeping, I made inspections. There was a smell, I was sure there was; the guest room in particular didn't smell unoccupied. I stopped to listen but there was nothing, not inside. Maybe the faint noises I was hearing now and then were coming from outside. Was it all in my head? I squinted around at nothing, absolutely nothing. Perhaps I was the one going mad.

My mother asked me if I'd been spending time upstairs when she wasn't home. I couldn't work out how she knew, because I'd been careful to leave things exactly as I found them, and to be flicking through comics on my bed when she got back.

'How do you know?'

She took some time to find an answer. 'Your grandma sometimes calls you and you don't hear.'

I could tell it was an outright lie — my mother didn't know how to lie. I continued my search. I looked in our cellar, in the small room behind the kitchen. I looked over the entire house, centimetre by centimetre. Even when she was there I walked around, examining the joins in the walls. It made her nervous.

'What on earth are you looking for?' she asked.

'Rats.'

That's when she began to find excuses to get me out of the house. Pimmichen needed some medication or another, even when Pimmichen insisted she didn't — yes, yes, she did, she had rashes on her backside, her throat was dry, she must be coming down with a sore throat, and what about some menthol cream for her arthritis? The minute she suggested maybe I could volunteer to help out with the war I knew she was trying to get rid of me. In a city that was being bombed, what I needed most for my wellbeing was fresh air!

So I went back to my old Hitler Youth branch and volunteered to help. They were in great need of assistance and had no qualms about my handicap. That very day I was back in my Hitler Youth uniform, carrying conscription cards across the city by foot. I thought there had been a mistake when a man in his fifties took the conscription card, said it was for him, not his son, who was dead. The woman who answered the door at the next address was older. She called out 'Rolf' and her husband came out, leaning over with a stiff back to take the card. Why in the world old men were being recruited I could not understand. I massaged my knuckles, knocked on Wohllebengasse 12 in the fourth district and, after a long wait, Herr Grassy cracked the door open and stuck his head out. He took in my mutilated face, uniform, loose sleeve, as though instead of being proud of me, he was disappointed at how I'd turned out. He'd grown old since I saw him last. His sagging eyes and baldness reminded me of a turtle, or maybe it was just his glumness and slow movements.

'Thank you.' He was only quick to turn the key behind himself.

Back home, I wanted to sew my sleeve up in a way that would make it look less pathetic. Going through the drawers of my mother's sewing machine I found an old Danube Dandy candy box containing reels of thread packed so tightly together it was difficult to get one out. I wanted to compare the tones of brown to find the one closest to my material, so I tapped the back until the cotton-reels fell out. That's when I noticed that the tin container had two bottoms, and in between, a passport.

Opening it up, I saw a small black and white photograph of a young girl with big eyes and a small, pretty smile. At first I thought it was someone in my family when they were younger. But then I saw the 'J' added on, as well as the name Sarah, to Elsa Kor. My heart was pounding. Were my mother or father taking special care of this Jewish individual? Had they helped her to escape abroad?

All kinds of thoughts went through my mind at that moment. I would've examined the passport longer but I had to put it back before anybody found out I knew of its existence. I was infuriated at my parents for risking their lives, even more because it was in our house, where it could incriminate me along with them. At that point, though, what I regretted most was their idiocy. They were obviously illogical and unscientific. Then I was overtaken by an irrational fear: what if Elsa Kor was someone from our own family? Had my father ever cheated on my mother with a Jewish woman? Were any of my ancestors — just one, by any chance — Jewish? The possibility of not being a pure Aryan devastated me most. If ever the passport was found, some hidden fact could come flying straight back in my face. Perhaps this is what, above all, kept me from confronting my parents.

Next time Pimmichen and my mother were outside taking air, I strolled about calling out, 'Yoohoo, anybody home? Yoohoo? Anybody upstairs? Downstairs? Answer me!' I was sure I heard a tiny noise upstairs — a crack, not more, barely perceptible. Careful to make little noise, I stepped up the first flight of stairs, up the more stiffly ascending second flight, down to the end of the hallway to my father's study, then retraced my steps back to the guest room to a wall I for some reason couldn't stop staring at, felt was holding its breath.

That night I felt my way up slowly, step after step, and only after I'd reached the top did I light the candle. It took me a long time because I had to advance very little at a time in order not to make the floorboards creak. I felt a presence and became afraid, as though it could be my grandfather still among us. The wall seemed to breathe in its sleep, however softly, I could have sworn I heard it. I myself had trouble breathing. It was hot and there was no air up there. Then I saw it, in the flickering candlelight, a line in the wall, so fine it couldn't be seen in the daytime, but at night the shadow accentuated it. I followed it with my eyes; it led me to another line, then another. The ceiling was sloped because the rooms on this third storey were directly under our roof — this whole section used to be part of our attic. The walls were thus short, and one of them, two feet in front of the original, was made of panels covered with wallpaper. It was so well done, no one would ever have suspected it. Behind it there was a wedge of space wide enough for someone to lie down but not to turn over easily, high enough to sit up but not to stand, and in sitting, the neck inevitably must bend. Someone was behind this wall.

All night I tossed and turned in my bed, wondering what to do. I cannot deny I considered denouncing my own parents. Not for the glory of my act, but because they were opposing what was good and right in opposing our Führer. I felt I had to protect him from his enemies. But in reality, I was too afraid for my own skin: something might come out that I would rather not have known. The best solution would be for me to kill the girl, if it really was her hiding there. My mother would find her dead, and this would serve her right, if not bring her to her senses. She had no right caring for a dirty Jew in the first place.

My next problem was when and how to kill her. I decided I would wait until the next time my mother was out, then strangle her. That would be the cleanest way. But it might not be possible for me with one hand. From the picture, I could tell she was a sly, nimble little girl. What if she escaped? No, I would slit her throat with one of my pocket-knives. I looked at them carefully, turned them over one by one before choosing one of Kippi's old ones, given me by his mother. That way Kippi would be helping me.

Two long days went by before my chance came — two endless days, two restless nights. My mother closed the front door and I dropped everything I was doing to rush upstairs. I didn't care that my grandmother wasn't sleeping; I couldn't wait any longer. I held on to my knife so tight the spine-like rucks of the handle hurt my hand, then had to open the panel, which I was unable to do. I kept forgetting I didn't have two hands any more. I slid the tip of the blade into one of the cracks and levered until it gave. It was fixed on five oily hinges and opened a thumb's width. I took in a breath, used my shoulder to swing it open completely, and resolved to come down with the knife as hard as I could on whatever I found. But my arm proved disobedient to my brain's commands. Stuck in the small space at my feet was a young woman. A woman. I was staring her right in the face as she tilted her head up sideways at me. A mature woman with breasts, whose life was entirely mine as she looked at me with stifled fear — or maybe it was only curiosity, a simple wondering as to who her murderer was. I'd even say that out of the corner of her eye she perceived my blade with resignation, as though whatever choice I made in the next tenth of a second she would accept. She didn't move at all, not even her eyes did, nor did she resist in any way.

I was unable to breathe, unable to look away. I brought the knife down upon her in a soporific manner, just to prove to myself I could. By the time it stopped against her throat I was sickly fascinated. I knew at that moment that if I didn't destroy her, Jew that she was, she would destroy me, yet the danger was bitter-sweet. It was like having a woman as a prisoner in my own house, a Jew in a cage. Somehow it was exciting. At the same time I was disgusted with myself because I failed to do my duty. She must have known the knife wasn't her foe any more, because tears welled up in her eyes and she looked away, stupidly exposing her neck. I closed the panel and left.

From then on, I observed my mother to see if she knew what had happened. If she did, nothing gave it away, not the slightest false batting of her eyelashes. She was more discreet than ever, yet everything she did, everything she carried up or down, however intimate, all at once became so obvious. I had to pretend I wasn't aware of the intrinsic organisation that kept the young woman alive. Every time I opened my mouth I was afraid of making a slip of the tongue.

Who was she? How had my parents known of her? Did they belong to some clandestine organisation? How long had she been there? Years? Had she become a woman in our home, closed up in such a small dark space? Was it possible? Or had the picture on her passport been taken years back? I went to look for it so I could check the dates, but it was gone; in fact, the box of cotton-reels was no longer there.

From that moment on, whatever I was doing, freely, I couldn't help but compare it with what she must be doing, lying in the dark, feeling the walls. I wondered what she was thinking up there, what she thought of me. Did she fear me? Did she think I'd have her arrested? Did she expect to see me again? Did she say anything to my mother? 'Your son tried to kill me.' 'Be careful. He knows.'

At the same time, I was aware I hadn't lived up to the standards of Adolf Hitler and a sense of guilt came and went inside me. I tried to convince myself I hadn't behaved so badly — what harm could she do to the Reich as long as she was closed up? Bothering no one more than a mouse in its hole? And who would know that I knew? Besides, she wasn't a guest in our house, she was a prisoner. Sometimes I tried to forget about her, and told myself over and over that she didn't exist. She was just a figment of my imagination: I had the power to make her come and go as I pleased. When the right time came, I would make her vanish.

My father came home for the weekend and was nicer to me. I wondered if he knew that I knew; maybe that's why he changed his mind, decided I wasn't as bad as he'd thought. I couldn't know. I dropped hints to Pimmichen, talked about skeletons in closets, people never knowing how many were really living under their roof, but she had no idea what I was alluding to, just thought I meant ghosts and told me not to make loony conversation. Her behaviour proved her innocence. As the rations became smaller, she scraped my mother's leftovers into my dish, ignoring her protestations. My mother watched me to see whether or not I would eat them, which to me signified whether or not I knew. I looked her straight in the eyes and ate.

Little by little, Elsa leaked out of her enclosure, strayed out into every corner of the house. The table was two floors below her and on the opposite side of the room but even there she got to me, made her presence felt. In my bed at night she switched places with me, she enjoying the softness of my bed and I finding myself cramped in her airless niche.

I made myself wait before I went to see her again, but after a week my patience ran out. I don't know what I expected, certainly answers to my questions, but I changed my mind at least twice before going up. What did I have to be afraid of? Getting caught by my parents? The Gestapo? It wasn't just that.

She frowned at the daylight; I think it hurt her eyes.

'I don't know day from night any more,' she said, wincing, covering her face with her two small hands, whose fingernails were chewed down past the pink. Then she opened two fingers to uncurtain one eye, like my sister used to do when playing peek-a-boo with me.

Her hair was primitive, thick and black, hadn't been combed for some time, and there were fine black hairs sticking to the sides of her face and neck. Her eyes had a raw, primal glaze over them and were so dark I had to look hard to make out the pupils. Even her eyelashes were plentiful enough for her to be defined as hairy. I looked away in distaste and caught a glimpse of myself in the glass of a framed lithograph of Vienna in the nineteenth century, with women in long dresses and feathery hats. My face

was hideous. Framed, in sorts, it looked like one of those degenerate paintings we had cracked our sides laughing at when shown by our teacher in school. Half of it was as it had been, but the other half was minus the cheekbone, and that eye protruded slightly, enough to make my face two faces rather than one. The scars pulled my lips on the marred side, stretching them out in a smile as though death never wanted me to forget it had played a joke on me. Instead of me joining it, it had joined me, was alive and walking with me, grinning at my every move.

I found it hard to look at her after just seeing myself, but she contemplated me as though I were peculiar, and not just because of my face. I mean, the way she looked at me, I never would've known my face had been mutilated. Other people looked from one side to the other in a moral panic, tried to pick one to talk to but kept getting drawn back to the other, which I could tell revolted them as they fought harder to stay focused on the good side. I saw all this confusion pass across their faces. But nothing on my face seemed out of place to her. It was one whole face in front of one person, and then, to my simultaneous satisfaction and dissatisfaction, I remembered that Jews were fond of the kind of ugly artwork they made.

In my mind I was guessing how many years older she was than me — five, six, at least.

'What's your name?'

'Elsa Kor.'

'I think you mean, Elsa *Sarah* Kor.'

She didn't answer. I would've liked to feel an anger I didn't. I looked down to see what she was fingering: a puzzle piece of a daisy field. There were other pieces around her, mixed in with crumbs and candle stubs.

'How long have you been in my house?'

She made a know-nothing expression by pursing her lips, lips needing nothing of the sort to distract the eye to begin with; besides being full, her upper lip dove down in the middle like a child's stick drawing of an airborne bird or the top of a Valentine heart. I watched her as she picked up

more puzzle pieces. She examined them individually against her eye as if she were testing monocles. Last time she had been wearing one of my mother's nightgowns. This time, despite the heat, she had an additional shawl wrapped around her. There was something forbidden about her — maybe it was the Nuremberg Laws, which made it illegal for Aryans to have physical relations with Jews.

I told her she could come out. She said thank you, after which she took to biting her fingernails anew. We stayed like that in silence until I wanted to go away, but didn't know how I could. I wanted to just close her up and leave, as I had the last time, only I couldn't bring myself to. I wished she'd be the one to say something. Pimmichen coughed and we both pretended to jump. In my hurry to close the panel, and in hers to help me, she lost a puzzle piece. I picked it up, turned it back and forth, from the blank cardboard, strangely human in form, to the amorphous fragment of a field. The limited view made it all the more vast and desirable: it was like watching a garden from a dungeon keyhole. I dropped it in my pocket.

After that, for some reason, I wanted her to hear me as much as possible. I came home hoping my voice sounded joyous and carried upstairs. 'Pimmichen! It's me! I'm back!' Before retiring, 'Pimmichen, goodnight! I'm off to bed!' 'Mutti, where did you put my map? I want to check something out.' I moved about the house stomping, grated my chair from my desk, added to my every cough and yawn. I wanted her to be as aware of my presence as I was of hers. My mother told me not to make so much clamour, but Pimmichen reminded her it was the only way she could hear me with her bad ear.

A few days later I went to see her again, this time drumming my fingers on the partition before opening up. I actually felt I was intruding on her, she who was the intruder in my house! My pretext was that she'd lost a puzzle piece — I acted as if I'd just seen it on the floor. That's when she saw my hand, or I should say my missing hand. The pain on her face was terrible; my heart sank. It was as if she'd seen an ominous sight. She reached her hands out and squeezed it, I mean there where it should've been. Although I knew very well she was inferior to me and therefore I had no reason to appreciate it, no woman had ever made such a gesture to me before.

'That was my greatest fear when I used to play the violin,' she whispered. 'Losing the hand I pressed the strings with. I used to tell Ute; it made her laugh.'

Upon hearing my sister's name I was taken aback. She reminded me of someone fuzzy in my memory. Yes, something of her face rang a bell. She smiled at the sparks of recognition in my eyes. So that was who she was. The girl who used to come over all the time and practise violin with Ute!

I looked down at the hand she was and wasn't holding. I was so moved that I didn't disgust her — a woman, any woman — that I thought I might cry. I had to get away before that happened.

That night a drunkenness came over me. My life, so intolerable all these months since my injury, whose minutes and hours had been supremely boring, had taken an unexpected turn. Every minute was now intense; my heart drummed in my chest as I became aware of myself each morning, before I'd even opened my eyes. Would or would I not get to see her? How would I go about it? It was exciting, imaginatively challenging, and I felt alive. The tables had been turned. Now I was the one to suggest that my mother go out of the house to get some fresh air, that she was looking pale. Or shouldn't we go to see my father at the factory? Go for provisions? When my mother was ready, with her basket on her arm, I'd be overtaken by lassitude. Let her go on without me.

If it's true I'd tried to get the young woman off my mind, by that time I was also trying to get Adolf Hitler off it. His constant reproach about my shortcomings irked me: my incapability, indecorum, infidelity, all starting with in and ejecting me out of his good opinion. Whenever I came across a picture of him in a magazine, father figure that he was, my insides contracted and I quickly turned the page.

For over a year she and I lived together in the same house in this insane manner. The latent danger made the trust come and go. I went to see her whenever it was possible without anyone knowing, and gradually an awkward affinity grew between us. I asked her about my sister. I told her

about Kippi, the survival camps, the way I was injured, but had to be careful of what I said. Oddly enough, it was harder for me to talk to her than it was for her to talk to me — she censored herself less. I told myself, rightly or wrongly, that this was more because of her loneliness than out of real trust in me: I was the only one close to her age she had to talk to. Sometimes she looked happy to see me, but there, too, I deemed it was because it was just time to step out of her confinement.

She told me about her parents, Herr and Frau Kor, who argued over how to serve oneself butter. Frau Kor cut a thin slice off the side; Herr Kor scraped it off the top. They had two schools of thought about everything, from how socks should be properly folded — flatly in two, or one balled up inside the other — to how prayers should be said — punctually out loud while rocking to and fro as was pleasing to God, or spontaneously to ourselves any time of the day, since God didn't need ears or a fixed appointment to hear. She told me about her two older brothers, Samuel and Benjamin, who dreamed of emigrating to America to buy and sell second-hand cars, and mostly she told me about her fiancé, Nathan.

Nathan was brilliant at mathematics, he could speak four languages: German, English, French and Hebrew. Who, I argued, would consider Hebrew a language? Even if you don't, she answered, that's still three languages, fluently written, read and spoken, which is more than most people, you'd have to agree. I didn't. I wanted to argue that a Jew shouldn't be allowed to speak the German language at all, but couldn't insult him without insulting her, which proved to be the case on many occasions.

Nathan played no sports, spent most of his time reading history, philosophy and mathematical theory. I couldn't believe she was so enthusiastic about such a bore. She could talk about him hours at a time, her dark eyes lit up, her chest expanded, her face dampened. She tossed her thick head of hair about as she sat with her short girlish legs bent to one side, then the other, her unusually small, over-arched feet bare on the rug, though I must say they looked more as if they were tightly wedged into invisible ball slippers. If I asked her just a little question about him, what did he think about this, or do about that, mostly to manifest my own superiority, on and on she went. Sometimes she closed her eyes and tilted

her head to the side as though she were imagining she would get a kiss from him before she'd open them. I found myself feeling irritated every time she brought up his name, partly because she had a superior Aryan right in front of her eyes, and all she had eyes for was him! Not that I wanted her, or was jealous.

One day (*well after* learning that his favourite colour was blue because it was the shortest ray in the light spectrum and the most bent, therefore it penetrated the sea and sky the deepest, that's why the sea and sky were blue; that his favourite word was serendipity, he liked to repeat it for no reason in her ear; that she knew they were meant for each other when they first met because he had some Ludwig Wittgensomething's *Tractus Philosophicus* in his hands, just like her, though the coincidence was stupid because they were both in the philosophy section of the same public library, where the only people in the world to have ever heard of the dryasdust were a batch of humdrum Viennese who loitered there every afternoon! — and that his feet were Greek because his second toe was longer than the first, but that was about the extent of *his* Greekness) I got up the courage to ask her if she had a picture of him.

It was strange. I felt betrayed that she did have one, right there in my house, hiding in that secret space of hers! I told myself my anger was only because I'd been imposed upon, in a way, with a second unasked-for Jewish guest. She proudly showed me her mousy-looking dirty-blond fiancé in ugly tortoiseshell glasses. If they magnified tiny print, they certainly magnified his eyeballs — talk about two billiard balls! How could two human eyes be so protruding and yet so absent? And he was uglier than me! Jews *did* like ugly things: they did, they did! I wanted to tell her I wouldn't trade my face with his for anything in the world. I felt mad at her, too, for thinking the world of such a wretched runt.

'Isn't he darling? Isn't he?' she insisted. 'When the war is over, we will get married. That sweet, erudite man will be my husband.'

I watched her caress the outline of his puny pea-brained head. I didn't want or intend for the war to end, but my reasons were still unclear to me. This was not the case for long.

If Elsa was by then prominent in my life, so was Nathan. He joined me for meals at the table, rambling on about some far-fetched theory as she batted her eyelashes at him instead of me. He was cramped up in that tiny space with her, embracing her; I could feel it. I wanted to pull him out of there by his feet, toss him out of the window for once and for all! Our whole house was their playground: they ran up and down the stairs hand in hand, giggled as they tumbled over our sofas and beds. How sweet that kiss would be, so long awaited, every one of her senses having been dulled in that enclosure. I imagined his meek fingers touching her cheeks, bringing her face nearer until his lips touched hers. It enraged me. Once in a while I dared imagine that kiss being mine, and felt a lump in my stomach and a kind of sluggishness all over. Was I becoming sick? Was she contaminating me? I was lowering myself, but somehow I didn't care. Who would know?

I began to read the newspaper with a fresh eye. Every victory now brought Elsa closer to me. Every enemy attack was only to take her away from me. The war lost any other significance. Winning meant winning her. Losing meant losing her.

The kiss became an obsession. I, who'd gone through all manner of trials of courage, who'd defended the Reich, found I was too cowardly to undertake this minute act. And she wasn't even an Aryan! I was furious with myself for spending so many hours with her, thinking of nothing besides, then being incapable of doing more than dumbly listen to her talk, captivated by every movement of her Valentine heart lips, nodding my head the whole time. It was agony, especially when she began chatting about him: all that had seemed possible turned impossible as if by black magic. Each goodbye left me with a profound sense of failure.

I swore to myself, on my honour, that the next time I saw her, no matter what, I would just kiss her, full stop. I rehearsed the kiss a thousand times in my mind. The fact that she was in my house made me feel she was more rightfully mine than his. Then the time came. She'd stopped speaking and there was a brief silence. I hadn't moved yet, but was just about to — had already taken the initiative in my mind and was concentrating as hard as I could — when she looked at me, at the ridiculous expression I must have been making, and burst out laughing.

Though usually I was fond of the way she closed one eye more than the other when she laughed, as if winking at me, it now irritated me no end. Her lips irritated me too, stretched so that her laughing looked like crying, so enjoyable was it to her.

'Do you still remember, Johannes, that time you came into your sister's room to throw your slippers at us?' Her laughter rose, grew melodic. 'I never saw such a bad temper in all my life! You said it was your turn to play with her. You almost broke her violin — you wouldn't let go!' She messed up my hair.

So that's how she thought of me! A little boy getting dragged away by the collar! How miserable I felt at that moment. She still saw me as my big sister's little brother. True, I was younger than her and her dear Nathan, but I was seventeen by then. Not only had I turned into a man, but I'd already been a soldier, didn't she realise it, a soldier? I was more a man when I was eleven years old, training, going on survival camps, than he would be at thirty, forty, or even a hundred! Her mousy Jew couldn't lift a wedge of cheese!

After that affront, I went out to deliver conscription cards. I fumbled around the city, made mistake after mistake. I was supposed to go to Sonnergasse in the twelfth district; I went to Sommergasse in the nineteenth. I went to Nestroygasse in the second without knowing (or checking) whether there was any other Nestroygasse in Vienna, and there was, in the fourteenth. I spent the whole time thinking bad things about Elsa, to the point that I didn't notice anything around me. She should be dying to get my attention. Even if I'd been injured, disfigured, my genes were intact, superior to his, and all she could do was go on and on about such a nobody, which really showed what a nobody she was herself, and I should just open up my eyes, face what an inferior being I was wasting my time on. Didn't they teach us in school all anyone should know about Jews? Why was I making an exception out of her? Why didn't I just turn her in? That would be the best way to get rid of her. And about time, considering how long she'd made a laughing stock out of me — as far back as I could remember.

A woman was selling very expensive apples in the street. As I walked by, I saw at her feet what looked like a bunch of garden-grown daisies, in a bucket, whose two centimetres of water were probably from our last rain; and felt myself forgiving Elsa, longing to give them to her. There was no price so I caught the woman's eye to ask. She stepped back, making no effort to hide her aversion when she looked at me, as if I set out deliberately to offend her with my face. Two other customers turned to see what the big attraction was. My legs weren't fast enough to escape their long intake of breath.

I had one last card to deliver. I knew the chances of seeing Elsa at that late hour were close to none, but I hurried to finish. I would slam the door so she'd know I was home. I imagined her waiting all day to hear that. I'd wanted to make her wait long, but now the separation was bothering me more than it probably was her.

On the way to Hietzing I saw a woman standing on a pillory, the cardboard notice around her neck saying she'd had relations with a Slav. The woman's hair was shaved, so at first I'd assumed she was a man. A group of people were insulting her. A newcomer read the placard and spat on her face. The placard cut into her chin, preventing her from lowering her face to elude, at least psychologically, the harshest verbal attacks, if not the spit.

I felt awkward as I walked freely by, my legs heavier, my every step stuck to the ground. I ended up dragging one leg along. Once distant from the scene, I tried to reason with the boy I used to be to snap out of whatever it was that was taking hold of me, but the battle was already three-quarters lost.

My last conscription card was never delivered. Before I got to Penzing I bumped into a group of German fellows my age in chic English clothes with hair past their ears, down to the chin, dancing to American brass music in the streets. These 'Swingkids', as they called themselves, weren't really *dancing*, as dancing requires dignity and self-command. No, here, clusters of two, three of them pranced around one sole girl, not one of them courteous enough to step back and wait their turn. They hopped like rabbits,

slapped hands, rubbed their rear ends together! One guy with two cigarettes in his mouth, clenching a bottle of spirits, dragged himself around on his knees, his head thrown back. Others were doubled over, their upper bodies hanging while their shoulder blades made spasms. They weren't sick, no — it was part of their so-called dance!

I had a feeling at that moment we would lose everything. In fact, I only had to look at the destruction around me to know it. For the first time I knew that we were going to lose the war, and with it the morals, discipline, beauty and sense of human perfection we'd fought for. The world was changing, I could sense it, and not in the right direction. Even me. That was the most disappointing part of all. I'd let down Adolf Hitler, whom I'd revered.

I didn't go home that night. All I did was wander aimlessly around the city, the peripheral bombings sounding like distant fireworks and awakening in me something as nostalgic.

vii

My mother was waiting for me with her face pressed against the window. Before I'd reached the gate she raced out to throw her arms around me. The previous year had taken its toll on her. Her lips were split at the corners, the rings under her eyes gave her a beaten look. White hairs curved out of her fine brown hair like the broken strings of a violin. While hugging her, I rested my chin on her head and looked at the vapour mouth she'd left on the glass, the unspoken progressively fading.

I debated with myself whether I should tell her I knew about Elsa then and there. Elsa thought I ought not to. She was afraid that if I did, my mother would worry about my safety; she was anxious enough as it was. I was convinced that if ever Elsa was found out, Mutter would have taken all responsibility; nevertheless, I feared that if she knew I knew, she'd have Elsa moved somewhere else. On the other hand, speaking up would ease tensions, and maybe I could see her more. I hated it when whole days would go by and I could do no more than scratch the wall in passing, or slip in a note on which it seemed a five-year-old had scribbled down one of our old greetings — *Grüß Dich, Guten Tag, Hallo, Servus*. This she would have to hide and I would have to throw away next time we met in case my mother came across it.

Early the next morning I sprang out of bed with the good resolution to tell my mother all, but an unforeseen incident stopped me. Pimmichen, hearing me go by, grumbled that she wasn't feeling well. I guessed she just wanted me to make her breakfast in bed, the way Pimbo used to do, and I went in and opened her shutters. The twinkle in her eyes showed me I was right. Autumn was worse than winter in our house because we didn't put coal in the stoves yet, so there was a phase where it was cold, but not cold enough to heat. It would have to get colder before it could get warmer.

That's when I saw 'O5' painted on the house across from ours. I thought it had been written for me to see as I opened up those very shutters, which

was a ridiculous thought since I was not the one who usually did so. Pimmichen's room was on the same side as Elsa's niche, so I figured someone had intended it as a threat to her and, consequently, our household. 'O' stood for 'Oesterreich', in the way it was written nine hundred years ago, and 'e', the following letter, was the fifth in the alphabet, thus O5. In modern times the 'O' and the 'e' were replaced by 'Ö', hence 'Österreich'. It was the code of the Austrian resistance, painted on political posters and administrative walls across town. I couldn't get my eyes off it. Our neighbours, Herr and Frau Bvlgari, stood at their window also, and we eyed one another mistrustfully. It was evident to me that they knew. Had they seen Elsa go by the window just once? Had they been spying on my mother? Or was it to do with my father and his long absences? Were all these fears interrelated somehow? What did it mean?

My worries were replaced by worse ones when my mother went outside to have a better look and came running back in. It was painted on our house, too — that's what Herr and Frau Bvlgari had had their eyes glued on. My mother saw it more as an accusation than an advertisement because it wasn't on any of the other houses. Losing no time, I went to the cellar to find a last can of *Schönbrunner* Yellow paint. The skin had to be removed to get to the liquid part. Plopped on the newspaper, it looked like the naïvely blissful sun of a schoolchild's drawing. No matter how many coats Mutter and I took turns applying, the yellow failed to extinguish the black. From then on, there was a mark on our house.

My mother was a bundle of nerves after that. If I made the mistake of coming into a room without announcing myself she wheeled around, clasping her hands to her heart. Every time the wind jiggled a window she cried out, 'What's that? Who's there?' She claimed she heard little noises when she picked up the telephone, noises unlike the breathy curiosity of the women who shared our party line. She came downstairs in the morning never believing, as sure as she stood and snapped her fingers, that things were as she'd left them. 'What's that cup doing there?' 'It was mine, Mutter, remember?' She compulsively rearranged ashtrays until her nervousness affected me, and tended to Elsa's needs less, afraid she was being watched. She tended to herself less, too: remained in her dressing-gown and slippers

all day and took long naps. Elsa began to live in the dark for days on end without relief. Luckily I went by in the afternoons to offer her a kind word, fresh water, or a cold boiled potato.

The days grew shorter. It was dark before the afternoon was over, and stayed dark when the clock showed that morning was well under way. That autumn struck me as exceptionally cold; maybe it was just because we were eating little. Some days we had no more than broth, old bread and a turnip. I went to bed in my clothes, my pyjamas balled up under me, and only when the temperature was bearable did I make the switch.

At three one morning the sound of weeping woke me up. I sat up and jumped out of bed. Elsa was on her knees with her head against the frame of my door. It took me a second to work out her position because her hair was covering her face like a veil, so at first it seemed her legs were going back the wrong way. I rushed to her; it was the first time I'd held a woman. She was so cold: I squeezed and rubbed her everywhere I could, conscious of her every bone. She smelt of urine and her mouth had the acidity of hunger but it didn't bother me.

'She doesn't come any more, your mother, Frau Betzler. *Tsures!* I will die!' she cried. I beckoned her to come back into bed with me to get warm, but it didn't work. She sucked her thumbnail without responding. I found a compromise. She could warm herself in my bed without me — if she hurried it would still be warm from me. This she accepted. She allowed me to rub her back through the covers.

'Please, Johannes, find me something to eat.'

I found my way with a candle, not giving two hoots if my mother heard me. I lit the gas, soaked the bread I found in a little leftover broth to soften it. It seemed forever before the first steam rose off the top, and the whole time Pimmichen's snoring irritated me. A full-grown man couldn't make such a racket through his nose in broad daylight even if he tried — I knew because I'd already tried to see if I possibly could and I couldn't — how could she do it in her sleep? All at once I felt as angry with her as I did my mother.

Coming back was trickier: I couldn't hold the candle between my teeth and under my arm had its risks. I had to melt the candle on to a plate big enough to hold the bowl and walking with it was a balancing act. I was glad Elsa wasn't looking when I maladroitly set it on the bed. The flame encompassed us in a faded yellow spot.

She just about choked gobbling the bread from my palm. I went back for some water, brought it to her lips, my lesser arm doing its best to hold up her head. Her face was sticky and wet from eating and crying. Her eyes, lit up with that perceptible gleam of intelligence, were set in an unusually pale, narrow face with dark rings under them, and straddled a perfectly straight nose that was set upon her face a bit too high, giving her a majestic bearing that could have, in other circumstances, bordered on arrogance. Her eyebrows were the only asymmetrical feature and gave the impression that each eye was feeling differently from the other. She breathed in a resigned way, one eye contented, the other one preoccupied. I kissed her before I knew what I was doing. She didn't do anything to kiss or push me back. What was love to me was passive gratitude to her.

'I must return now,' she mumbled. Too slow to come up with a reason to postpone her leaving, I followed obediently. Feeling gawky, looming two heads taller, I was only too happy to kneel and cover her with my duvet, which she accepted after much insistence. I'd tell my mother how she'd come by it the following day.

I got up at 5 am so there'd be no chance of my mother getting to Elsa before me. I didn't want her to be shocked at any explanation Elsa might give her. I waited on the sofa in the hallway across from my parents' bedroom, which was just to the left of the staircase, so I couldn't possibly miss her. I got up to check the time — five minutes had passed since the last time I'd looked. By 7 am I was champing at the bit. My mother didn't answer my knocks. Unable to wait any longer, I walked in.

'Mutter . . .' I stopped in my tracks. Her bed was made — there was no sign of her. Where had she gone? And when? Had she joined my father? Was he part of the resistance? In a way I felt relieved — I hadn't found the right words to use, but at the same time I felt I was in some kind of trouble.

My grandmother didn't have any idea of her whereabouts. 'Maybe she went to get some brioche at Le Villiers,' she suggested. 'It's open by now, isn't it?' She was in the wrong epoch: Le Villiers, the French delicatessen in Albertina Platz, hadn't existed for five years.

I checked the rooms downstairs in case Mutter had fallen asleep reading. Just as I was about to unlock Ute's room I heard her and my father come in. 'I catch myself hoping we'll be done with her once and for all,' my mother was saying in a low voice. 'I feel evil fearing for my own family. Love for my own kin is turning me into a bad person.'

'Don't say that,' came his reply. 'You did everything to get her. You've been very brave. I'm proud of you.'

'It's too much. I go up expecting to see some fanatic with a gun pointed at me! I'm changing. I'm no one to be proud of any more.'

'You won't have to deal with it much longer, Roswita, I promise you.'

'They were supposed to be here by now — where are they? All they're doing is bombing us! Civilians! People who are helping them!'

I waited until they had gone past, then skipped the other way around the library and through the boudoir, and encountered, them rubbing my eyes. 'Ah, good morning, Mutter, Vater.'

'Good morning, son,' answered my father.

'My, my,' my mother said. 'Up as early as me.'

How often had she spent the night away from home? But my father didn't leave her side and it was awkward bringing up the subject with him there, so I frustrated both them and myself with small-talk. My mother nodded too enthusiastically at my weather forecasts, forced tense smiles at the recitation of my latest dream, one in which her legs, as well as my father's and mine, had melted together and we could no longer walk around the house but had to hop.

'And you?' I said to her. 'Did you dream anything?'

'I don't remember.'

'You must've slept too deeply.'

'I suppose.'

I followed them to the cellar, then into the kitchen. I caught a glimpse of my father taking a hot-water bottle from under the sink. He complained about a sore shoulder. Later I learned from Elsa he'd put hot broth in it, giving it a double use.

I loitered around the stairs ready to intercept my mother on her own. But it appeared my father had relieved her of her task of caring for Elsa. By the time my mother took over again, she didn't even notice my duvet, or if she did she assumed it had been of my father's doing — or so I hoped.

That first day my parents stayed closed up in their bedroom for a long spell. My father was first to emerge. He grabbed Pimmichen by the waist, began to waltz. She complained she couldn't without music. 'What? Mutter, are you really going deaf? You don't hear Johann Strauss's *Fledermaus Overture*?' My father put on that he could. She listened with her timeworn face and it perked up — yes, yes, she could. My mother gave it a try in her dressing-gown and slippers, which flopped every three steps. She stopped for a reason my father said only a woman could have come up with: that she couldn't waltz without her hair up. My father removed the clip keeping the hair out of her eyes and put it to the back. It took him a few minutes to understand how it worked, but the improvisation was respectable. Even if it didn't last long, our laughter did.

He came back from the garden with a weed sack and a funny crook of a smile. The meal he put together was — how can I put it? — original. He made bitter salad from nettles, roasted chestnuts for the main course and dessert, collected mushrooms to add taste to our broth. He wasn't as good as Mutter at rinsing off the soil or cutting off bad parts, but we didn't mind. The garden was depleted after one foray, so he must have gone to the black market the next day. No one believed his tall tale — he had been on his way home when he came across a baby boar lying unclaimed in the middle of the street. As though a hunter had wounded it and it had escaped to within a stone's throw of our oven.

Ignoring my mother's warnings that there wouldn't be coal to get through winter, he filled the tiled stoves. His behaviour was uncharacteristic but I wasn't going to object. We eased our armchairs towards the prettiest stove made of elaborate green tiles, watching mesmerised for the fire to get hot enough for the hatch at the bottom to be closed. It had all the mystery of a tragic play no one could understand, enflamed actors proclaiming their hearts in a dead language. My mother was cuddling up against my father and I wished Elsa could be with me. I knew they were thinking of her too, because my mother said something in my father's ear and he was instantaneously up and about.

Although I wasn't unhappy with them, I was impatient to be alone. I had inexplicable urges to scratch Elsa's name on the wall near my bed, scrape it on my arm. I re imagined our kiss, longed to kiss her more deeply, kiss her shoulders, neck, girlish stubby-nailed fingers. The fact that my parents didn't notice my dreaminess only shows to what extent they were preoccupied with their own fate. I think from that moment on, my mind never had a second's rest from her. To other people I looked the same, perhaps, but to me, she was there as much as I was, if not more. It was a wonder no one could see her sitting on my lap.

One winter night there was no moon. All our shutters were closed, and the windows that had no shutters had rugs nailed to them. The posters had doubled in every neighbourhood: 'The enemy sees your light! *Verdunkeln!* Make darkness!' Light had turned into an enemy. I went up on my knees, feeling my way to her. Darkness was my friend: it would hide my face, any awkwardness I might have. I would confess to her I loved her; I couldn't keep it to myself any longer. If ever we lost the war we could emigrate to America and I would marry her. I didn't mind marrying a Jew. She wasn't like the others I'd learnt about — she was an exception. Besides, she could convert to Catholicism. If my parents had safeguarded her, what could they have to say against it?

My heart was pounding. I stopped at the top of the stairs and went over my words again. I was convinced she'd jump at the privilege of being my wife, the wife of an Aryan. Naturally, she'd accept. If she'd resisted me until now, it was only because I hadn't offered her any commitment; she'd

assumed I was playing with her, looking only to have fun. I rested my cheek against her wall, drummed my fingers on it in our special way.

'What?' she hissed.

'It's Johannes.'

Again I had to tap. It was a while before she opened. Enamoured, I reached in for her with the force of youth but, curiously, she made no effort to come out. I tried to wedge my own head in for a kiss but she pushed me back with a sigh.

'What's wrong?' I thought she was mad because I hadn't come to see her sooner. I was in a tight spot for I knew that before I shared my plans with her she'd hold back, but it was hard to speak of such matters before she'd shown me some sign of affection.

Her voice was annoyed. 'I can't live in this stupid black any more. I want to scream, pull my hair out! If it were only for me I wouldn't care! But if I died, what would change? For me there's not even any difference between awake and asleep! Just black, black, black!'

'Shh . . .' I rubbed her hair. 'You want me to give you my torch — with my one good battery?'

'Do you have to ask?'

I wasn't expecting her to snap at me, but decided it was only the discomfort she was undergoing. In a way I have to say I was flattered, as it meant we'd passed the barrier between polite acquaintances into a more intimate union. Nevertheless, I took my time going to get the torch. I wanted her to regret the way she'd addressed me. It worked. When I got back she reached out to feel it was me.

'Here.' I put my hand around hers to demonstrate how it worked, keeping it there after I was done. She worked hers away.

'Elsa . . .' I began, but all I'd intended to say seemed out of place. She cut me off anyway by shining the torch in my face. I reached out blindly to take it back but she'd already hidden it in her nook, which I was starting to hate.

As much as she was dependent on others, there was something autonomous about her when she was in it.

'*Black*', she started again, 'isn't even a colour. Nathan explained to me that black is nothing but the absence of all colours. I, therefore, am living in the absence of colour. I cannot see myself, therefore I can assume I am absent, I no longer exist.'

'You do to me.' I leaned forward. 'I love you.' Her lips contorted and I found myself kissing her teeth as she cried so loudly I feared my parents would hear. I covered her mouth. Those were the last seconds of my happy illusion. I thought it was what I'd said that caused her such emotion, the equally intense love she shared for me, but after a long in-breath that nearly took my palm with it, she uttered, I was almost certain, his name.

Shocked, I drew my hand back. She continued between gasps of air: 'Nathan, Nathan. Help me, help me, you're all that keeps me alive, Nathan.'

I'd been unprepared for the jilt of rejection. In fact it was more than rejection: it was as if we'd been together and she'd just cheated on me with him. Hearing the planes overhead was a relief and I hoped at that moment she'd be killed. When a bomb exploded close to our house, the blast somehow set me free and I yelled from the pain she'd caused me. The air-raid siren made its familiar plaintive rising and falling howls and my mother called out for me. I slid down the stairs on my bottom. I heard her knocking things over in my room, beating my bed in the dark.

I clutched my mother from behind. She didn't care where I'd just come from — all that mattered was getting to the cellar. My father must have lifted Pimmichen in his arms, because she was fussing that she didn't want to die without her teeth — please, couldn't he please go and fetch them. Pimmichen often described the funeral she wanted. She was to be buried in her wedding gown, her veil (spread across her upper two bedposts for as long as I could remember) covering her face, J. S. Bach's 'Slumber Now, Ye Eyes So Weary' being sung as the coffin was carried off. Just as pretty as on her wedding day, and of course we weren't to forget her teeth! My father regularly mocked her: 'Yes, in case you decide to smile!'

Our nightclothes offered us small protection from the damp chill of the cellar. The flickering light bulb added to the gloom. My mother, father and Pimmichen hadn't had time to put on their slippers and the floor was hard, cold dirt. I looked down at mine, hoping no one would wonder how I'd found them in time. I picked the dried skin of paint off the newspaper, twisted it one way and the other, trying to allay the worry sneaking up on me, despite my anger, for Elsa, excluded from a decent shelter.

The walls shuddered at every explosion. The stone structures were our only protectors, yet we knew they could from one instant to the next become our indifferent executioners. Pimmichen continued, 'My teeth. If anything happens, make sure you go through the ruins till you find them. They were just on the sink.'

My mother turned to my father. 'If the roof is blown off, can you imagine what they'll see from above? If the house crumbles and the neighbours see? We'll be doomed!' She buried her face in her hands.

'Don't worry,' my father reassured her. 'In that case we'll all be dead.'

The house was shaken again. I watched the light bulb swing on its wire, our shadows giants swaying back and forth on the walls.

'They might be by my bed. I don't remember. You'll have to check.'

'What if some of us die, but some of us don't? Or if most of us do, but just one doesn't? Only one? Did you ever think of that?' My mother wrung her hands as she went over the various scenarios in her head. I'm guessing the one that disturbed her the most was all four of us dead and Elsa left unprotected. But maybe it was the scenario that left only me alive with an extra body to have to account for. I had a tragic vision of each possibility in turn.

My father held her close, her head against his shoulder. 'We'll do our best to all die, won't we?'

'Fine state that would leave me in. Look at me — dirty bare feet, toothless, looking like some beggar in the streets. I wouldn't get a proper burial . . .'

'Oh, if this house falls,' remarked my father, 'you will have one to put Tutankhamun to shame. Can you believe the tons of debris they'll have to excavate in order to unearth you? Maybe you'll be famous in a couple of centuries.'

The dust rose, was gritty between our teeth.

'Don't poke fun. A burial is a serious thing — could mean the difference between heaven and purgatory. I come from a respectable family, you know.'

'I always told you, you'll live to bury us all. Only people in the Bible live as long as you.'

'Don't worry, I'm so cold, I'll catch my death for sure. You notice how they bomb more when it's cold? They do it on purpose! If they don't get us one way, they get us another. Our country won't count the ones who die from the flu, war victims as much as anyone else. But no, we who putter out slowly with strength and courage won't find our names engraved on any bronze plaque. They won't chisel our names into any monumental slab of granite.'

'Jesus would've had a hard time crossing the raging sea with the likes of you. You're each worse than a hole in a hull.' My father got us to join hands. Pimmichen tucked my left arm under hers.

'When I was a boy in school,' he said, 'I still remember that I sang with my classmates:

*Sing,
To Kingdom come,
Sing,
'Til His will be done,
Fear,
Go on and flee,
Faith,
Come back to me,
Righteous
Is His mighty sword,*

*Sing,
And praise the Lord.'*

Pimmichen joined in — she knew the words. Then my mother meekly raised her voice with us. I sang out but it was as if someone else was singing for me, for I was in another part of the house, the fear of death — mine, hers, my whole family's — having converted my anger to a violent brew of love. It was the first time I made love to Elsa in my mind, more intensely than life would have enabled me to. I was brought back to reality when the light bulb met its end against the ceiling. It was as black as death. We continued singing as if nothing had happened. I dug my finger into the ground, wrote 'Elsa' until the dirt under my nails hurt. I'm sure it'll still be there to this day.

viii

The bomb alert was over. Apart from being chilled to the bone, we were intact. My father said we should take the cellar exit out to the street, because if the house had been hit, something could fall on our heads if we went back in through the inside. My first impression on emerging was how warm the air was. That was before I saw Frau Veidler's house, two houses down and across the street, in flames. Herr and Frau Bvlgari and a new neighbour, a young Dr Gregor, were proffering their consolation with no effect. Spotting my parents, they waved them over. I heard Frau Veidler say, 'I don't care about the house, but please, save my birds, save my darlings!'

Since she'd been widowed she'd bought cages full of them. Neighbours quibbled about the noise. Her house supposedly stank; the postman had told us you couldn't go in without holding a handkerchief to your mouth. My father had joked with us, saying that if there wasn't enough to eat, would we like him to go and get one of her stinky little birds?

The roof shrivelled off its wooden ribs; one side of the structure gave in. There was nothing we could do or salvage. The flames were warming me — a sensation I guiltily enjoyed. Pimmichen, I think, was doing the same. She rubbed her hands together, then, feeling my mother's eyes on her, checked them into an awkward configuration of prayer.

An exotic white bird, as dainty as if made of lace, flew out of the burning framework. It was a dire spectacle, its trailing tail and wings aflame. I couldn't tell if its shrieks were accusing us of ill-doing or cursing us as a species, which in the end might have boiled down to the same. Frau Veidler raised her hands to her head and called out, 'Anita!' After a last brief suspension in the air, the bird fell lightly to the ground, where the flames continued their course.

I wanted to stamp them out, but could not without trampling the bird. I knew I should end its misery — I remembered what I'd learned in the Hitler Youth — but it disgusted me to do it. The ribcage moved in and out with

breathy notes like a punctured accordion. Frau Veidler smothered it between her breasts. Then she held the dead bird up. No one could get her to let it go. 'Those bastards killed my bird! God-cursed murderers! My beautiful little birds!'

Our house was shrouded in smoke. I could sense that something was wrong. Had Elsa left her hiding place? Was she wandering in the streets? Without a word, I hurried back. The roof and windows were untouched, yet I felt her absence, was sure of it. I rushed up the stairs expecting something vague but dreadful, burst into the room.

Nothing had moved, but there was a curious detail that would've given her away had I been someone else. Strands of her hair were sticking out of the bottom crack of the closed panel. I stooped and felt them, twisting the thin, dark curl at the end around my finger. Now that I knew she was all right, my resentment came back full force and I pulled out that lock of her hair. If she needed comfort, Nathan could give it to her.

I vowed not to talk to her, never ever again. Hating her, I already missed her, and it was a cruel irony that the only human being who could console me was the very one who made me suffer. No, I decided I ought to punish her so she'd never treat me badly again. My behaviour was without a doubt childish, the fruit of impulse, not reflection. There was a flask of tea I knew was going to be taken to her. I unscrewed it and poured salt in.

Far from satisfied, I offered to clean the kitchen. I put soap in the leftovers I knew were intended for her. My mischief backfired. The leftovers were served back to us and I had to eat them without showing anything was wrong. Pimmichen, to my relief, didn't notice. My mother ate some, made a face and glanced down at my arm. She said she knew that with so little water it wasn't easy but I really had to do a better job of rinsing the dishes.

The nightgown Elsa wore had been washed and folded, along with a towel. I cut off some of my own hair, chopped it up and dotted the inside of the fabric with these fine bits before folding everything back the way it was. I hoped they'd make her itch. Things were now equal. I pressed her lock of hair against me as I slept.

The next day my parents left for the factory. I paced back and forth in Elsa's room, letting my boots thump down. She never dared chance my name, not once, I noted bitterly. All she cared about was saving her own skin. I hoped the battery of the torch I'd given her would die, but that particular detail was taken care of after my parents' return, in a manner I could not have anticipated, when two men dressed in civilian clothes showed up at our door.

They asked if they could talk to us — they just had to ask us a few questions to help them protect our neighbourhood. Had, for example, our house been hit? Did it suffer any damage? Could they take a look around the garden? My parents had no objections. They walked around our house, remarking on the species of trees we had, asking how old they were, had we been the ones to plant them? They kept looking up at the dormer window of the guest room. My mother offered them information about the weeping willow, how taxing a tree it was, its whip-like branches and leaves falling year around; no grass could grow underneath it because of the acidity of its sap.

They waited politely for her to finish. 'Whose window is that, up there?'

'Nobody's. Or I should say, all of ours. It's a guest room, you know, but we haven't had guests in ages,' my mother explained.

'No?'

My father cut in. 'No. Nobody.'

'Were you in your cellar during the bombing?'

'Yes, all of us.'

'How many is that?'

'My wife, mother, son and myself.'

'Four?'

'Yes, four.'

'You didn't forget anyone upstairs?'

'No.'

'Then one of you forgot a light?'

'There were no lights on. Our house was black,' said my mother.

'A light was spotted in that window throughout the entire bombing.'

My mother was unable to hide her fright. 'That's a lie. Who said so?'

'We saw it for ourselves, ma'am.'

'That's not possible.'

'I was up there before the bombing. Sorry Mutter,' I spoke up. 'I couldn't sleep. I was trying to read with a torch. I don't remember turning it off when the bombers came. It's stupid — I should be used to them by now.'

The men looked at me intently. 'What's your name?'

'Johannes.'

'Hitlerjugend?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You ought to be careful. You know it could be interpreted as a signal?'

'Who would help the enemy to bomb their own house?' my father interrupted.

'Was your house bombed?'

'No.'

'Your neighbour wasn't so lucky. For all you know, the light in your window was their target.'

My father broke the silence by asking them if his wife could make them some coffee. They accepted. Once inside, they took interest in the various paintings, pieces of furniture, claimed what a beautiful house it was, asked if they could have a look around. They opened the door to Pimmichen's room to find her on her back, sleeping, with a bowl of soup balanced on her

chest. Her hair was in a tight bun, which made her nose stand out all the more. They turned to my father to ask, 'Your father?'

'My mother.'

Had my mother put too much cream on her hands she couldn't have been wringing them more. My father led her to the kitchen while I followed the two men upstairs. They looked less at the furnishings than they did the ceiling, floor and walls. One of them fingered a Persian rug in the hallway, referring to the quality, but it was just an excuse to look under it. They did the same with our beds. As we went up the last flight, I didn't dare speak lest my voice reveal my nervousness. All I could think was, what if a few strands of her hair remained in the crack? It would be the end of us all. I wondered to myself, if they discovered her, could I fake shock? What if my eyes met hers? It was a horrible thought because I loved her, her eyes were more familiar to me than my own, yet if I were to survive I would have to deny knowledge of her existence. I imagined the look on her face as I treated her as a total unwelcome stranger. Many may judge me for this, but when death is knocking at the door, not all behave as they flatter themselves they would.

They looked one wall over, moving to the next. They slid their eyes up, down, seemed satisfied, opened the window and peered out of it. A thorough tour of the attic followed, and a brief one of my father's study, after which one of the men sniffed, lifted one of his fingers in the air and announced, 'Coffee's ready.'

I thought the ordeal was over but, sipping their coffee, the men asked if I wouldn't mind showing them the torch I'd used.

'Go, show them,' directed my mother.

I stood and they stood too, which sent a panic through me, especially when they followed me into my bedroom, making it impossible for me to go to Elsa for it. Luckily I had the one Stefan and Andreas had given me for my twelfth birthday. One of the men brushed the dust off it, tried turning it on and off, but the battery was long dead. I stared down at it dumbly.

'You're sure it was this one?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You don't have another?'

'No, sir.'

'But it doesn't work.'

'I must have left it on too long.'

'Just one night?'

'I used it lots before.'

The man gave it to his colleague, who pulled the battery out, stuck the tip of his tongue to it. 'No juice,' he said, and dropped it into his pocket.

They were in a hurry to leave, so they didn't finish their coffee. The taller one said to my parents, 'You have a fine son; you can be proud of him.'

'Oh, we certainly are.' They smiled tensely as, on either side of me, they each forced an arm around my waist in a model family pose.

My mother was mad at me. Wanting me out of her sight, she sent me to see Frau Veidler, who was staying at Dr Gregor's house. I was to carry over a suitcase containing towels, sheets and winter clothes, and ask if there was anything we could do. He was happy to let me in, partly, I think, because my lending an ear to Frau Veidler meant his could rest. She kept me there for hours. It was torture to pretend I was interested in what she was saying — which birds had affinities with which, which ones she used to put in a cage together, how much grain each species consumed per day, which ones washed themselves in the drinking water, which ones resented this, wouldn't touch the water if there were feathers or caca in it, even if they were dying of thirst. Did I know those feet of theirs could rot? Sometimes they chewed them off, just like we humans bite our nails. She bravely declared she was now free to go wherever she wanted, and when the war was over she would. True, Frau Veidler had no house to call a shelter, but on the bright side, she also had no house to call a prison and keep her in. She was as free as the

wind for the first time in forty years. Noticing she was on the verge of tears, I hastily asked her a question about bird beaks.

Coming home, I found no one was about, not even Pimmichen. And there, lying on my bed, was the torch I'd given Elsa. Had Elsa chanced putting it there? Was it a sign of rejection? Or was it my parents who'd discovered it? What had Elsa said? I finally had the excuse I needed to go and see her. Not so much an excuse to face her as to break the promise I'd made to myself never to speak to her again. But before I'd taken a step in her direction, someone went berserk with our door-knocker, while crying out at an increasingly high pitch, 'Frau Betzler? Frau Betzler?'

I thought such shrieking could only be Frau Veidler, so I undertook the option of tiptoeing away. I didn't get far. A tall figure barged in, wearing a long dress that looked as if it was made out of a Scottish plaid blanket. The stranger's grey hair was too long for her age, as well as unkempt and stringy, though her appearance was not as witch-like as it could have been, considering the mole on her chin, which, had I looked more closely, might have turned out to be only a scab.

'I have to see your mother, young man. Right away.'

'She's not here.'

'When do you expect she'll be back?'

'She didn't say.'

She twisted a piece of parcel string around her fingers, whose tips were black with what I assumed to be car grease, the charms on her bracelet jingling the while.

'It's about an urgent matter. I'm leaving at seven tonight. I won't be back. I've got to see her before then. Questions of life or death. Tell her! Just like that! She knows my address.'

'She'll need your name, madam . . .'

'She'll know who I am.'

'Excuse me. My parents know many people.'

'She'll know who you're talking about. Here.'

She was about to endow me with one of her gold charms, jingling around to single out a cross, which she abandoned for a bumblebee, before changing her mind and choosing instead to make a nautical knot with the string. As soon as she'd gone, I dropped the greasy thing in a vase, wondering just what kind of characters my mother associated with.

The torch serving as my excuse, I didn't resort to any of my old protocols before opening up Elsa's panel. I wanted to impress her with my new manly ways. I couldn't believe my eyes when she wasn't there. There was just an empty space. Gone, as if she'd never existed. I could've smashed the wall to pieces, attacked anyone on the spot. So I'd been fooled by my parents. That's why my mother had wanted me to go see Frau Veidler: so they could move Elsa to another home.

The next hours were cruel. I could do nothing but roam the house as though it were alien to me, or I to it. Just breathing became a challenge; I had to will my heart to keep beating. I squatted in the middle of a room, hoping to gain solace, then found myself stretched out on the floor. I rediscovered the house in this manner, hating every cold, idle object unable to help me.

By the time my mother came home, standing up was a test of willpower. My distress was too great to dissimulate. She stepped back when she saw me, yet didn't ask what was wrong. I stared at her, waiting for her to say something, anything. She didn't, just stared back apprehensively.

'Where's Father?' I asked.

'At the factory.'

'Where's Pimmichen?'

'I had to take her to the hospital. She was spitting blood.'

'Which hospital?'

'Wilhelminenspital.'

'And where were you, Mutter?'

'We certainly are getting a lot of questions today.'

I wanted to yell, 'Where's Elsa?'

'How's Frau Veidler?' she asked.

'Heartsick over her birds.'

She peered out the window, sighed. 'That's understandable. There one day, gone the next.'

'She can think of nothing else.'

'When you're used to their company, when you have no one else . . .'

'I know exactly how she feels.'

'Do you?'

'I'm feeling rather the same.'

'Over Pimmichen?'

'Not quite.'

'Vater?'

I didn't answer. My mother scratched her eyebrow.

'Keep guessing. Well, Mutti?'

'I have no idea. Why don't you help me out?'

I shrugged my shoulders.

'Bigger than a bread bin?' she offered.

'You tell me.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'I'm sure you do.'

'Something you're missing? You mean your torch? I put it back on your bed.'

'Where'd you get it?' I asked.

She looked sincerely puzzled. 'I found it at the bottom of the stairs. I thought you put it there?'

Did she not know of Elsa's disappearance? I played it safe. 'Yes, I must have.'

Why hadn't I taken advantage of their being gone to check the house over? I regretted my absence of mind. I beat around the bush, but if I wasn't frank with her, neither was she with me. At one point, despair made me jabber every folly that came to mind, and as my voice cracked, my mother lunged forward to take me in her arms. Moving as little as I could, I wiped the tears away. Hearing the telephone gladdened me; it would occupy her while I regained my composure. But she squeezed me tighter. I held on to her as well, to protect her from the caller I assumed was the odd woman who had come earlier and who had struck me as a troublemaker. The ringing went on and on. My mother pulled away and picked up the receiver, drumming her fingers against her cheekbone as she listened. Immobilised by her thoughts, she set it back down without letting go.

'If it's important, they'll call back . . .' she said under her breath.

I tried to resume our conversation, but she didn't flirt with the secret any more. I could allude to it as much as I wanted: she refused to take the bait. I began to doubt myself, but at the same time something told me that if I didn't react, it would soon be as though Elsa had only been a dream, a figment of my imagination, an incarnation of wishful thinking. The reality of her would fade away with each passing day. I watched my mother go about the house as if nothing were wrong, wanted to grab her, turn her around, make her tell me what she'd done with her. She must have felt it, because she turned around and caught me with my eyes fixed on her. This made her smile her weak, angelic, martyr smile.

I searched the house over, from top to bottom. It was a provocation and she knew it, but she refused to react. If I did it too obnoxiously, shoving furniture around, slamming doors, she sighed, 'Oh, the rats must be back again . . .'

I continued my search around the neighbourhood, looked up every tree hoping to see Elsa's legs dangling from a high branch. I even walked through Frau Veidler's ruins, knowing Elsa could not possibly have found refuge there but that's how desperate I was becoming. Tiny bird skeletons were plunged at random into the ashes, each looking as if it had been swimming away using a different stroke and had been paralysed in a heartbeat by a spell cast upon it.

I stayed at my keyhole two full nights, but my mother didn't go up or down the stairs, just stayed in her room. Before going to bed she sorted socks, went through bills, curled up in a chair to leaf through an Italian cookbook. I could tell she was relieved by having less responsibility. Once or twice I caught her pouring water into a flask, but she carried it up to her own room on retiring. She had only herself to take care of now; there was no one else.

The third day, she was dusting in a detached way the very objects she'd constantly rearranged in her previous anxious state and all at once I couldn't take it any more. Neither could I stand her prim appearance, pressed dresses, pretty hair, filed oval fingernails. How much time she suddenly had to devote to her grooming. Her attitude was devoid of any regret, that's what got me most — the way she moved the feather duster, her hand tossing about lightly this way and that.

'Where is she? Tell me, where is she?' I felt the ugly side of my face twitching. My mother looked at me, alarmed, but wouldn't answer. 'Tell me! Where is she? You know!'

'Who?'

'Don't lie to me!'

'I'm not.'

'Tell me!'

'I have no idea what you're talking about.'

I took hold of her feather duster, and in doing so, knocked over some ornaments.

'What's wrong with you?'

Among the broken pieces scattered about there was an intact segment of a vase neck, out of which the old woman's knot had fallen. From the way my mother stooped down to pick it up, I saw it meant something to her.

'What's this?'

'A knot.'

'How did it get in the vase?'

'Some loony came by. Didn't bother to give her name. New fashion in visiting cards?'

'When?' The knot was trembling in her hands.

'Sorry, I forgot to mention it. Two days ago. Three?'

'Did she say what she wanted? Any word in particular?'

'Just to chat. She was going away, so it was then or never.'

My mother put her hands on the table to help support her weight. Feeling she was trying to sidetrack me, my patience ran out. 'Mutter? Please. Tell me now! I have to know! I have to!'

'Know what?'

'You're killing me! You know it!'

'Lower your voice.'

'Afraid she'll hear me?' I asked.

'Who? Who might hear you? Frau Veidler?'

'I don't mean Frau Veidler!'

'Who then?' she asked.

'Elsa.'

'Elsa?'

'Elsa Kor!'

'Never heard of her. Who's that?'

'Elsa Sarah Kor!' I hugged my ribs to prevent me from shaking.

My mother looked at me. 'No, that name doesn't ring a bell.'

'Ute's friend you took in. You took care of her, for years, behind that wall upstairs. Feeding her, cleaning her. I saw you and her with my own eyes.'

'That closet Vater made for our old letters? You're imagining things.'

'Elsa! She played violin with Ute. Her passport was in your sewing box. Danube Dandy Candies? Ring a bell?'

'Your accident must have traumatised you. Go look, there're only letters up there. I have no sewing box. No sweets.'

'She replaced Ute for you, didn't she, in your heart? You didn't watch over Ute's injections as closely as you should have, so you wanted to make up for it, your guilty conscience. But now your angel mask has fallen.'

After a silence, my mother's voice was cold. 'What do you want with her?'

'I have to talk to her.'

'No.'

'I have to!'

'Forget her.'

'Where is she?'

'She's not for you.'

'You can't know.'

'She's not for you, you're not for her. You're too young for her, Johannes, apart from everything else. Please, put her out of your mind.'

'I must know where she is.'

'She's not here any more. For your sake, forget she ever was.'

'Where is she?'

'I don't know.'

'Who does?'

'None of us do.'

'You sent her away.'

'No, she was just gone, she left on her own. I went up and her place was empty. I was as shocked as you are. She's gone. Gone for good.'

'You're lying!'

'I trusted her. It may be she hoped to protect us . . .'

I didn't want to let my mother get away. In her thrashing about to get out of my grip she fell, which caused me to trip, though it might have seemed to her that I came down on her deliberately. Regret was wrenching my innards; I knew I'd gone too far yet had to continue.

'Johannes, if you know, it'll risk your life along with mine. If they torture you, they'll get it out of you. You'll put her in danger, put yourself in danger. You know that, don't you?'

I let her go. She staggered up, brushing broken bits of porcelain from her skirt. 'See? I'm risking my own son's life right now to escape pain. To get out of a scratch. Me. Your own mother!'

I begged her for the truth.

'You would be willing to die for such silliness?'

'Yes.'

'It's just infatuation, growing pains. It has nothing to do with love. Nothing will ever come of it.'

'They'll never torture me like I'm being tortured now.'

'You don't know what torture is. They inflict pain, pain and pain, until the only hope you dig your fingers into is less pain, at any price, anyone's death

— your mother's, father's, your own.'

'I love her, Mutter.'

She knelt down, took me in her arms. 'I know you believe you do. But you know nothing of life. One day you'll grow up into a man and you'll see I was right. You'll love someone else with real love, someone meant for you. Everyone's struck by a first love, but everyone heals from it, believe me. Life goes on. We all would have sworn we'd never survive. I know what I'm talking about.'

'Mutter . . .'

'The feelings will be milder, but true, ripe.'

'Have pity!'

She took a deep breath, crossed her hands primly on her lap. 'She's on her way to America. As soon as they inform me of her arrival, I'll tell you.' She sat still for some time. 'It's the honest to God truth. She's on her way to New York. Her brothers have long been there. One's in Queens, the other's doing well in Coney Island.'

She was avoiding my eyes. I moved my face close enough for a kiss had we been lovers. She covered it, howled in frustration. 'Stop looking at me like that! Stop it! What do you want? A lie? If you would prefer a lie, I can give you one.'

I wouldn't let her turn her face away from me.

'You prefer me to tell you she's dead? Would that make it easier for you to forget her?'

'Her exact whereabouts!'

'Fine! You asked for it! But first you must promise you'll never go and see her. You'll let go. Swear it. On my head.'

She led me to her bedroom and indicated four floorboards that looked no different from those around them. 'She's leaving tomorrow. Your father made this years ago, just in case we ever found ourselves in this position.'

She showed me a bent nail which, with the help of the handle of a cast-iron cup, could be used to lift the assemblage up. The only holes through which Elsa could breathe were made from nails that had been removed. 'She's safe and sound. You've nothing more to worry about. Believe me, she'll be happy.'

My heart sank. The space under there would have been the size of a tomb. Either it was a lie — no one could make it out of there alive — or I knew Elsa had to be dead.

Part II

ix

When Pimmichen returned from hospital the next morning my torment over Elsa eclipsed any joy I might have felt. Without her I felt incomplete, reduced to half of one body. I was instantly conscious of my missing forearm, the still half of my face. Missing her, I missed these parts more. This insufficiency had disappeared while I'd been with her — I'd been whole again, my existence had doubled, I was two people, not one, not half. I'd lived life in her place as much as I did mine, if not more. Now suddenly I was an amputee again — and severed from her. I was bleeding to death: there is no other way to describe what was happening to me.

Pimmichen poured us *Kräutertee*. Her little finger, ordinarily crooked when drinking tea, was keeping warm with the others around her cup. She sipped to quell her coughing. 'There are more people in the hospital than there will be left out of it if this war doesn't stop. You wouldn't believe what I saw in a day. You wouldn't. By the time we win, we won't need more land, we'll need less. What my old eyes didn't see.' She shook her head. 'Men with their bottom jaw blown right off — chin, tongue and all. I didn't know you could survive like that. A nurse fed them, my God, they can't chew, smile, talk — their faces end here at the top teeth. Nothing underneath, just the hole that goes down to the stomach. No, Dearest, trust me, you're still human: anyone looking at you can figure out what you used to be like. The ones I saw, they lost their individuality, their humanity! It looked like some mad sculptor had come along and chiselled off their face.'

Pimmichen carried on about what medicines she'd been made to swallow with no doctor examining her, how nurses gave her dirty looks as if she had no right taking up a bed at her old age. She knew she'd better leave in the morning before she received a dose of hemlock. To my consternation, every subject came back to me. 'And they weren't the worst off! Another had his face off right up to the nose. Two eyes on a neck — how can he go through life like that? Just raw nothingness from here down. He's ruined; no one will ever marry him. How could any girl be expected to? One look, she'd

faint. Imagine waking up to *that*? He'd have been better off dying. No, *mein Süßer*, you're not so bad . . .'

She was depressing me no end. What she was basically saying was if there was no one else in the world besides a hunk of roast beef perched on a spike and me, a girl might choose me. But what girl would be cut off from all other choices? I took advantage of my mother's inattention to get up.

'No, no.' She caught the back of my sweater. 'You stay right here with me.'

'I was just going to get the comics I left upstairs.'

'I'll come with you.'

'He's big enough to get them himself, Roswita. You're not a baby any more, are you, dear?'

'I was just going to get my comics, nothing else.' I looked my mother in the eye.

'Fine.'

Halfway up the stairs I heard her say, 'Oh. My spectacles.' Needless to say, they were in her bedroom. At one point she went down for a book she'd left on the bottom stair, where she had a habit of depositing whatever had to be brought up. Given that I was in my room, next to hers, I just had time to rush in and press my mouth to the floor to utter, 'Elsa? Elsa? Can you hear me?' There was no answer, and anyway, I hadn't time to wait.

My mother and I both skipped lunch, neither of us leaving our rooms, after which she came into mine to tell me I had to go shopping with her. Feigning illness got me nowhere. Hearing the front door close, I gave it a minute to play it safe and sneaked in her room again to find my mother sitting on her bed, arms crossed. 'You disappoint me, Johannes. Don't you remember the agreement we made? What you swore on my head? Well, now that you're feeling better,' she held out a list for me to take, 'why don't you run along and get these for me.'

Time was against me. I considered all sorts of plans for that evening, such as rearranging the pillows on my bed so she'd think I was asleep, dropping

one of Pimmichen's sleeping pills into her water. In the end it was simpler than that. My mother, with no explanation, went out. Pimmichen was cross. She told me to keep an eye on her, for without my father around she could easily be taken advantage of. She said she'd have a serious chat with him next chance she had.

I was sure it was a trap. I'd lift the lid to find my mother, arms crossed, scowling at me. Be that as it was, I didn't care. If Mutter was there, at least I'd know who wasn't.

Her room had just been cleaned and looked spacious, almost unused. Because the boards had been polished, I couldn't find the right four. I spotted the nail but nothing budged, cup handle or not. I'd been a fool to buy her lie. Scrambling up furiously, I caught my sock on another nail.

I banged and called out, 'Elsa? Elsa?' There was no answer. My thoughts and heart were racing. Would I find her? Dead or alive? 'Elsa! For your sake, answer!'

As I succeeded in lifting the floorboards some millimetres, a silverfish crawled out. A closed-up, foul smell sickened me. I suffered an initial shock. Nothing. Blackness. Blackness. Limitless blackness. Eternal emptiness. Nothingness to cut off my breath. Lost seconds of darkness in which I longed to alter my fate, whispering to myself that I could have hugged a corpse, loved it a last time, but absence, total and irremediable, condemned me to visions of her sniffing the sea air on her way to the New World, full of hopes and dreams not involving me, fancies that would slip like a laughing ghost through my arms at my every futile embrace . . . until gradually . . . my eyes began to adjust. Fear had blinded me. Now I could make out the newspapers lining the narrow space, balled-up darkened pages, a bowl of water on one side, a stale sandwich on the other.

I was able to perceive her half slumped in the bottom, half forged into the darkness. She had lost substance, was thinner, unrecognisable. I had to concentrate hard to make her out. She had brown blemishes on her face, was paler, sunken. Her eyes shifted to avoid me, or maybe it was the light, because when they did focus on me, she reached wildly to pull the top down again.

'I'm sorry for the way I treated you. Forgive me!'

She blocked her mouth.

'I don't know what came over me. I was . . .'

I couldn't understand the sounds she was making.

'Really, I'm sorry! What do you want me to do? Tell me, I'll do it!'

Her wish was incomprehensible. I wrenched her wrists away from her mouth. Between breaths, I understood something like, 'I'm not allowed to speak to you . . . If you don't leave, things will go bad for me.'

'Who said so?'

'Frau Betzler. Your mother.'

'They look bad already.'

'Worse, much worse . . .'

'I'll speak to her.'

She choked to catch her breath. 'Don't. She hates me enough as it is. She found the torch, thought I had stolen it to make signals. She said I broke her trust — she endangered her family for me and I'm set out to bring you all down.'

'Why didn't you tell her the truth?'

'I did, I had no choice. It only made it worse; she said I had no right getting you involved.'

'She's punishing you!' I said.

'She's protecting me. It's my last chance. Your father was picked up at the factory.'

'I know. He'll be back, like last time.'

'He's been sent to a work camp,' she said.

'How do you know?'

'Frau Betzler told me. She says they'll torture him. That's why I'm here. If it came out, I'm safer, and so are you, ach Gott, so were you . . .'

'I told them the light was me; I was reading.'

She put her finger to her lips. 'I know. She told me what you did for me, Johannes. I'll never forget it. If anything happens to you or her, I'm to blame. They searched the factory after that. She's right, it's my fault. But I wasn't signalling anyone, I just . . . didn't want the cursed black.'

I took advantage of helping her sit up to hug her. She was content, I think, even if she kept her arms tightly against her breasts.

'Frau Betzler tells me it won't be for long: years sneak unseen from the future into the past. She says it won't be for much longer; I've come from a cage upstairs down into this hole. I don't want to die, I can't, not without seeing . . . again . . .' She swallowed his name.

She couldn't see the pain on my face as I stroked her back.

'It's dreadful here — how will I live? The lid presses down on my face, my feet, there's no air . . .'

'I'm sure my mother will let you return upstairs; it'll be bigger, better compared to here. I have ideas for the future if you just hold out.'

She said sadly, 'That reminds me of a story my mother used to tell me as a child. An old woman went to see a rabbi to complain her house was too small. "What prayers shall I say to have a bigger one?" she asked.

""No prayers," the rabbi answered. "You must act."

""What shall I do?"

""A good deed. Take in all the homeless of the village."

""Where in the world would I put them?"

""God will provide, he will move the walls apart."

'She took five homeless in from Ostroleka. There was so little room, she had to take her bed apart and sleep next to them. When she awoke, no

change had taken place. She went back to see the rabbi, who explained that God was testing her goodness.

"The homeless stayed all winter — her house was smaller than ever. "With the summer will come your blessing," she was promised.

'Summer came: the corn and wheat ripened. With the harvest, each homeless person found work in different parts. After they left, she went back to the rabbi. "May heaven gobble you up, Rabbi, you were right. God has moved my four walls far, far apart. My house has never been so big."

My mother came home two days later a changed person. Pimmichen's rude French proverb, *Qui va à la chasse perd sa place*, addressing my absent father but targeting my mother, was met with her lighthearted laughter. My grandmother was insinuating that my father had left his place free for another man, whose arms, she must have crazily conceived, my mother had just left. My mother attempted to fluff up Pimmichen's pillow, despite her unyielding back, told her not to be ludicrous. I suppose my mother knew I was visiting Elsa, but neither of us brought it up. She stopped guarding her altogether. Her attitude indicated that what she didn't know about, she would tolerate.

She informed Pimmichen and me that my father, because of his know-how in metallurgy, was in Mauthausen supervising a camp fabricating war weapons, but would be home shortly. She spent those days listening to the wireless with a sly smile, knitting a jersey for him. Pimmichen said my father didn't look good in red — she knew because she'd dressed him as a boy. Besides, she explained, 'that's the colour of red Vienna, so we don't want to dress him like a communist, do we?' My mother nodded or shook her head as was expected of her, but kept on knitting, her smile growing, giving a new lightness to her being. This got to Pimmichen, who took to knitting him one too, in that old Austrian green that still dominates the clothing of our population to this day. The rival balls of wool competed, jerking up and about as though the first ball to expire would win, wrapping itself around my father in the form of his favourite jersey.

I watched the yarn dwindle like the revolving line of time, the thread being yanked out of its soft round form and worked into the tight constrained knots of the present. I feigned interest in their work. Gradually the small woollen pieces grew, and all I could think of was Elsa — was she still there, would I still be able to see her. Each move of the needles was another twist and pinch in me. I told myself to wait longer, one more row, another layer off the ball, but they peeled off so languorously as I fixed my attention on them. I acted as if I'd misplaced something around my chair, frisked about the room, chanced the stairs. My mother didn't take her eyes off what she was doing, just moved her needles faster, took the lead. Pimmichen's needles stopped, her ball dangled above her ankle, and her head hung over her bust in another involuntary nap.

I kneeled next to the place almost reverently, my hand on the wood. The desire I felt was intense. It was as if in lifting the boards I was about to undress Elsa. I considered visiting the bathroom, for if she saw, she might mistake it for a sign of disrespect, but time was precious. Nothing but darkness met me again, a sinister cloak of black I strained my vision to draw away and hence expose her small, over-arched feet, giving the impression she was in the middle of some everlasting rapture, and beneath the soft fabric covering her, the inviting form of her legs, wide hips, sunken belly, breasts, fragile shoulders, neck, face, thick wild hair. I took all of her in, despite my attraction for each unique part.

She didn't open her eyes, just took in the fresh air, her pale lips parting. I held my breath so the airless smell would diminish, especially the faint odour of vomit I could detect without breathing. Her chest expanded with her sighs; I dared watch it. My hand reached out to caress the air above her breasts. It was incredible: it felt charged, magnetic — maybe it was just the heat coming off her skin that gave me this impression. Even resting in her lining of soiled newspapers she was to me as sensual as if she'd been in the sheets of our matrimonial bed. I longed to touch her, to squeeze her, feel her as solid reality, not just another one of those frustrating samples coming and going in my mind.

'Thank you . . .' she murmured.

I believe she was mistaking me for my mother as she reached out for me to help her out. Looking back, I see now what she'd intended. At the time, I took it to mean she was inviting me to lower myself on to her. It was risky — my mother could have shown up any moment, a thought that illogically accentuated my wanting. I remember the excitement of thinking I was being beckoned into her enclosure, feeling her breasts through her nightgown separate under my weight as I leaned over on her and, I admit with shame, I experienced a premature climax. I don't think she noticed because my legs were to one side: I'd only lowered my upper body on top of her. Had she, she must have reckoned my inept movements due to the strain of my position.

'Johannes? It's you? Your mother says they're winning the war. Soon I'll be free,' she whispered hoarsely into my ear as much as she asked me.

She couldn't have said anything worse, especially at that vulnerable moment. 'That's a fat lie if ever I heard one,' I spat.

She acted as if she hadn't heard me. 'Soon I'll be free,' she said to herself.

'Sorry, I shouldn't tell you the truth. My mother is plainly trying to give you false hope.'

She took her time before she began again. 'Don't you know the Americans joined the war last summer? They're helping the British in North Africa, in France. They're fighting to free us.' Behind a pretence of assurance, her voice sounded scared.

'The majority of American people don't approve of their involvement. They want the president to go back to their policy of political isolation.'

'Your mother heard about their progress on the BBC.'

'Yes, and just yesterday she thought she heard my father calling down for glue so he could fix the wallpaper peeling off your nook.' This, in passing, was the truth. 'It's normal. She's gone most of the night, doesn't sleep, so she dreams standing.'

'I've heard the word "*Amerikanisch*" a lot, I'm sure. My hearing has become acute since I use my eyes less.'

'Then you must know the Japanese have entered the war on our side? You must have heard we have a secret weapon? We'll never lose the war.'

'Your mother heard that the Germans were working hard on it, but she said the Americans . . .' Her voice trailed off.

I snatched the newspapers from around her, held them to her nose. The headlines were in the Reich's favour, the dates I pointed to were recent. It took a while for her eyes to adjust. She blinked dully at them.

'I don't want to give you false hopes, Elsa. I can give you real ones. I have thought of better ways to help.'

She didn't ask me what those were, not even when I took her hand, waited for her to encourage me. She turned over on her side, her back to me. It was the only part of her I found to my distaste — independent, stubborn, rude — and I was about to poke her for attention when one of the newspapers she'd been lying on caught my attention. On the front page was a picture of a public hanging in Cologne— Ehrenfeld, which in those times was ordinary enough, but what was extraordinary was that I recognised the face of the Edelweiss Pirate who'd attacked our Hitler Youth march. I examined it, was sure it was him. The ringleaders had been caught and hanged. It was numbing. I folded the page and put it in my pocket. Too bad Kippi wasn't there to show it to.

The war situation was, in fact, getting desperate. I was sent out to collect batteries, scrap metal — anything that could be used as war material. Going from house to house I was bound to come across some crackpots. Some people offered me rusty nails, putting them in my palm like gold pieces. One man gave me his deceased wife's hairpins and the hooks off her suspender belt, and one lady offered me a handful of vegetables, swearing they had iron in them. The honest truth.

I added my mother's wireless to the items I was handing in. She put up quite a fight, told me to say we didn't have one. My excuse was unforgivable, looking back. I said I couldn't lie. I picked up newspapers she

left lying around. Any articles I didn't want Elsa to see, I ripped the pages off and fed them to the burning coals.

I didn't want to face it but I knew Elsa was right. Soon we would lose the war and she would be free. I had no idea what I could do to keep her. But I believed she could learn to love me, was convinced my sole fiend was time. Time to get to know me better, to forget Nathan. Instinctively, I knew the more desperate her situation was, the more of a chance I had. I needed to maintain her despair, then offer myself as her only hope, if not happiness. Every day I wished for a miraculous turn of events. If only we could win the war, my life would be saved.

Thick smoke covered the city. The Opera was burnt. The Burgtheater, the Belvedere and the Hofburg (which Pimmichen still called the Hapsburg Imperial Palace) were damaged, as were the Liechtenstein and Schwarzenberg palaces. I remember the Cathedral of St Stephen was hit, the very cathedral where the Cardinal Innitzer had preached against Adolf Hitler. There were no firefighters to put out the fire because they were in combat.

Vienna was declared the new front. Elderly *Volkssturm* ran past me, stiff-legged, clutching their machine-guns to their tired breasts. Those who hadn't enough teeth to whistle through had their old lungs to whistle for them. The most shocking *Volkssturm* I saw, though, were children — they couldn't have been more than eight. In adult-sized helmets and clomping boots they revived a forgotten memory of Ute, fresh out of her bath, parading in front of the trumeau mirror in my parents' room in Mutter's loose ball slippers, boobies burgeoning, ankles waggling.

After each attack, more people took to living in cellars and catacombs, and idled about on the road. I was beginning to find beauty in destruction, ugliness. I thought to myself with simultaneous humour and melancholy: Elsa must be rubbing off on me.

One wet day, I'd been assigned to collect war materials in the twenty-first, and as I was going by Floridsdorfer Spitz, I saw where a public hanging had taken place. Thinking of the Edelweiss Pirates I'd seen in the newspaper just days before, I studied the faces of the traitors who, according to the notice

posted in front of them, had helped the enemy undermine their compatriots and kill their own kind by supporting the Resistance.

They hung there as if they hadn't a care in the world. I fancied them to be puppets, imagined pulling their cords so they could come to life, legs marching, arms swinging, heads bobbing. I pulled their cords harder so the couples jiggled, danced, jumpity jump, slapped ankles. Then I saw that one of them was my mother, slappity slap dancing with another man. This will make no sense, but in that inert moment the earth swelled in my ears to block out noise, time, solidify the sky, like a dome immuring some better part of me for good. Another me — deaf, numb, dense — stepped out of my old self and continued forward to the blurry rest, the guards holding me off, I choking to make them understand who I was and who she was, not being listened to, wrestling with ill-will, striking out at fate, being dragged away, weightless, powerless, my face in the mud, facing down into darkness where I'd initially stood looking on so carelessly.

My grandmother understood that it was too painful for me to speak about my mother. She understood this without my having to tell her. Talking would have reduced the holiness of my mother, loving me in life as I felt she still did in death. My silence was my way of keeping her high above; talking about her would bring her down to our pitiful world. My grandmother had her own way of expressing her grief. She sewed together the pieces of the red jersey my mother never finished and took the habit of wearing the constituted garment for days on end. It didn't even reach her waist and the edges hung with ragged woollen fringes. These came apart and the jersey imperceptibly worked its way up. It was only when I referred to it as her sexy red bra that she got the hint and put it in her mothball-smelling chest of precious articles belonging to the vast artefact one calls the past.

X

After removing the baskets of letters my mother had stuffed in Elsa's former hiding place, I carried Elsa back upstairs, for she was too dizzy to sit up on her own, let alone stand. I took care of her the best I could, but have to say it wasn't easy. I'd never done the shopping, cooking and house-cleaning for myself, and suddenly I had to do all this and take care of Elsa and Pimmichen. I made mistake after mistake. I poured milk into Pimmichen's tea — it was too hot for her to drink otherwise — and it curdled. I'd bought buttermilk instead of milk. Elsa would hardly touch the sandwiches I made, yet I'd put no salt or soap in them. I had to drag the reason out of her. It turned out her stomach ached if she ate certain animal products.

My meals were catastrophes. From the depths of her bed, Pimmichen explained all I needed to know. You put a dab of cooking fat in the pan, added a couple of sliced potatoes, then covered them with beaten eggs. Cooked, the omelette should be folded over. She didn't mention that the potatoes had to be boiled beforehand. I wanted to make beef stroganoff to remind her of her old sojourns in Budapest, as well as, I admit, impress Elsa. I used up all our ration cards for the little meat, but figured we'd have titbits of it all week; all I'd have to do was warm it up. I didn't ask Pimmichen for advice — how complicated could it be, everything chopped up and mixed together?

I threw in the meat, onion and salt. But something was missing — my mother always had lots of juice. The meat was turning dry, the onion black. I added a litre of water: the contents floated to the top. I went to Pimmichen for last-minute help. She said you had to add a teacup of flour to thicken the sauce. This formed lumps which, forked, turned back to powder. After much evaporation the sauce gained substance but the meat was too tough even for me to chew, and I had all my teeth. In the end I ground the pieces down with the cheese or carrot or whatever-it-was shredder and the taste matched the presentation.

Needless to say, supplies were a daily problem. Soap had grown outlandishly expensive. I had to go and get crude blocks of it from an isolated house in Neuwaldegg where a spinster made it herself the old-fashioned way. After spending the afternoon walking all the way out there, I spent a good deal more out of my purse. The black market had become unreliable. The bread tickets had been so poorly counterfeited lately they were rejected by the first baker to set eyes on them. The forests were gradually becoming depleted of deer and wild boars. Quality and quantity plummeted, prices soared. Many unscrupulous go-betweens were making a fortune on people's hunger. Those small shopkeepers who bartered were the worst. One greedy butcher offered to trade me a quarter-kilo of cooking fat for the shoes right off my own two feet!

One morning at the public market, I was the last one in a queue long enough to have been that of a weekend fair. A farmer stuck his head out of his truck in a no parking zone and whispered that his potatoes were cheaper than the ones I was queuing for. I was uneasy about leaving my place, for several newcomers were already lined up behind me. The farmer dropped his price until I was convinced to take a look.

The bag he showed me was more than we were allowed to buy, and really cheap, but since I'd come to do my shopping as usual on foot, the quantity was equally persuasive and dissuasive. Reading my mind, he said he'd help me with it as soon as he was done with his sales. I accepted and he dropped the sack at my feet. He went back to his truck for a coin he needed for my change and I was stunned to see him drive away. It was impossible for me to pick the sack up on my own and some strangers, feeling sorry for my handicap, helped get it on my shoulder. Carrying it home was as clumsy as carrying a dead man, and as nerve-wracking, because I could have been caught red-handed in possession of an illegally purchased product, the quantity alone being a giveaway. It fell every hundred metres, whereupon I'd have to wait for someone to help me again. Some people, anticipating my problem, crossed the road to avoid me.

At one point I left the bag where it was and offered to sell its contents to people passing by. But they were on their way home with arms full and didn't want to burden themselves with more potatoes. I ended up taking

handfuls out and leaving them behind. To make it uphill, I had to dump almost half the sackful. I looked back with regret, to see pedestrians reaping the harvest off the footpath.

I went to prepare the damn things for lunch. It was one-thirty in the afternoon: I was running late. Usually I took Elsa her meal at noon, and Pimmichen about an hour thereafter. As I rinsed the dirt off them, the original volume dissolved under my eyes, exposing a much smaller potato. Peeling brought another blow — there was as much black as white. I carved out sprouting eyes, dug out rot, snipped off tops, bottoms, sides, leaving me bits of potato as small as dice. I would have killed the farmer if I had bumped into him the next day. His giant sack provided me with exactly one pot of potatoes, which would've cost me one-tenth of the price had I purchased them honestly like everyone else, not to mention all the risk and aggravation!

I didn't have any better luck with the cleaning. I dusted off the furniture with the beeswax my mother had used. The dust clung to it like honey, and so did armies of ants marching in from the windowsills. I washed our clothes and was surprised that something as small as a sock could share its tint with a whole load of laundry. The ironing was the worst. I ironed one side of a garment only to come up with as many creases on the other side, and ended up branding that familiar blunt-nosed triangle on a good deal of our clothes.

Our material comfort was deteriorating. I recall the torn strips of newspaper in the toilet, a disagreeable sensation, although maybe a less disagreeable one than had I read them. Our telephone wasn't working; neither was the electricity. Some crook sawed off a shutter in the middle of the night. I made it downstairs to cut my toes on the broken glass, the window frames fanning my face, no one in sight. Nathan was first to enter my mind: I had a hunch he was crouching behind our japanned screen, waiting to ambush me. That was before I noticed the bare fireplace, and it took me a moment to realise that our cartel clocks and who knew what else were missing.

Every day just carrying drinking and washing water up to Elsa and then down was a real chore, and we didn't always have running water, so first I had to find it. She was reluctant to give me her chamber pot but had no choice. I think it was terrible for her — she couldn't look me in the eye. I didn't mean to make her feel bad, but if I caught a glimpse or failed to hold my breath long enough I gagged. If I told her once I told her a hundred times, I didn't mind, even if my body had funny ways of acting on its own.

The most mortifying for her were her monthly bleedings, which were in fact decreasing steadily. I cleaned the nook day and night but still the silverfish multiplied. I offered to bring her up the rubbish bin, so she could put whatever she needed into it herself, but she said it was dangerous — if anyone went through it they'd know it wasn't from Pimmichen or me. She had a point. It took some convincing for her to let me bury what was what in the garden along with the peelings.

At about this time Pimmichen suffered a series of bronchial infections, stomach and head flus. I tended to her needs as much as I did Elsa's, bedpan and all. I don't know if anyone can imagine to what extent my life had changed. I was a teenager, itching for adventure, and I found myself in a housewife's shoes, shopping, cooking, cleaning, a lot that kept me, both grievously and soothingly, bonded to my mother. Stepping into her shoes, I had a better idea of what her life had been, or at least I was experiencing certain aspects of it first hand. In my head I often chatted with her about the domestic concerns I hadn't known a thing about before. There was hardly a moment's rest and I preferred it that way, considering how guilty I was feeling. I imagined that the message I had failed to deliver had resulted in her death, that the knot the woman gave me had been meant to warn her of the hanging. It ate my insides out that once I'd caught sight of my mother, I hadn't continued to search among the hanged bodies for my father. Or had he been standing in the crowd when it happened? Did he even know about it? Was he suffering as I was? Or was he still safe in his work camp? I tried to do what I was sure my mother used to do: blank her mind in the non-stop chronometer of domestic labour. My chronometer was harder to keep up with than hers, though. With only one hand, the smallest task — buttering bread — took me twice as long as it had her. Perhaps this had more to do

with my inexperience than anything else. More than once, burning the chest of a shirt with the iron, or burning bread in the oven, I yelled for her, knowing all too well she wouldn't come rushing to help me, but her not coming remained beyond bearable.

If the three of us could have lived together normally it would have been far less work, for better or for worse. I would have had only one platter to put on the table and each would serve herself. But that wasn't the case. Pimmichen was sick in her room, with special diets to contend with. Elsa was upstairs and her meals had to be taken up in secrecy. Up I went, down I went. Then it was Pimmichen's turn again. And all this in between paying bills, running to the pharmacy, fumbling with ration cards, not letting on that there were more than two of us yet finding ways to make meals sufficient for three. My stomach had to be loud to remind me of myself. I hardly had time for that one. I ate whatever came to hand, standing or on the run.

The domestic tasks were tedious, and I was too young to tolerate boredom. I hated it as much as old people hate instability, yet I never considered getting out of it. The fact was that far from impairing my feelings for Elsa, it strengthened them. I took care of her; she was thus mine. Perhaps some of the mystery disappeared from before, when she was my parents' forbidden protégé, tucked away behind a wall, under a floor, in the non-existent spaces of our home. We had a different relationship now centred on her needs for nourishment, cleanliness; we had less time for conversation. It was the same with my grandmother.

Those nights the house grew bigger. So did the darkness it contained. Elsa upstairs, Pimmichen downstairs, I in the middle. I dwelled on when I was a boy, my mother cutting magical snowflakes out of paper or tucking me in with her thumb crossing my forehead. I'd never come to terms with the fact that I hadn't been permitted to give her a burial. The soldiers had done the job — dumped her body in some ditch along with the others, or maybe burned them all and discarded the ashes. What they did with such enemies, where and how, was esteemed to be none of our business.

I waited impatiently for another dawn, tossing, turning. Wishing my father would return, I had gone to the police for advice. There was no way for me to visit Mauthausen, I had been told, but I was perfectly free, of course, to write. I debated a long time before writing of the hanging. Maybe I shouldn't have, but it seemed wrong to write about the weather. I tried to be neutral so I wouldn't incriminate him. Because my letters went unanswered, though they weren't sent back to me, I felt my father was blaming me.

The moonlight shone in. On the wall I perceived shadows like fat dogs with many ears. They were from the baskets I'd set down near my bed. The daylight adequate, I picked a letter out of one. Then another. My face reddened but it was impossible to stop.

I had no idea my mother had known someone else, some Oskar Reinhardt, before marrying my father. He was a jockey! Oma and Opa hadn't accepted him, claimed it wasn't a man's work to go riding around in front of a mob of people with his arse up in the air. They called him the 'gamblers' entertainer'. Because Oma and Opa forbade her to see him, they met in secret, wrote to each other care of a mutual friend, mostly about how much they loved each other. Then Oskar was offered a contract in Deauville and the letters were postmarked from France, same stamp of the self-important profile with a hook nose and girlish ringlets that I at length associated with Oskar's own physiognomy. The dates of these later letters were spread further apart. The last one finished with a poem:

*the beaches of normandy are endless, long
cliffs bow to greet the sea
the waves offer both chorus and song
green grasses and old man apple trees
gulls gliding like a hundred kites
and as i canter, trot, gallop, flee
the children point with all their might
wishing to ride my mare in place of me*

*i cry out, i cry
we live, thus we die*

*to know is not to feel
what is dream and what is real
our heads high in the air, her mane, my hair,
whose legs are whose, hers, mine, who cares
it is then i remember my beloved one
her face has grown faceless like the sun
as distant, warming memories of my past
without a voice, a scent, please! a last*

My mother's best friend had been Christa Augsburg, whom I'd never heard of, and from her letters I found out that my mother had done outrageous things. After Oskar stopped writing to her she was furious with her parents, told them she wasn't interested in their 'decent farmer'. She ran away, leaving her hometown Salzburg for Vienna, slept in the train station for weeks. Had I known my mother? She cleaned flats, then one of her clients gave her a room in exchange for household chores and babysitting — time enough, she said, for her to make friends. Christa wrote to my mother that the days of slavery were gone; she'd never have time to make friends that way. She advised her to get a paid job, rent a room of her own before she turned into an old maid. She said it was up to her to catch the right man. If she wanted a cultivated one she should go to museums, if she wanted a bon vivant then read books at café terraces, but Christa begged her not to hang around racetracks wringing her heart out or she'd end up the deprived wife of a gambler.

My mother had told me she went to Vienna to study drawing, but that after the Great War, times had not been easy so she was forced to work. I knew she had met my father in Vienna, but now I wondered where, in what circumstances? I found myself feeling a further loss, over the 'she' I'd never known. And now she wouldn't know this 'me' of myself. I sobbed harder at this realisation. It was deep in the night, and some truths drag their longest shadows then.

There were fewer letters from my father than from Oskar. Oskar's alone filled the baskets. My father wrote no poems, and his handwriting wasn't pretty or prepossessing like Oskar's. He only wrote after they were married, on business trips, using hotel stationery, and the contents of his letters were

practical: reporting the course of his work, his contacts abroad, how he'd renovate the house. I lost interest in them and felt disappointed in my father.

It was that moment I decided I must learn to write, as in try to master the use of words. First, though, I had to learn to write, as in master the use of a pen with my right hand. This is what helped me through those nights. I traced Oskar's handwriting until my hand shook so badly I gave up. To a left-handed person it is unnatural to pull a pen along like a limp extra finger rather than push it actively as a natural extension of the hand. I tried again, this time more modestly with the letter 'a', made streams of it across the page. The letter 'b' followed, 'c', and so on, until I felt sleepiness carrying me into its all-possible world.

I won't weigh this down with all the poems I wrote to Elsa, but it's amusing to remember the first I slipped under her soap dish. Please excuse the style: a testament to youth. She was kind enough not to have dipped it in the sudsy water:

*You sneaked into my house,
Entwined my heart,
It is not fair.
You must love me too,
Before leaving behind,
The corpse of my despair.*

I cringe to imagine what she must have thought!

Those days I fabricated hope in the most witless of places. Emptying her washing bowl, I gambled on not smashing a certain cluster of soap bubbles with the water slapping from side to side by the time I got downstairs. That would mean she loved me. The girly ifs I came up with. If two clouds ran into each other before I took in three breaths (and I could turn blue in the face), if an ant walked in a chosen direction (invariably it did, considering the erratic paths ants take). While I was hanging up the sheets in the garden a robin came down for one of Elsa's hairs. I took it as a good omen. It was enough to put my past logic to shame. I saw it myself, but spring had come despite the war, buds were forming on the bare branches, the air was

changing from crisp to sweet, and nature, taking no heed of man's doings, also took no heed of my former neat, folded notions.

Without the wireless and newspapers I began to live in seclusion from the world. Outside proved unpleasant, brutal. Inside, we were protected, our house was safe, quiet, a sanctuary. Whenever I returned home I got inside and rested my back against the door and inhaled deeply. The air was so different from that just centimetres away. It was caged, tamed, smelled closed in, secure. The air outside moved restlessly from place to place, changed directions with all it met, had a fresh, unpredictable smell to it. Outside equalled danger. Inside was a kinder place.

This is when I cultivated a love for the interior that was probably nothing but the reverse side of my ever-growing hatred of the exterior. I hated to leave the house, imagined every time how bad it would be for Pimmichen and Elsa if something happened to me. I would use up the last drops of water, the last scraps of food we had, ultimately anything that lived, moved or rotted in our garden before I'd go out to buy more. I reduced the portions of every necessary commodity, more so than any governmental rations imposed on us. The war made it easy for me to justify my behaviour to Pimmichen.

As usual, after procrastinating, I returned for provisions to the only place I could find enough to last the week, in the basement of a wine dealer, a hidden world in itself, lined with wine barrels and luxurious goods. There I ran into Josef Ritter, my old Jungvolk leader. He was in uniform and had the nerve to tell me that as long as I wasn't dead, it was my duty to do volunteer work. He didn't say anything about the venison I was holding, probably because he himself had just put down the cash for a carton of American cigarettes. I answered that I didn't have time: I had two people to take care of at home. He asked me who the two invalids were. I felt the blood drain from my face, replied my grandmother and myself. If my quick thinking rescued me from worse, it nonetheless brought down on me a lecture on the priorities of life.

I trudged unwillingly from door to door, stepping over rubble and corpses. Those few who opened up were depleted of metal scraps and hope. One

woman with a baby in her arms and a child pulling at her skirt asked me what was the use, the war was over. I warned her she'd get in trouble for saying such things. But she wasn't the only one to tell me. Four houses later another woman asked me if I hadn't heard the news: the war was about to end, we were about to surrender. I went about the neighbourhood, stopping people to ask about these rumours. No word had come to them of the war ending. I entered a baker's shop and the baker said yes, she'd in fact heard the war was over. Indeed, many of the women there had — that's why they were there. There was no more bread to buy. They were hoping the Westerners would hurry up, because if they didn't, the approaching Russian troops would not hesitate to make us a province of the Soviet Union.

Shouts of joy broke out in the streets. I walked faster. I passed homeless people who manifested no sign of joy. It was a day as unsure of its season as it was of its war or peace. The buds on the trees had opened into bright leaves, releasing some magic force that reminded me of waking up as a child. I used to watch my sleepy fists open and there was something always miraculous about the life I had been given. The trees sang with the birds they hid in their foliage, yet the air remained chilly.

I told myself I had to get back in case someone else told Elsa before I did. I anticipated her shriek of happiness, the hug I'd receive, just as much as I dreaded her next actions: patting me on the back so I'd back off and her instant preparations to part. I'd warn her to be prudent, insist she wait before she did anything. Maybe it wasn't true, maybe it was all a big trick.

I reached the outskirts of Vienna. The maze of human structures, standing and fallen, gave way to the simpler countryside: fragrant pine forest, sweet yellow fields, hills etched with vineyards. I thought to myself: this is the last time I will go home to a hidden, secret Elsa. Soon, she wouldn't be mine any more, and I felt the sadness of it. Then another thought crossed my mind. What was the big hurry? Who would tell her but me? Couldn't I at least make this last walk back to the house we shared last a little longer?

Two clouds were moving in the same direction, one catching up with the other. As I watched them merge, an unexpected third cloud sank, creating an awkward hump on its back — maybe a burden of some kind. What did it

mean? Would Nathan show up at our door? A third party? I imagined Frau Veidler running around the neighbourhood waving her arms as she shouted the news, and picked up the pace.

Inside, there was a dead silence. I banged on Pimmichen's door, peeked in to find her flat on the bed with one leg stretched out, a drip of blood working its way down her shin, a tissue between each toe to absorb more that had gathered there. She started and slipped her limb under the sheets. 'Can't you knock, Johannes, before barging in?'

'I did.'

'I'm going deaf. Knock until I answer.'

'Pimmi! What happened?'

'Nothing.' She blushed. 'And if I don't answer, that means I'm dead.'

'You're hurt!' I tore back the sheet, caught her foot and blinked at it, confused.

'I look at my music notes, they're yellow; a picture of your grandfather, he's gone yellow. Look at my wedding veil up there like some old *moustiquaire* — yellowed. I look down at my toenails, same old thing happening. Decay can't wait for death. Nasty *Schweinerei*, impatience.'

Comprehending, I was speechless.

'I borrowed this red nail enamel some time ago from your mother's room. I'm sure she wouldn't have minded. I know ladies from respectable families don't put colour on their toenails, but since nature is putting one on for me, I'm entitled to change it to what I like.'

'Were you planning to go out and celebrate?'

'Where'd you get that far-fetched notion? Is there anything worth celebrating?'

I smiled nervously. 'Some say the war is ending.'

'Oh? Really? We won?' I let her foot down, the bad news enough to bear. She looked up, saw in my face that we'd lost, and contemplated her toes.

Spreading and relaxing them, she said, 'Such an end would be unfortunate. You wouldn't believe the black misery they dunked our heads into after we lost the last war. May God help us.'

I sat down on the edge of her bed. We were quiet for some time.

'Johannes? You wouldn't mind helping me just this once, would you, dear? I can't reach any more.'

My mind wasn't on what I was doing and my workmanship proved as sloppy as hers. Her little toes had no nails, so I dabbed the skin where they should've been with the lacquer. Pimmichen was fast asleep by the time I was done. My heart was heavy. I now had to face Elsa.

I didn't go straight up. Neither did I put the venison in the oven or heat water for her tea. I simply sat in the kitchen, relishing those final moments she was still in my care. Though it had been tiring, caring for her had given me a sense to my life. In the future I'd only have Pimmichen to watch over, and that for how long? In how many days would my father be home to console me? I pitied myself long and hard before standing up. After rinsing my mouth and fingering my hair back into place, I decided I was ready.

The pinstriped wallpaper was a motif I at once hated and loved. Hated because it shielded Elsa from me with its brittle bars; loved because it held her there safely. 'It's Johannes,' I announced. 'I'm going to open up.'

I lowered the shade before helping her out. She fell on the rug. I massaged her legs, lifted them up and down to get the blood circulating. Neither of us spoke; we knew the motions by heart. I put my arm under hers, hoisted her up. She put her weight on me while I helped her pace. When she'd had enough she slid down. I supported her back with my knees, massaged her neck, shoulders. I moved her hair aside to do so, longed to kiss her neck, knew every fine hair, the small mole on it. She had the habit of doing all this without opening her eyes. Once in a while I fed her like this. She accepted whatever I put in her mouth. One can imagine what state all this put me in. If only she'd known, yet I was sure she did know . . .

One particular afternoon she tipped her leg from side to side in a way seeming to indicate that her defences were dropping. I asked her what it was she'd been thinking about in there, my voice unexpectedly thick and scratchy. 'Many things, many nice things . . .' she'd answered, opening an eye rapidly to look at me, then closing it again. For a split-second her smile was coquettish. I massaged her legs as usual, only that time I moved my hand a bit higher up, watching her face for any sign of rejection. Her expression didn't change. I slid my thumb close to her undergarment, let it dwell there. She said nothing, did nothing. I dared ease it under the fabric. She gasped, clutched at it, then edged it back and said, 'Stop it, Johannes.' Her tone didn't sound angry — I must say it came off rather motherly.

This time, however, there was no ambiguity. Looking down at her, I blamed her for my mother's death. I moved an arm for her, waved it, let it fall back down. I did the same with the other arm, picked up a leg, jiggled it, did the cancan with it. Where did she think she would go, what would she do, without me? I picked her up, walked her around the room. I was doing most of the work; her legs just followed like any puppet's would. I bobbed her up, down, tried to make her waltz to my 'Oom pa pa, oom pa pa . . .' She picked up that something was wrong, opened dizzy eyes.

I moved her around roughly to an obnoxious tango, 'Dum dum dum dum, doom doom, ta da,' dipping her back each time she tripped over her own feet. If I ignored her pleas to stop, it was because as I was dancing with her, I was imagining her in a wedding gown, a crown of daisies in her hair, and I was her groom, Nathan!

'Why are you behaving like this?'

'Aren't you happy? Don't you want to dance?'

'You're hurting my neck!'

'You have every reason to dance. Look how beautiful you are. Wasting such beauty here. Imagine whirling around a ballroom, sharing it with every man.'

I toppled her around, faster and more recklessly until I collapsed with her, held her close to me and sobbed bitterly.

She managed to steady herself, pushed my hair out of my eyes. There was panic in her voice. 'What's happened?'

Trying to get myself together, I wiped the snot from my nose. She shook me by the shoulders. 'It's your father?'

'I'm sure he's fine. Busy as usual.'

'Then why are you . . . you know?'

'Because I'm so happy.'

Outside, screams of joy could be heard, mixed in with the distinct sound I could hear of a fretful minority not shouting, like me. Far away, there was a sound like hundreds of firecrackers going off. Elsa straightened up, grasped her neck. 'What's going on?'

The time had come. My heart was pounding blood into my limbs but it felt as if they were being drained. I sought the right words with difficulty, then said, without knowing what I was saying, 'We won the war.'

I was as unprepared as she was for this lie. It wasn't even a lie, not at least in that exact moment it was spoken. I don't know fully what it was. It was so many confusions balled up in one. In a way, it was a test to see how she would have reacted if we had won — a small test before announcing the truth. It was also what I would have liked to say, and not only say, what I really would have wanted. I know it will be hard for anyone to believe, but it was also a joke: a fraction of it was ironic, intended to be funny. Another fraction was designed to torture her, because I knew shortly she'd torture me with the real facts, and that for much longer than the brief instant I'd made her suffer. There was a provocation in it — I wanted her to figure out on her own that what I'd said was a falsehood, wanted her to see through my façade, confront, insult me.

Her face fell, but not nearly to the degree I had expected. I was startled. I waited for her to cry, to do or say something drastic that would force me to tell the truth, something that would squeeze my heart, get it out of me, but she acted so reasonably let down, I just couldn't believe it. It was in those next vital seconds that my words and every notion they contained — test,

wish, joke, torture, provocation, confusion — began to sprout into a real lie. Maybe by simply believing it, she'd offered the seed its first drop of water.

Trembling, unsure of myself, I opened the partition to see what she'd do — if it would or could against all impossibility work. I was counting on a well-deserved slap before she stormed away. It was incredible: she stepped in. I didn't hear a single noise. How she'd accepted my explanation . . . I couldn't get myself to trust what was happening, how easy it was. I'd never once thought I'd get away with it.

I had to be alone, get my thoughts together. Maybe it would be better for me to wait until the situation was clearer before announcing the true turn of events? In a way I was protecting her. But deep inside, in a hidden corner of my heart, what I was really thinking was: what harm would it do to steal just a few extra days?

xi

Vienna only remained Vienna after the war the way a loved one retains a name after death. The city was divided into four quarters, each occupied by the troops of one of the victorious. Hietzing, Margareten, Meidling, Landstraße and Semmering were occupied by the United Kingdom. Leopoldstadt, Brigittenau, Wieden, Favoriten and Floridsdorf (the district near which my father's factory was located) by the Soviet Union. France took Mariahilf, Penzing, Fünfhaus, Rudolfsheim, Ottakring. The United States occupied Neubau, Josefstadt, Hernals, Alsergrund, Währing, Döbling. If Vienna was cut into four, like a cake, the inner-city 'Hofburg' was the cherry on the top, chewed and left on the plate for all to share. As the saying went, it was worse than four elephants in a rowboat.

Each nation's flag was to be seen in its assigned sector, but curiously, that wasn't what made a nation's presence felt most. The flags were like children sticking their tongues out at us — annoying, but to be expected. The armed troops were humiliating less for their official duties than simply for the way each soldier couldn't help but gloat: they were the winners, we the losers. It reminded me of the medieval sculptures over portals of cathedrals. The pope, bishops and financial supporters of the artwork are giant-sized, and below, one happens to notice the procession of men who don't reach their knees but are more significant than they initially seem, for it's thanks to this strain of tiny men that anyone can appreciate the grandeur of the first.

The encumbering aspect of it, at least to me, was the cultural invasion. From one day to the next, unusual smells filled the streets. Vienna just didn't smell like Vienna any more. These came from the American fried breakfasts, the British fish and chips, the French cafés, the Russian bistros (a Russian word the French were quick to pick up on), as much as from the windows of private dwellings one walked by, these given over to the military for their married housing. Don't get me wrong: on their own these smells weren't bad, they just weren't ours. Incomprehensible languages mixed in with utensils caressing plates, glasses kissing glasses. Even the

laughter was not our own — you could tell it apart from a mile away. Maybe because we had nothing to laugh about.

Foreign languages were popping up on street signs, in shop windows and movie houses, on toilet doors. Foreign currencies were being scribbled down on the price boards of *Wurst* stands and the windscreens of old Mercedes, the American dollar particularly. Menus in restaurant windows bragged: 'We speak English'; '*Ici, nous parlons français.*' Not only were the Russian words beyond guesses, so were letters of their alphabet. I must say, though: the written languages were never as irritating as the spoken. It was one thing for a city not to *smell* like your own any more, but for Vienna not to *sound* like the city I grew up in sent a dagger through my heart. German was my mother tongue, the language my mother spoke to me as a child, and as dear to me as she'd been.

These were the languages of the victors and they knew it. There was a note of self-esteem in every word. The Americans were known for speaking loudly. Maybe their way of speaking was more perceptible from far away because it was so nasal. If some of our Germanic language came out of our throats, I'd say a good deal of theirs came out their noses. The other nationalities could be loud too, especially after a few drinks, and Americans, British and Russians were well known for those. A joke went around. How do you know if an American officer has been drinking? He can't walk straight. How do you know if a British officer has been drinking? He tries his best to walk straight. How do you know when a Russian officer has been drinking? It's the only time he can walk straight.

They stuck out like sore thumbs — the British with their blushing schoolboy complexions, the French kissing every other French person they came across on both cheeks like windscreen wipers, the Russian men smacking each other on the old pucker. I knew I'd never get used to it. Big cities such as New York have known the phenomenon. Chinatown brings to mind China more than the United States, but this was a progressive development. Imagine waking up one morning and overnight your whole neighbourhood has transformed into another country.

Our country, by the way, was Austria again. We were no longer a province of the German Reich. Austria had been declared independent (some few would have the nerve to say 'had declared itself independent') before the end of the war, when the tide had turned against the Reich. Most Austrians preferred to change shirts at that time — to whitewashed shirts at that — and to act as though Austria had been unwillingly invaded by the Reich rather than welcoming the annexation with open arms. To this day, Germany is the bearer of the war guilt. The truth is, we were the hind leg of the beast, not the white rabbit caught in its mouth. Another joke that went around: 'Why is Austria so strong? Because it makes the world believe Beethoven was Austrian and Hitler German.'

Those first days weren't pretty. There were lynchings in the streets. The months that followed were heavy with finger-pointing: Nazi here, Nazi there. More than once a Nazi, in order to save himself, accused a Resistance activist of being one, and this latter was eliminated with no questions asked. A good percentage of the population remained tightlipped, fearing that it was just a question of time before the Nazis would be back in power. Vienna reminded me of a big circus. The few who'd walked the tightrope, who had taken a sole inflexible path in life, had fallen, and perhaps would rather have fallen than compromise their sense of morality. The trapeze artists had entrusted their lives to others. Some had survived, some hadn't. The jugglers fared best, tossing one government away for another, whichever seemed best at the time, whichever was at hand. No thought was involved; thought could make the ball fall; just toss, toss, toss. Better for the ball to fall than the man. I myself had started out the strong man and ended up the freak. Our whole country was looking at itself in distorting mirrors.

If only our house had been one street down we would've been in the American quarter, which was considered by far the best to be in. Unfortunately we were on the edge of the French quarter, the second-worst. It was common knowledge that the French were broke and stingy, at least with us Austrians. They got their hands on the imported provisions first, mainly from the United States, used up whatever they needed for their fine cuisine, then when our turn came around there was a food shortage. We were deprived of vital products — butter, milk, cheese, sugar, coffee, bread

and meat. The French weren't prepared to deprive themselves for us — wouldn't dream of making their coffee weaker, limiting themselves to one sugar cube per coffee. They needed extra butter for their cooking; who cared if we had none for our breakfast bread?

The detail we Austrians talked about most as we waited in endless queues, our quotas already promising not much, only to arrive at the head to find stocks exhausted, was the bottle of wine propped on too many a French table for lunch and dinner. After the first year I overheard a lady going on about a report that had been made. For thirty or so tons of sugar and fresh meat the troops had consumed, our population had consumed zero. But I also remember a man who proclaimed other statistics. Those of us in the queues were all ears. He read out loud from a monthly, raved on that 200,000 of our civilians had consumed 50 cows, pigs and sheep and 100 chickens, whereas 20,000 of their soldiers had consumed something comparatively phenomenal like 400 cows, pigs and sheep, and 10,000 chickens! Even if I'm a little bit off on the figures, one gets the general idea. Of the four nations, only France had been occupied by the Reich, including her utmost pride, Paris. They were out to fill their bellies as much as get even. Maybe it wasn't as vindictive as it sounds — France had known hunger and now dined and sipped wine as an overdue right.

It could've been better, but it could've been worse, much worse. The Russians were famous for a policy of 'one of everything per person' — spoon, knife, chair — and all 'excess' property was confiscated and sent back to Russia. Schwarzenbergplatz was renamed Stalin Platz, and a twenty-five-metre monument was constructed there that first summer, on top of which stood a bronze figure holding a red flag and an automatic weapon across his chest. This 'Unknown Russian Soldier' quickly became known to one and all and even had a name, the 'Unknown Plunderer'.

Not only dwellings were stripped, but civilians also, in the most brutal of ways. In the Russian sector hot spots, bars, dance halls were reopened and curfews ignored. Word went around that Austrian women were being taken at gunpoint to 'escort' Russian men and raped, and apparently so were Austrian men by Russian women. Dysentery and sexual ailments spread, typhus became epidemic. Incidentally, the Soviets had sent so many of the

cars and trucks they got their hands on back to their homeland that the dying had to be toted to the hospitals in wheelbarrows. The death rate in those days was something. I suppose the Russians had their reasons for exacting revenge — they liked to justify their own crimes down to the pettiest, by citing the twenty million of them killed in the war and their greater homeless masses.

I didn't go through the Russian zones if I could avoid it, although people were free to do so, because one was prone to be taken for labour without warning — a day or a week, it didn't matter to them. Everyday life there had a flair of Russian roulette. What a contrast with the American sections, where traffic signs indicating a 25-mph speed limit were put up left and right to promote safety, even on endless streets such as Währingerstraße! Such American laws were not only passed, but also strictly reinforced, for small fish and big alike.

Elsa didn't come out and ask me, but I could snatch at her questions in the air. I could feel one on the tip of her tongue, the way I could her eyes on me whenever I brought her boiled water (as a sanitary precaution) for washing or drinking. If I was sprucing up her chamber she took advantage of my inattention to scrutinise me freely. Sometimes I made as if I were looking out the window, offering her my better profile. She looked straight at it, but when I turned to her she lowered her eyes, to keep from me a look too ambiguous for me to understand.

Perhaps she was picking up on how troubled I was, and was asking herself why, and if there might be any consequences for her. Maybe she was grateful for what she thought I was doing for her — or sincerely worried about me, feeling guilty. You see, I was expecting my father home any day, and if I imagined the best, I also imagined the worst. I could see his hand on my shoulder, declaring how wise I had been to wait for him before I took it upon myself to make any decisions concerning Elsa. I had done well not to inform her of the events in case she did anything rash. Congratulations, son, you did a fine job of taking care of your grandmother, Elsa, the house: I'm

proud of you. I know it wasn't easy with the loss of your mother. You've been brave.

Or . . . upon setting eyes on her he'd step back, appalled, ask why on earth she was still closed up in that wretched place. Where in the world was my mother? Elsa, in all her innocence, would explain. In front of her, he'd strike me across the face. Not caring how I felt, he'd set her free. She'd lose trust in me. I'd lose my chance with her.

Was there any way out? Could I chance telling my father she was already gone? Would he check? Couldn't I come up with some reason for her to keep extremely still? Could I get him to postpone the truth a few days? The time I needed to convince her? But I decided I couldn't trust him to understand my feelings: the risk was too great that he'd ruin it for me. No, no, I had to tell her before he came home.

Elsa drank her soup from the bowl. In her strenuous efforts to be polite she struck up the most banal conversations a person could conceive of, centred mostly on the vegetables — where I'd found them, was that a potato she tasted, that was nice, oh a pea. Next to hers, the words I needed to get out of my mouth felt preposterously heavy. They weighed already in my mind, were inappropriate to let out in such a light, thin atmosphere. They'd go crashing to the floor. If I got up the courage to take her by the hand, stare deeply into her eyes, she'd surely paralyse me with her expectant look, one eyebrow lifting as if to say, 'Yes? What is it?' Could I say something so important that my life depended on it in a matter-of-fact way? 'Oh, by the way, speaking of vegetables, did I mention that I lied about winning the war? We lost. So you don't have to be sitting there like you are with me, wasting your time, drinking that watery, tepid bowl of soup. I'm sure your parents have prepared something nicer — in fact, on your way out, why don't you just throw it in my face?'

How many times I tormented myself with a blank page. Dear Elsa. My pen stopped. 'Dear Elsa' was banal, the wrong prelude to what was to follow, a few light notes on a flute before attacking with a trombone. She'd block her ears. If I let myself go with a grand overture, referring to her in a way truer to my feelings, she'd be on guard before she got past the first line.

Besides, coming up with suitable terms of endearment was a problem in itself. They came off as over-used, shallow; they might have worked for the first lovers who used them, centuries ago, but by now were old songs whose too-familiar melodies had washed away the meaning of the words. Even I rolled my eyes in considering them.

Out of the blue one day, Pimmichen threw a fluffy disc at me. It was soft and fragrant. I think she used it to put powder on her face. 'Come on, you can tell your grandmother, Johannes. I've seen and heard it all before.'

'Tell you what?'

'A little birdie tells me someone's on your mind. A girl?'

'Where'd you get that crazy notion?'

'When a boy your age gets that melancholic look on his face, bobs his knee up and down because he'd rather be somewhere else than with his grandma, it usually means Cupid's arrow has found a resting place in the left side of his chest.'

'There's no girl, Pimmi.'

'She's rejecting you?'

'I mean, I don't know any girl.'

'You can't fool me. I've seen more of the past century than you have this one. My eyes are bad but I'm not blind. Loneliness is something altogether different. You'd sulk, your feet would drag. You'd be looking vaguely for something but wouldn't know what. No, you're agitated — someone precise is on your mind. You stare out the window and concentrate so much you stop moving. I've been watching you.'

I couldn't help but smile. 'Maybe there is . . . someone.'

'Big secret?'

Tempted to play with fire, I gave in to a fraction of a nod.

'Good for you. A family of your own is exactly what you need. In my day, we were old enough to start at your age. I won't be here forever. You don't

have your mother any more, and your father — God knows in what shape he'll be in when, I pray, he comes home. Children are a great remedy for all the disillusion in life.'

'Slow down! Who said anything about children?'

'You're right. Let's get to the starting point. Does she love you?'

'I don't know. As a friend maybe.'

'That means no. Is it your face?'

'What's wrong with my face?'

'Nothing. And don't you forget it!' She contemplated me, very pleased for some reason. 'Where'd you meet?'

'I can't say.'

'So it's all very secret . . . Mmm. She must be married?' Her mouth indicated disapproval.

'No. Not at all.'

'I know. She is a nun?'

'A nun?'

'She loves someone else?' She caught the downcast look on my face. 'I see . . . Was he courting her first?'

'Ach! Yes.'

'And you want to take her away from him? That could be complicated . . .'

'They haven't seen each other for years.'

'Because of the war?'

'Well . . . yes.'

'Why didn't you come to me sooner? You know, I can be of help in these matters.'

Observing her exceedingly wrinkled face, I knew she could be of no help. She was too mellowed for such sentiments.

She read my mind. 'Don't you fret, Johannes. I remember well the intricate workings of the heart. In fact that's all I seem to remember. My, my. Love.' Pimmichen's face took on that queer glazed look of someone near-sighted trying to behold the details of a faraway landscape without their glasses. She tapped her lips and snapped out of it. 'Now, let's see. Will you have the occasion to see this girl again?'

'If I go and see her.'

'But if you didn't go and see her, she wouldn't go out of her way to see you?'

'It's complicated.'

'It's important for me to know.'

'She can't come to see me.'

'Why? She lives too far away?'

'She's not allowed to.'

'Strict parents. That's good. She obeys. I suppose they don't mind if you court her? You come from a respectable family on my side, you know, and wealthy, too. Our assets and accounts are still nothing to sneeze at — don't you ever let anyone overlook that!'

'She doesn't care much about those things. That's what makes her different from what people always say about . . .' Feeling my face flushing, I covered my mouth, coughed.

'Women? Yes, well, did you ever consider she might not know just how you feel about her?'

'She knows.'

'You've admitted it to her?'

'On occasion.'

'Hmm, that wasn't good. You're still too young, too honest. You'll never get her like that. Honesty isn't the best policy in affairs of the heart. My advice is to take less interest in her. She knows she's got a hook in you, but she's keeping you in the water, hanging on the line. You're nothing but a second choice, in case the other fish doesn't land in the boat. She has to feel as if you're getting away in order to take any interest. If you keep circling around the hull gaping up at her with googly fish eyes, how can you expect her to wind in the reel?'

'Should I make her jealous? Make her believe I've got someone else?'

'If it gets to that, as a last resort. But bear in mind that you don't have to fake it — there are plenty of fish in the sea. Throw one fish in, fish ten back out, as the saying goes.'

I began formulating the details of a dream girl, to make Elsa realise what a prize catch I was. So far I only had bits and pieces of her — blonde hair, blue eyes, perfect nose, pretty smile, which I combined to form an Aryan face, but, when I closed my eyes to imagine it, I found it was generic, not real. Maybe it would help if I gave her a name. Gertrud, Ines, Greta, Claudia, Bettina — that one wasn't so bad. Bettina. 'Sorry, Elsa, I mustn't keep Bettina waiting in Volksgarten.' 'I'd love to stay longer, but I really must run. The sun could harm Bettina. You know, she has fair skin, as only blondes have.' 'Please, tell me again what Nathan said about blue. I wanted to tell Bettina because her eyes are that colour, but whenever I look into them, I forget all I was going to say . . .' The fantasies grew grotesque. Bettina developed into a world champion, though which sport would unsettle Elsa more remained undecided — diving, skiing or gymnastics?

It must have been mid-afternoon, for the shadow of the Bvlgaris' tree invaded our back yard, forcing me to keep moving my chair every few minutes. Pimmichen tottered out of the house, her fingers set about her mouth in that pensive way that meant her teeth were newly set in and precarious. A soldier was following her. I couldn't make out a word he was saying — no wonder: he was speaking French. Gesticulating broadly and prissily with cigarette in hand, the way the French do, he looked ludicrous,

and with reason — God knows why but he had on an American uniform, and, what was more, one twice his size. The cuffs hid his hands, the seams of the armpits came down to his elbows, and his trouser bottoms had been rolled up thickly.

My grandmother conversed through ever-pensive fingers set like a goatee, she repeating, 'You promise to be kind to him? *Vous promettez d'être gentil? Vous promettez?*' and he, 'Oui, ça va, ça va,' the irritation in his voice accumulating. She said I had to go with him, it was a normal procedure for everyone my age.

The soldier led me to a French base where many French soldiers and officers were wearing American uniforms. From what I learned, the Americans had donated uniforms to the French army, but as there was a difference in size between your average American and your average Frenchman, the French weren't looking too smart for all the American generosity. If that wasn't enough to confuse me, I sat there wondering why the French had given their French uniforms away to all the black people who were present — to me, Moroccans were black. I assumed it was out of decency, because they didn't want them to remain naked, as they had probably found them in Africa. Only later I learned that Morocco was a French colony and its citizens were thus part of the French army. The Moroccan troops, sent to the front lines, weren't victims of shortages as far as uniforms were concerned. With all those who fell under fire in the front line, one could even consider uniforms a surplus.

I couldn't understand much outside the odd phrases I'd picked up from Pimmichen, who liked to show off her knowledge of French. I listened to the Moroccans speaking Arabic, found the intonations harsh and barbaric. To my relief, I wasn't the only Austrian; far from it — a few hundred were waiting before me. It would've been a Babel Tower if not for the Alsatians, who spoke German and French and were there to translate. Still, they weren't numerous and the interrogations, forms — and smokers — unfortunately were.

It was here I learned the details of Adolf Hitler's death, which was probably old news, but I'd closed myself off to information concerning

events far and near. I was in a state of shock. I couldn't bring myself to believe such a supreme figure had behaved in such an unideal way. If that wasn't enough for one day, when my turn came to deal with the formalities I found out about the contradicting reports concerning my father. Some witnesses had reported he'd escaped from Mauthausen, others that two men had escaped but my father had been caught, and yet another that two men had made an escape attempt for which my father had been accused of masterminding the plan. Officially, my father was neither dead nor alive. He was missing.

Before I was allowed to leave, I was given a chapter to read out of an American book. Hitler had changed the foreign language to be studied in Austrian schools from French to English, so I could handle a basic level — I am, you are, oh my, it is raining cats and dogs — but not more. Neither could anyone else. We were all given the same book,

which proved inefficient, despite the American goodwill in meeting the printing costs. I remember it was called Handbook for Military Government in Austria. With pick and axe, Nazi emblems were hacked from buildings and sculptures across the city. Civic employees were being fired, from police officers to the mayor. The roles had reversed; now it was the members of the Gestapo who were being hunted down. Hermann Goering, who'd spoken on the wireless, and others like him were arrested and brought to trial, as was Baldur von Schirach, Governor of Vienna and leader of our Hitler Youth, now declared a criminal organisation.

Despite these goings on, the French put up signs everywhere with the words *Pays ami*, which meant our country was their friend. It was their policy to dissociate Germany and Austria, weaken any chance of a recombined force. Having 'liberated us' from the Germans, the occupiers were now 'protecting us' from them. Charles de Gaulle defined his country's intellectual mission as the three Ds: *disintoxication, dénazification, désannexion*¹.

I was made to go to the American section, along with others like me who'd belonged to the Hitler Youth. After a march, the American soldiers forced us to line up at a train track. I thought they were going to send us off

to prison and was in a state of panic, as under no circumstances could I abandon Elsa and Pimmichen. Every time I tried to distance myself, an American soldier moved his gun in such a way as to indicate I'd better move back.

A train crawled up painstakingly on its stomach, bringing with it a stench to empty ours. My memory may have distorted some of what I'm about to say, because as I close my eyes I have doubts as to whether it was exactly what I saw when the box cars were opened one by one, or the essence of what I saw, or only a fraction of what I was unable to forget.

From the bottom to top, bodies like skeletons to which only the skin and eyes had been added were stacked on top of one another. It was a glimpse of hell, an orgy of corpses. Limbs entangled indifferently with other limbs, heads thrown forward and back, genitals long expired in the aftermath; here and there a child could be made out, the shrunken fruit of a numb ecstasy. I was caught in a nightmare — the only way out was to wake up.

I blinked at my familiar bedroom, saw each concrete object as it had always been. The trouble was, I hadn't been sleeping when the nightmare occurred, so by willing myself to wake up, I had put myself to sleep in my woken state, fabricating a daydream that I would never be able to separate from life.

xii

Pimmichen pulled me along by my belt to my mother's desk, implying that she was in possession of some of the answers we needed concerning my father. She sat down resolutely, opened the drawer containing an elephant tusk Pimbo had brought back from the Congo way back when — or just a part of one, actually, the length of a good scimitar. I supposed she was rubbing it to procrastinate, and that the notice or whatever she'd come for was underneath. The longer she took, the more my legs grew weak and I knew the news must be bad. Then she dimmed the light and set the tusk upon the desk with a sigh. Shutting her eyes to concentrate (I assumed) on contending with the bitter facts, she all of a sudden, out of the blue, put the question (to God knows who or what) in a loud, trembling voice: 'Is Wilhelm Betzler still among us?'

My stupefaction was absolute. 'Pimmi! For heaven's sake!'

'Shh!' She rotated the tusk several times before bringing it to a halt, opened her eyes to examine its curve, which 'smiled at her' apparently, meaning the answer was yes.

My reaction failed to check her and she continued in the same vein. 'Is he well?'

I watched her fingers turn it round and round, feeling which end was which. She was unaware that it was pushing my mother's Bible away with each successive turn.

I mocked her without restraint. 'Keep on turning! The poor old thing is frowning . . . Oh, what a sourpuss!'

'You're acting like a heathen! Hush up.'

'You think you're being Christian to consult the overgrowth of a dead elephant's tooth?'

'I'm asking God, Johannes. And God will answer me. This is just a tool — it could have been a staff, a snake. Now you just witness what truth we are given.'

She cleared her throat to start again. 'Will he be home soon?'

I saw the Bible balancing precariously on the edge of the desk. Before I could do anything it fell with a bang, making Pimmichen jolt so that she scratched the back of her hand against the tip of the tusk. Blood trickled down her wrinkled skin and continued its course across the smooth ivory.

'The Lord never lies. Blood has been shed,' she declared in a monotonous, dismal voice.

'Yes, yours!' I retorted, rolling my eyes as I went to get some disinfectant.

In the minute it took for me to get back she was making a mess with her bleeding hand, trying to light candles in front of my father's picture, one taken in a photographer's studio when he was my age and had whiskers in the mode of Kaiser Franz-Josef. The haze of artificial light made his traits softer than I'd known them to be. His eyes were fixed on some point in mid-air, probably the little wooden birdie photographers used to wave about on a stick in the early days of photography. She bid me pray with her until the last flame 'drowned in the tears of its own doing'. In doing so, she said we'd be helping my father out of purgatory, where she knew he was trapped. I didn't make an issue of it. I was free to say my own prayers in my mind. The last flame was subdued at dawn, but not without having given its murderous tears a good fight.

Our change of circumstances moved me to set down new rules for Elsa. I told her the guest room was now hers to use — the bed, desk, books. She could make herself at home. We'd have a code. When it was me coming up, I'd whistle. If she heard anyone besides me she had to get back to her old place without making a sound. I'd give her drills to see if she could do it fast enough from any point in the room, which wasn't big, especially with the sloped walls — four strides got you from one to the other. The blind was to be kept lowered at all times. She was forbidden to look out the window.

Whenever I wasn't with her, I'd lock her door. This would give her more time in case . . . Did she understand?

'Not all.'

'What?'

'It's just that . . . No, I don't know.'

'Come on.'

'Only, you see . . .'

'Spit it out.'

She crossed her legs one way, then the other, unable to find the right position on the edge of the bed. 'You never say anything to me. If I had your father to talk to, he'd clear up so many of my confusions. Why isn't he home if the war really is over?'

Caught off guard, I paced back and forth to buy time. Then, without knowing why or even having intended to, I uttered, to my own dismay, 'He's dead.'

'Dead?' Her hands cupped her nose, tears welled in her eyes. 'Ach, Du Lieber Gott — because of me? That night?'

'One thing led to another, and then . . .' I stammered into silence, my lie actually inciting me to feel that what I had put forward was true.

'Because of me, you have no more family.'

'I still have Pimmichen, don't I? And I . . .' I ventured timidly, 'have . . . you . . .'

She hung her head in shame. I didn't know whether her eventual sobs were for me or for herself for she made no attempt to make a kind gesture or even look at me, just sat there with her chin sunk in her knees, her arms hugging her legs, in her own small world. To me what was happening was true. I mean, I was witnessing exactly how she really would've reacted, had it been true.

'The war, Johannes,' she said. 'You never told me anything . . .'

'What's there to know? We won.'

'We?'

'The Russian, Brit, even the mighty Yankee military forces are kaput. Our land extends from Russia's ex-territory down to North Africa.'

She lifted her face to behold mine fiercely. 'You told me the Americans were only minimally involved.'

I was taken aback by my blunder. I did what I could to convert my nervousness into indignation. 'They were till the end. Japan bombed Pearl Harbor early on, but it took them a long time to send a fleet over. We invented a bomb so powerful, dropped from above it could cause waves high enough to overturn every ship within a circumference of a hundred kilometres. They stood no chance.'

'How . . . that's terrible! So they got the *Wunderwaffe* first.'

'I'm sorry you feel that way. Maybe you would've preferred it if we lost? You wouldn't have minded if they killed my grandmother and me? Flattened this whole damn house? As long as you saved your own selfish little skin — that's all that counts, isn't it?'

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way.'

'Anything else you care to know?'

She took time before meekly asking, 'And the Jews?'

By the Jews, I was convinced she meant only Nathan. Jealousy shot through my veins.

'They've all been sent away.'

'Where?'

'To Madagascar.' This was actually what I'd heard years back at survival camp; it was the rumour that had gone around.

She shook her head. 'Come on, Johannes.'

'It's true.'

'Every single one?'

'Besides you.'

'To bask happily in the sun?'

'I suppose. I don't know what people in Madagascar do with their days.'

'They've been sent to Siberia, in the freezing cold. Who else would go there but forced labour? Coal, minerals, isn't that it?'

'I told you, Madagascar, and I won't tell you again. If you don't believe what I say, don't ask!'

She was ungrateful, self-centred, and I hated her utterly, yet I wished she'd say something to help banish the unhappiness I was feeling. I wanted nothing more than to love her — a simple gesture was all it would take. But instead of coming to me for solace she stepped past me to press herself against the books on the shelf. That was the last straw, I was gone.

Five minutes later, I couldn't stand it. I threw open the door and, imitating her voice, whined, 'Thank you, Johannes!' She was curled up in my grandfather's armchair, but not reading, as I'd half-suspected, or she would've had a piece of my mind. She made an effort to overcome her blank stare and answer, more sincerely than I was expecting, 'Thank you, Johannes.'

For a while I was afraid I'd given Elsa too much liberty. Surely she'd be tempted to peek out, just to catch a quick sight of the neighbourhood, but enough for a neighbour to catch a quick sight of her? I had this crazy idea of her not being able to contain herself; had visions of her running about the house wildly, shrieking with laughter, throwing up her arms. Pimmichen would think there was a madwoman in the house. I think Elsa had no idea how jittery I was. I took Pimmichen's sleeping pills to calm me down in plain day.

What a jolt I experienced the first time I found an empty room. I thought she'd jumped out the window. Of all places, I found her in the last place I

would've looked (and did) — back behind the wall. She did this to me more than once; each time she scared me to death. She claimed she felt better there, safer, that she felt lost in too much empty space. 'What good does it do me to be out,' she asked, 'when the whole time I concentrate on being ready to jump back in?'

It took months before she'd venture out all day, but to sleep she still preferred to close herself in. Well after she'd taken to sleeping in the twin bed, I'd catch her taking naps on the floor, one arm in the nook. As much as she'd hated it, it must have been like an old friend.

It would be wrong to say I was hurting Elsa when, in my mind, I was protecting her. First of all, I didn't imagine her parents were alive, or Nathan at that, or someone would have come around to claim her. She had no one else but me. The images of what could've happened to her, had she not been closed up, never left me. Besides, it seemed to me a reasonable, balanced, fair decision. She had no parents and, until proven otherwise, neither had I, but we both had each other. I felt the responsibility we'd taken for her gave me some right to continue having that responsibility. Besides, I loved her more than anyone else ever would, so that was that.

I forgot to mention my being notified that I had to go back to school. Not only me, but everyone my age and others older than us. It was decided that none of us had received a proper education. We were considered ignorant; it was humiliating. This would mean a good part of the week away from home, and just the idea of stepping outdoors was repellent to me, as was contact with outsiders.

I remember exaggerating my grandmother's ill-health to a social worker in the hope that it would exempt me. I explained the life-and-death necessity of my staying by her bedside. The woman suggested having a nurse watch over her. I said something to the effect that she had a difficult personality, would never tolerate a stranger in her house. The woman was right to be confused. Just seconds before I'd described her as an unconscious nonagenarian. I added, 'I mean, in those rare moments she comes to.'

'That's not a problem,' she chuckled. 'We're used to it. Give me an extra key — I can have someone check on her from time to time.'

'It's really not necessary to involve someone outside the family. She's not that sick.' I contradicted every point I'd just made. She told me she had two nurses available. I babbled a series of incoherent excuses, stepping out backwards. A smile spread over her face. 'The first day's always the worst. You'll make friends!'

The middle school was a good fifty-minute walk from home, near St Aegid Church. I knew my way around Vienna eyes closed but played it safe with Pimmichen's old map, for familiar buildings were no longer standing, street names were long gone. I was trying to work out where I was, my forearm fighting to keep the page open in the wind (and to keep the page sticking to the binding), when a group of dolled-up Frenchwomen walked by, stopping their chatter to look me over. I read it in their eyes — 'vanquished', 'conquered one', 'one of the idiots who followed the idiot'. Outside, I was all these things. I had no walls, no roof to defend me.

I passed Schönbrunn Palace, where hundreds of craters scarred the grounds. Ugly as it was, nature was to provide her remedy as grass sprouted without prejudice, making it look like a golf course within three weeks. An old man with a beard as long as an aviator's scarf was preaching, since no damage had been done to the 1400 rooms. One hole only had been blown in the roof, had brought destruction to a ceiling fresco entitled what? Glorification of War! A sign from God that the end of the world was near! We must all stop what we were doing and fall to the ground to repent! Stephansdom, dedicated centuries ago to St Stephan, the patron saint of Vienna, had been hit. Another sign! The old man was getting a few British listeners, none of whom was actually falling to the ground. The palace had become the British headquarters after being taken away from the Russians, who would have liked to keep it as theirs, figuratively and literally. I had to give the British credit: they were restoring whatever was entrusted to them without making a show of it — brass, banners and all. Unlike the Russians, who made a hullabaloo each time a slab of cement dried or the rail of a bridge was screwed back on.

I passed hospitals and caserns being used for refuge. Children had adapted better than their parents, those who still had them, and were thrilled to have so many neighbours. They played ball with two helmets tied together, had tea parties with sets of discarded shells. The *Sporthalle* of my school was being used to house families as well. Some people were dozing in sleeping bags, some having breakfast, others stepping hurriedly into their clothes, embarrassed by the line of students stopping every few steps to cup their faces to the glass sections of the partitions and gape. By the end of the week they'd be accustomed to the youths, and the youths oblivious to them.

We were put in a classroom with children who gazed up in bewilderment. It was degrading and I suspected it had been done for just that reason. The teacher, an ill-humoured woman 'with hair on her teeth', as the saying goes in German, called one of these 190-centimetre adults to the front. He grated his chair back, then changed his mind. This provoked a lecture: we were all equals, there'd be no exemptions, so step up as asked. The problem became plain when the desk moved up and down like a small bucking animal as he attempted to free his legs from it. This caused an outburst of laughter from the younger ones.

The teacher pointed at me. As luck would have it I'd straddled my desk and hidden my arm in my pocket. I took the chalk from her, concentrated hard, but my 'p' didn't close and my 'c' did; wanting to dot an 'i' my hand slid, the chalk squeaking down the blackboard. I could feel everyone's eyes fixed on the illegible hen's tracks, could hear what they were thinking. On paper I'd made progress, but writing on a vertical medium felt like starting from zero again. It never occurred to her I wasn't right-handed. In front of everybody, she asked if they'd ever taught me to read and write.

It was a relief to spot our house uphill, but as I drew closer I saw that the front door was wide open. I could see no one coming or going. I listened for trouble but all seemed peaceful. Maybe Pimmichen had wanted fresh air?

'Pimmi?' I called out. She wasn't in any of her usual spots. The corner of one rug was overturned; the cushions of the sofa were dishevelled. I saw three cups on the table, yet unused.

I was halfway up the stairs whistling a tune for Elsa when I heard my grandmother cry from the library, 'Johannes, is that you? We're in here!'

I stopped in my tracks, numbed with hope and dread over who she meant by we. My father? Elsa? Would I find them all chatting, the best of friends?

Pimmichen was in fact with two strangers, seated on our antique chairs with their knees as far apart as the frail arms let them. One was so strongly built and overweight I feared the tapered legs would give way under him at any moment. His face glowed a red that might have been good health, just as it might have been emotion or alcohol. The other was young enough to be his son, only there was little resemblance between them, even if he also had dirty blond hair, and this is what made something in my mind click. Mr Kor and Nathan!

Pimmichen, noticing my distress, bade me sit.

'Johannes, we're to take these men in. They fought for the Allies to free our country. Here. They have an official document. The official who was with them couldn't stay — he had an important mission elsewhere.' With a cough she added, 'We have no choice.'

Fingers trembling, I took it. The document was in French, but I saw the official seal and stamp, and above, the names Krzysztof Powszechny, Janusz Kwasniewski. My disbelief was instinctive. I had a hunch it was a governmental manoeuvre to corner me. I tilted it in the light this way and that, doubting that their squirming was because of the discomfort of the chairs. I sized up the younger one. He was more rugged and mature than Nathan, but then again, without his glasses and years down the line, changes were to be expected, especially if he'd fought the war on the Russian side. The older one fixed his attention on me.

'Hello? How do you do?' I said, with a hint of a bow, hoping despite the mad circumstances to give a good impression. The older man tugged at his earlobe.

'They're Polish, they don't speak our language,' explained Pimmichen, 'and I've forgotten my Hungarian, though I'm not sure it would have done the trick.'

The men leaned towards each other and spoke in what could've been Hebrew or some long-lost dead language for all I knew.

The first chance I had, I warned Elsa that my grandmother had company and she had to abide to stricter rules. To my annoyance, every time she thought I was finished, she brought up Madagascar again. Where, for example, did I get the information I'd given her? Did I have any articles I could let her read? Would it be possible to listen to a wireless so she'd have a link with the outside world? I had no choice but to say yes, Elsa, no problem. Elsa, of course. Don't be silly, Elsa. I couldn't risk arousing her suspicion even further. Basically she was asking for proof. For the past four, five years she'd asked for nothing; now all of a sudden she needed proof.

Afterwards, I had an argument with Pimmichen about the necessity to protect our private life. She rallied Jesus to her side until I relented and set the dinner table for four. When she gestured for them to join us, however, they declined with a wave of the hand. Seeing their resoluteness, I beckoned them over, a tactic to pacify Pimmichen at little risk. But the men made camp in the foyer and didn't use any of our furniture. Each had his own sleeping bag, milking stool and washing bucket which, turned over, served as a small table. Bread, apples and hard cheese were the essentials of their dinner; pocket-knives served as knife and fork. They seemed self-sufficient and to be minding their own business.

I tucked Pimmichen in early; I needed to get my bearings. She was in the mood to talk. 'Did you notice? They don't say a word to us. Even between themselves, they hardly make a peep.'

'Everyone's quiet compared with you, Pimmi.'

'And they make a point out of not using anything of ours. Was it too much to sit at the table with us? We're their enemies. I judge people by their acts, not their words.'

'I thought they said no words.'

'Don't you think there's something fishy about them? Maybe they're not who they say they are.'

'What do you mean?'

'I don't know, Johannes, maybe they're . . .' she drew in a breath to whisper, 'spies?'

'What would spies want with us? The real colour of your toenails?'

'Who knows what your father did. Something in our house interests them. I feel it in my bones. They're never wrong, especially this little old metacarpus of mine.' She held up her arthritic index finger and pecked the air with it.

Pimmichen's talk and the late hour were taking their toll. I became convinced my first impression had been right: Mr Kor and Nathan had come to stab me in the heart while I slept and steal Elsa away.

I took precautions and set up camp in front of Elsa's door. From the balustrade on the third storey one had a view of the hallway below. I covered it with blankets to camouflage my position, left the hallway light on so I'd see my murderers after they'd climbed up the first flight. I put on my old helmet and kept guard with my father's hunting gun. Every time I heard a creaking I poked it through the banisters, aiming below.

I must've fallen asleep at some point but it mattered little, for they were gone before I got up, by five. Their sleeping bags were rolled, stuffed in their buckets and crowned with their respective milk stools. Each man's socks were drying on two legs like stiff rabbit ears, timeworn underpants flagged over the third. A bag of walnuts had been left on our table for us. This didn't seem the station of spies or killers any more. What had seemed so vividly true just hours earlier rose as the folly it was with the pale, peaceful light of dawn.

xiii

I scoured the devastated city for something, anything to convince Elsa of what I'd said. Every headline contained words that struck defeat into my heart, and the articles beneath them were just as incriminating. The shops discouraged me, full of trinkets testifying to Austria's occupation. Shelves of patient Pierrots sat above less resigned Mickey Mouses, toothpicks were topped with British flags, posters presented Josef Stalin as 'the people's papa'. Everyday household objects had been nationalised — cups, ashtrays, keyholders — with headache-inducing red, white and blue patterns: French, British and American. Only the flag of the Soviet Union provided variation: red with a trace of yellow. There was nothing, big or small, boasting any remnant of the Reich. Ten years in jail or even the death penalty awaited anyone caught in possession of the like. It was a hopeless quest and I trudged home empty-handed. All I had to carry back was my lie.

I stepped into the foyer to find the older Pole greasing his shoes, the younger reading the newspaper the shoes were on, each trying to knock the other out of his way. I strained my eyes to see what was so interesting, but the characters were as unintelligible as those of Russian.

'Where have you been?' Pimmichen cried. 'You're late! There's been a drama!'

I couldn't get a word in edgeways before she related it to me.

'I left the house unlocked because our friends here were gone before we'd given them a key. Any thief could've walked right in and you know me, I wouldn't have heard an army of Cossacks if I was taking forty winks. I remembered a spare, but couldn't find it anywhere.' (This, in passing, was because I'd taken it in case she'd had this very idea.) 'I went to look upstairs, though God knows I hate those stairs. Your father's study was open, but not the guest room. I thought it must have been my wrist, but no, it's locked. Then I was coming back down, holding the rail, one slow step at a time, when I heard a bang, which made me lose my balance . . .'

I'd listened without moving. 'And . . . ?'

'And what?'

'What happened?' I asked.

'I already told you. I lost my balance.'

'You didn't hurt yourself?'

'You should've seen me. Whoosh! From high to low on my plumpest part.'

'So where's the drama?'

'I could have broken my neck! Killed myself!'

My sigh of impatience was really one of relief.

'You will see the bruises on my posterior tomorrow!'

'I hope I won't.'

'Why is that door locked? Who's up there?'

'Pimmi, I leave the window cracked open so there's fresh air circulating. The door doesn't shut well, so to prevent the draught from opening and slamming it all the time, I lock it.'

'Aah, so maybe a pigeon's nesting up there. Or a weasel, a ferret? No, no, a marten! It must be a marten! I heard they get in, chew the electrical wires — they can ruin a whole house.'

'I'll open up. Give me a minute. I was in there yesterday and must have missed the wildlife reserve.'

'Don't bother. I'm not going up again — I've done my bit.'

'A wise decision.'

'You're telling me? Those steps are a shortcut to heaven! Your parents never should've converted that attic. We didn't need extra rooms; we don't even use the ones we have!'

Elsa was expecting me. Her eyes were big and round in a show of innocence when I set aside the partition, which meant she hadn't been in there long or the light would've smarted them. She told me in a frenetic whisper, 'Someone tried the door today! I think it was your grandmother!'

'It was.'

'I think she heard me.'

'She did. And God knows she's half deaf.'

'I stood up and the chair fell back. I would have sworn it sounded like she fell down the stairs.'

'How perceptive.'

'There was nothing I could do. It was terrible. I heard her talking to you. She kept saying, "Just give me your hand, little Johannes, and your tired, broken Pimmi will get up. Give me your hand . . ."'

I fished a tin of olives, some dried fish, half a loaf of bread out of my backpack.

'Does she know I'm here?'

'Always you. What about her?'

Elsa flushed scarlet till her eyes watered. 'I'm sorry. I'm confused.'

'You and I have a lot in common. The person I care about most is you. The person you care about most is you. We really are meant for each other. It is destiny, God's will, don't you think?' I could tell Elsa was ashamed and took pleasure rubbing it in. 'So how is she, you ask. She'll be fine, Elsa, don't worry. You have enough worries of your own — you have yourself to take care of. Please, don't give a second's thought to anyone else, only you, yourself.'

She wrung her hands together in self-reproach, but I caught the split-second lowering of her eyes — she hadn't been able to resist looking at the backpack. I knew what she was wondering but she knew better than to say it.

'Elsa, while these guests of my grandmother's are here, it'd be better if you went back behind the wall. If you can manage to remain quiet, I'll let you out when I'm home.'

I would have liked to stay and keep her company, chat about inconsequential nonsense the way we used to, but I had to get out before she started asking about what I knew was eating her insides out. I gathered the washbasin, night pot and kitchenware to be washed, content to have made it through another day.

The following evening I wasn't so fortunate. Elsa brought it up as soon as I unzipped the backpack, before I'd even reached my hand inside. 'Oh, Johannes, you did remember to bring me a newspaper, didn't you?'

'That's what I meant to do!' I hit my forehead. 'I knew I'd forgotten something!' I detected the scepticism in her face. 'Now it's the weekend, stupid me! I can't make you wait till Monday. Why don't I go hunt one down? This district's dead, but the next one should have a newsstand. I'm sure it's stopped raining.'

Perhaps remembering the day before, she cut me some slack. The more I insisted, the more she looked reassured, and the other way around. 'Are you sure?' I said. 'Really, I don't mind. I think my grandmother will be fine if I hurry. I won't keep her waiting too long.'

Her eyes softened; trust had been re-established.

I was in an unenviable frame of mind. My bluffing had won me two more days, but it couldn't go on forever. All I'd done was postpone my dilemma. I saw no way out, outside of a miracle. If I had the entire weekend to think, I also had the entire weekend to torture myself over a labyrinth with no exit, not at least without breaking a wall.

Saturday was wet and miserable. The Poles were gone by 4 am, their sleeping bags rolled, a bottleneck sticking out of one. On each of the stools, I noticed as I swished my mop around, there was a hand of playing cards

face down, the pink lacy-looking backs making them look like the dainty fans of dames of earlier centuries.

'The only thing that needs brightening up around here is your face,' said Pimmichen. 'Go for a walk. Young men aren't made for staying inside dusting grandfather clocks.'

'It's raining, in case you hadn't noticed.'

'That wouldn't have stopped Don Juan — not a thousand raindrops nor a thousand ladies' tears.'

She bent down to take my duster, moaning elaborately. 'I'm not doing it for you. I have to keep moving to keep my muscles warm.' Wherever I went, she wasn't far behind, her feathers switching side to side through the air like a bird in first flight. Sometimes I moved too fast for her, found her tripping along, dusting the air above the furniture. She kept giving me queer looks out of the corner of her eye, humming a melody I couldn't place. It might've been the Polotsvian dances, Hungarian dances, or even our *Vogelfänger* at that, for all I'm good at music.

'You forgot to tell me her name,' she said in an offhand manner before resuming her humming.

'Whose?'

'Your girlfriend's.'

'She's not my girlfriend yet.'

'So it wasn't her waiting for you upstairs after all?'

'What do you think of me? Bringing a girl home behind your back? She's not a tramp, Grandmother!'

From the astounded look on her face I realised she'd been just teasing me and now was wondering at the strength of my reaction. 'Goodness. Last time I saw you in such a state you were three and didn't want a bath.'

'If you see the young lady again, you'll understand.'

'I know her already?'

'You know of her.'

'That means she's from a good family.'

'What do you mean by good? Decent or well known?'

'Does she have a name?'

'Not yet.'

'How about the initials?'

'No, no, Pimmi.'

'How could that hurt?'

'I don't know.'

'Come on, don't be superstitious. The first letter of her Christian name? Just the first.'

After some hesitation I gave in. 'E.'

Pimmichen crossed the room, unlocked her bureau, rolled back the cylindrical top. The marquetry caught her sleeve and, in trying to free herself, she tore a piece off. She pursed her lips, dropped it in the top drawer to be glued back at some stage, and pulled out a booklet. 'Let's see. May 20, Elfriede?'

'No.' I felt at once amused and irritated.

'July 23, Edeltraud. Isn't that a pretty name? Edeltraud. Precious faith.'

I blushed as far as my ears when I realised she was reading the calendar of Catholic saints, which I reckoned Mr and Mrs Kor probably had not consulted to baptise their daughter, who probably wasn't even baptised — no, no, how could she be? 'Pimmichen, come on, stop.'

'I'm getting close. Now, help me read this — the writing's small, my eyes are bad. What is it, St Emilie, St Edith?'

'Neither.'

'There can't be that many E's. Isn't this another? Oh, St Elizabeth. St Elizabeth was the daughter of a Hungarian king in the thirteenth cen—'

I twisted the calendar free from her grip, slid it back in the drawer, closed and locked the bureau and threw the key on top of her secretaire cabinet — well out of reach.

'I guess not,' she said, a twinkle in her eye. From then on, 'Edeltraud' became her way of referring to Elsa.

I remember the details of that weekend as if it was yesterday. Everything felt like the present and past at once. I missed moments as they were happening, before they had been sifted out of the concrete world and blown off to the distant, untouchable realm of the past. The countdown had started. If I could've stopped time I would have, but time is the greatest thief of all: it steals everything in the end, truth and lie. That afternoon I waited hours for Pimmichen to take her nap but nothing made her sleepy. I told her I was going up to take one myself. Standing at the base of the stairs, she watched me go up. I was losing my patience with her and turned around twice to let her know. The second time, she was gone.

The raindrops drumming on the roof gave me a sense of cosy intimacy with Elsa. I listened to her tell me all about the creatures of the earth — what it would be like, for example, to live in an ant's skin, greeting each other with flexible rods on our heads. Or if we humans had been conceived as turtles in form, how would that have changed our lives? She compared it to walking around with our houses weighing upon our backs: it would be uncomfortable but there could be great advantages. We wouldn't have to build homes, there'd be no homeless in the world, we could change the view outside our window every day, and wherever we were on earth, we'd always be at home, which would eliminate bloodshed over borders. I felt a certain warmth go through me when she said 'our' house and 'our' backs, as if together, she and I would have the four legs we needed to be one, even if only one turtle.

She asked me where I thought the mind was located, in the heart or brain. I answered the brain, hoping that was right. She squinted her eyes to think, then claimed hers was outside her body. Right as she was speaking to me,

she said, her mind was seeing a three-storey house cut open like a dollshouse, and we were nothing but two tiny ephemeral individuals in the triangular-shaped room at the top right.

I begged her not to do that — in a way, she stopped living the moment her mind forsook her body. I warned her one day it might decide not to come back. I was bothered by her mind gallivanting around instead of staying put with me. In using my leg as a pillow she had made it fall asleep, but I hadn't shifted it in case she changed position. She lifted her head up as if to look at me, but her stare was blurry and unfocused. I wondered if she could see me. Maybe I was nothing other than a white smear, soft clay out of which she could fashion the face of her choice. With one childlike hand she pulled my head down, and slowly, emptily, kissed me.

After that, there was a quiet in the air, and not just because neither of us was moving or speaking. It was a blessed quiet that existed on its own and had to be respected. She lay facing the wall with that same stare. I stroked her hair, hoping that this time her thoughts were closer to me.

I passed the older Pole on my way to the bathroom. His socks were soaking in the sink and his hairy feet were quite a sight. I was, as anyone can imagine, glowing to an extent that I'd forgotten what it was I was carrying in the ceramic basin. The wrinkled nose, twisted mouth and singular Slavic interjection brought me back down to earth. I surprised myself at how natural I was in pointing to my grandmother's bedroom, shrugging as if to say, 'It's part of life.' He patted me on the shoulder before scurrying away.

I cleaned the *Kachelofen*, lit the first fire of the season, thinking to myself if only Elsa would love me, the whole house would be hers, I'd give her everything I had. Pimmichen noticed my changed mood. She asked if we'd received any mail today (there used to be mail on Saturdays back then).

'I don't know; I haven't had time to check.'

She frowned, worrying her chin with her three-finger goatee. The Poles were arguing over something that I assumed, from the complex sounds, to be philosophy or astrophysics. Unexpectedly, the older one exposed his

molar. I burst out laughing, imitated their grandiose sounds, then pointed to my back tooth. We all roared, except Pimmichen, who hadn't caught on.

I don't know how it started but in no time the three of us were sitting around Pimmichen's footrest, shuffling the deck like croupiers until cards either fell or flew, especially those up our sleeves, sneaking in 3s with suites of 8s, adding a stowaway card to every one swept off the deck, erasing points from whoever took the lead. Pimmichen didn't pick up any of this, neither did she Janusz's laughter every time he looked up at her, remembering what he'd witnessed me carrying earlier in the day. I felt sorry for Pimmichen, so demure, unaware and lost in her big armchair, but I couldn't help getting a laugh out of it too. Elsa's kiss contributed to my drunkenness as much as the sips of their vodka.

I had a headache in the morning, but forced myself up early. Elsa's eyes were no longer absent; on the contrary, they were feverish, full of life. She accepted the tray without noticing the garden-fresh ivy I'd decorated it with, dug her rapturously over-arched feet into my mother's nightgown, stretching it more tightly into her own shape. Unaware of the extra volume her breasts gave her, she dipped the fringes of my mother's shawl in her tea every time she leaned forward.

'Johannes, I've been thinking. Wouldn't it be possible for me to go to Madagascar too?'

All I could think was thank God I hadn't told her the truth the day before, because I'd been tempted to after the kiss. Suddenly the carefree manner in which she crunched her toast got on my nerves, and so did her licking of the teaspoon. I took my time and said as neutrally as possible, believing my words as I spoke them, 'You'd risk my grandmother's life and my own. This seems to be your specialty.'

She flinched and took to wrapping a curl around her finger. 'Can't you just let me out in the street at night? Tell me what I must do to get the train that'll take me to the port? I can disguise myself — I've been thinking about it. If I'm caught, I'll never say a word about you, I swear to God.'

I held up a wet fringe for her to see. She gave it a few slaps, scattering the crumbs sticking to her fingers until she noted my disapproving glance and picked one up off the rug to crush between her front teeth.

'Everybody's on the lookout for Jews. You'd be shot on the spot. The longer you wait, the more of a chance you'll have. Why not give it another year?'

Her downcast face was an insult to me. I was incensed by her inconstancy. She'd be caught, she'd be executed! I was protecting her! And what little was left of my family — thanks to her! I was keeping her alive! Helping her all I could! After all we'd done and lost for her! For her, I was a traitor to my country! All she could do to thank me was bite the hand that fed her!

I was trapped in my lie as much as she was.

xiv

Sunday, all through the night, I tossed and turned feverishly, unable to admit defeat. That's when the idea came to me. It was improbable, crazy, yet not any more so than the war had been, not a bit. In fact, it was really just a continuation of the past logic, a branch continuing into smaller branches and twigs instead of being cut off. My plan took some preparation, so I skipped school on Monday and Tuesday, after which this became a habit.

I warned Elsa that the truth was a dangerous notion that no one needed in order to live. Truth was poison. It should be shunned at all costs, because even when people think they have it, at most they have a fraction of it. The same flower seen by two people would not look exactly the same if they were to redraw it in their minds — already it's not one any more, but two. She need not worry about plucking the real one, but the one most pleasing to her senses. If her senses came up with a less painful world than the real, she would be wrong not to live in that world.

I handed her the box of carefully selected clippings, minus any articles condemning the Nazis' doings. The high figures in the captions sounded like an exploit. She looked from one to the next, to me, to the next and back to me. There were lumpy hills made of shoes. There were glistening hills made of spectacles. There were shaggy hills made of hair. There were mountain ranges of clothes. There were skeletons wearing nothing but loose skin, standing in doom, or buried as bare in mounds of each other. I told her that if I'd lied to her about Madagascar, procrastinated so long, kept her cut off from the outside world, from news of anyone in particular, it was only in order to protect her from the truth. As she could see for herself, the extermination of Jews had been highly organised and all-inclusive. I told her of the vast green world of Hitler's dream just outside our walls, yet admitted that I felt happier there with her, walled in my own dream, than I would have roaming about freely in his.

In a way, my lie was not unfounded. What I said existed on its own; these things had actually happened. I just gave a voice to an alternative truth — gave the ending a different spin. We lost the war, but we could have won: it was an equal possibility. Sifting the facts, all anyone would be left with was a few ifs. I was just giving life to what existed in the abstract absolute, the invisible branches in the empty spaces between the real . . . the hundred and one that weren't but could have been. Besides, Elsa's parents and fiancé, in all likelihood, had not survived. That much would have been true. I didn't invent what was depicted in the pictures.

For four days Elsa showed no signs of grief. It was almost as if what I'd shown her did not affect her personally. I felt relieved. The worst was over and done with, though I found myself resenting her coldness, perhaps too because she was as cold with me. Then, for no reason, she stopped eating. She'd fasted before at regular intervals, so I didn't give it much thought. But the days went by — a week, more days.

I tried to coax her into being reasonable, but in the end she left me no choice: I had to force the food into her mouth. Despite the condition she was in she was clever, manipulative. She hugged me — no, clung to me like a child, mature woman that she was — and the moment I softened, patted her back, she spat out whatever I'd got her to eat. Those nights the hunger must have been acute, for in the mornings I found her arms marked with dark arcs.

It was more than I could take. Sick with worry, I decided to tell her the truth. But the truth itself is what stopped me. What was this great big truth? I examined the facts from every angle. I couldn't give her loved ones back to her, and that's what her mourning was about. All I'd be giving her was her freedom, but freedom to do what? To stray about her old, drab neighbourhood, point to where she used to live, hear the morbid details about the fate of every person she used to know? What roof would she have over her head? She'd told me the roof of her family's garret leaked — and that was before the war! How would she afford to eat? What would she do for a living? What was freedom if dictated solely by constraints?

And yes, I'll be perfectly honest, I considered myself too. What about my own life? Would she realise I hadn't been obliged to admit anything to her? Would she be grateful for my honesty, or would she regard me as having been a monster from beginning to end? Of course she would. I'd have sacrificed my own happiness for her, and she, in thanks, would slam the door in my face. She who'd emptied my house of my mother and father in coming to it. And who else would ever love me, the way I looked? No, never once did I want a replacement for Elsa, but this last reason served as a justification, too, for my wrongdoing back then. And the most difficult reason to cough up. I respected the person Elsa thought I was, didn't want to lose him either.

After taking what cash was left in my parents' safe, I chanced a jewellery shop on Graben. Two salesgirls were flirting with a French officer, both leaning over the display case. They saw I was waiting, and the officer even motioned to me, but the first girl didn't move a muscle and the second caught him by the neck and lifted her legs up, winning her a smack on the backside. They were making a contest out of who weighed less. Her rival demanded her turn. Finally, one looked down her nose at me as if I was a nuisance to ask, 'Ja? What is it?'

I should have just left, but was inexperienced enough to believe my openness would win me better service. I explained I was looking for a gift for a special woman, but didn't know what a woman would really like, a necklace or bracelet. I admitted that a ring might scare her off, unless I chose a gem that could be considered one of friendship, like an amethyst — weren't amethysts yellow, or was I confusing them with amber? Her sneer compelled me to stammer that yellow roses were less meaningful than red, so it must be the same with jewels . . .

With a haughty shrug she suggested I learn more about the woman's likes and dislikes, and, while I was at it, about women in general. She and her friend exchanged a smirk before taking up where they'd left off. Their contest was a draw, signifying that their shoes had to be taken off to assess their real weight. By the time I'd thought of an appropriate insult, another officer had come in to fetch his friend, reminding him of the law against 'fraternisation'. He was answered, 'Fraternisation, yes, but not sororisation.'

I took the long boulevards, Mariahilfer Straße and Linke Wienzelle, scoffing each time I saw Austrian girls getting cuddly with the French, probably so they wouldn't get in trouble if they were pinned for their war deeds. Superficial blonde bitches, I thought, and not even real blondes, most of them 'mousy browns' who bleached their hair. I passed by close enough to have slapped them, standing there in the arms of the enemies who'd defeated their husbands, fathers, brothers. Whores! My heart cried out all the more for my Elsa.

In stepping over a beggar I noticed some second-hand gramophones on the footpath for half price. I chose one, along with a recording of a French singer in vogue at the time, Edith Piaf. After I'd paid the seller, the beggar claimed his due; he was raking in tons of change.

The gift was a flop. Seeing Elsa's swollen face distort, I wished it was she who'd been disfigured instead of me; everything would have been easier. She covered her ears until I heard myself blurting out reassurances I'd never planned to — she had everything to live for, she must get herself together, stop acting like a baby, surely there were hundreds of others like her right here in this city, I had a plan I'd given much thought to.

Elsa's suddenly expectant eyes put me on the spot. I had no plan, not the foggiest notion, but, fearing to let even a second's silence come between us, I plunged headlong into the first idiotic vagary that came to mind — that she had so many pent-up feelings, I was certain she had it in her to paint great works of art with subjects and symbols that I could display to bring us into contact with others in the same boat. With a growing sense of shame I heard myself jabbering on, 'You know, at first I thought I'd take care of old people so I could search their houses one by one for any other survivors like you. You know how long that would take? Think about it: this way we could reach out to a whole public at once. There must be other people doing what I'm doing. And there'd be no risk for me — you know, it's not like anyone could come across anything put down in writing. Any compromising intent could be laid at the door of artistic fantasy.'

'Who says I have talent? You think feelings are enough to give life to great art? You fancy that a third-rate artist peddling his Danube boat scenes

and kitschy fruit bowls hasn't got just as many feelings as your great artist? How do you know he didn't pour all his feelings into that bowl of fruit?'

'He did, he didn't: doesn't matter. There's always folk with no taste who appreciate such tacky efforts.'

'Maybe your "folk with no taste" get as much out of such tacky efforts as others do out of a Rembrandt or Giotto. They might be more sensitive than the elite — they don't need all that magnificence to pick up on the simple love and awe a poor soul felt on seeing that bowl of fruit or that boat making its insignificant way down the Danube. One day there'll be museums for bad art. They've marked the world just as much as any of culture's top dogs.'

I thought I'd win a point with her by saying, 'At the end of the day, who's to judge what is great and not great? Perhaps in the end it's all great.'

'No. It isn't. But feeling isn't what makes artwork great or not. Nor technique. Many a bad artist has mastered technique.'

'So what are you trying to say?'

'Never mind. I don't even have technique so there's no use wasting your time, though I appreciate your intention, truly.'

'I'm sure it would work.'

'You really want my opinion? It's far fetched; it stands no chance.'

'Listen, it's a way for me to get out of the house, make contacts. How am I going to meet anyone if I stay in doing nothing all the time? Besides, we have nothing to lose. Tell me, what's the worst that can happen?'

She began a list. I cut her off. 'Let me finish. Before the world went topsy turvy, that's what I wanted to do — be an artist when I grew up. Not this. Just look at me.'

My plan isn't what brought her back to life, but I really think arguing with her about it did. It wasn't really believing. It was needing to believe, to have faith in faith, for faith, because of faith — in itself a suspension of disbelief;

a disbelief of disbelief. I tried a spoonful of soup. For the first time in a number of days she didn't splurt it back out.

I didn't get in trouble for the school I missed because my teachers believed me when I told them I'd come down with the flu. It was plausible because I'd lost ten kilos. I couldn't say the same for Pimmichen. She'd been finishing off what Elsa, then I, didn't consume; three meagre portions still equalled one hearty meal — two of those per day plus breakfast. Her zip wouldn't stay done up when she sat down. This, too, because she was being spoiled by her two new 'breadwinners', as she called them, Janusz and Krzysztof, who brought her bread filled with nuts and raisins, covered with poppy or sesame seeds, and *Viennoiseries*, as Pimmichen liked to call them. I didn't know where they could be getting their hands on these, and especially in such quantities, at that time. Pimmichen had an inkling they were working in a bakery, which she said would explain why they were gone before dawn. I was glad for their company. Their keeping Pimmichen busy and happy when they were there gave me the opportunity those vital weeks to consecrate more time to Elsa.

Now I'd like to mention the other two reasons I missed out on school. First, I'd made up my mind to find my father, come what may. Over and over again I chanced official posts, with as little success as I did train stations and highways. I found myself speaking about my loss to truck drivers who picked me up, ticket controllers who didn't pick me up, basically strangers I knew I'd never see again. During these excursions I raked up — more than anything else excluding hope — all kinds of anecdotes from the Great War, such as that the Soviet Union had freed her Austrian prisoners more than a decade after the war had ended, and without ever having delivered their mail! These true stories were mostly told as encouragement in regard to my father. There was the wife who had remarried and had three children before the real husband stepped back into their matrimonial chamber to face his usurper. There was the wife who took her husband for a thief when she came back from work to discover him in their home going through a drawer, and nearly killed him. There was yet again the wife who'd remained faithful but didn't recognise her husband on

opening the door, so he turned around without saying who he was, whereupon his walk rang a bell . . .

And, at last, after changing my mind half a dozen times, I'd gone to see whether anyone from Elsa's side had by any chance survived. The doubts, non-existent when I was at home, had assaulted me whenever I was out in the open. If a person I passed didn't look like my own father to begin with, he or she turned into a potential relative of Elsa's. Every old man was her maybe father, every old woman her maybe mother. Nathan was tall, short, thin, stocky, twenty, fifteen, forty. He was no one and everyone. He was even invisible, up in the sky, watching my every step.

I'd imagined there would be a place in Vienna where I could go to obtain this information — some governmental building assigned for the purpose — but this was not so. The Nazis had destroyed many of the registers before the end of the war and there was no simple way to go about finding someone's whereabouts or fate. There were displaced persons' camps in and outside of Vienna, but these regrouped individuals from forced labour and prison camps with the survivors of other camps — concentration, extermination. You had to be able to furnish the exact name and camp to which the person had been sent, or, even better, go there yourself. I told them if I already had all that, I wouldn't need them. They asked me if I had any idea just how many missing people by the name of Levi there were? It was a wild goose chase. Some told me the best thing would be to find survivors, trust word of mouth. Or the IKG — Israelitische Kultusgemeinde — but this had been annihilated during the war! Or how about the Rothschild-Spital? Weren't there different points set up in places where lots of people passed through? Why don't you try the tracing service of the Red Cross to find the correct camp? But none of this was as easy as it sounds. Not just anyone could walk in and request information. You had to say who you were, why you were looking for the person. Again and again I took the risk of giving my identity, told them of my father's business partner, explained that these were friends of my parents.

Going through the existing partial lists (even today, no one would claim to have anything complete) was like reading a telephone book. For anyone who has ever consulted them, it's incredible how you come to feel for

people from their names alone. I can guarantee anyone who doubts me: I knew no relief. I sat in front of yet another volunteer, trying to pluck up the courage to follow her finger's rapid descents. It came to a halt. Even on learning that this time it was Nathan, my long-despised rival, I knew a defiling pain, which I would never have expected of myself. The end result of it all:

Mosel Kor, died after 16 January 1945 forced march from Auschwitz to Mauthausen.

Nadja Golda Kor, *née* Hochglauber, Mauthausen, gassed October or November 1943.

Nathan Chaim Kaplan, died 6 January 1942, Sachsenhausen, exhaustion.

All those years, he, my greatest threat, had been dead, before I'd even known of Elsa. It was a shock to me, as it would be a shock to her — the dates, I mean. I sat under a tree in some desolate public square all afternoon rearranging my thoughts and perceptions, switching layers of truths, half-truths and untruths within myself, and switching them back and forth with her in my mind to make it all fit again.

Pimmichen was trying to strike a bargain with Janusz and Krzysztof. If they did some plumbing and painting around the house, they could have my father's old study and the guest room. In the beginning, they'd only smiled at her attempts to slop an imaginary paint brush in the air. Even funnier was her effort to describe the concept 'sleep'. She pointed to each of them, tucked hands under her chin and snored, her nose all the more masculine because she kept her hair pinned back. One must keep in mind that her snores probably kept them awake more than theirs did her, if indeed they snored, and I suspect Krzysztof said something to that effect to Janusz, who winked at me.

But Pimmichen could be stubborn and I felt it was only a question of time before they gave in, for she was already teaching them bridge, despite their objections and raw outbursts, in which y, k, n, f got sandwiched as easily as p, r, j, v, and after which they would both throw their cards at each other

until one would face her again sheepishly — the one who'd inherited half the deck. If they agreed to Pimmi's bargain, I was planning to move Elsa to my parents' room, where she'd have to stay under the floorboards. As long as I was home she could have my room. I'd lock the door and, if need be, she'd have my bed to hide under. At night she could sleep in it; I'd sleep on the floor. We'd already talked it through and she'd agreed.

What I put myself through those schooldays, counting the minutes within the hours within the fragmented mornings and afternoons. Anything could happen at home, and I wasn't around to control the situations that kept presenting themselves. School was complicating my life, and on top of it, I wasn't learning what I should have been because I was too busy worrying. I gave myself stomach cramps imagining worst-case scenarios, only to find, evening after evening, the setting more or less as I'd left it. Yet it seemed impossible that the threads of our lives, all five of them, could continue to be knitted together without a tangle. The more providence accumulated, the more providence seemed likely to fail.

Each morning I got to school panting and sweaty just as the doors closed. Class dismissed, I ran back as fast as I could, downhill, uphill: I knew the topography by heart. Every now and then the guys my age asked me to join them for a round of ping-pong (which shows the extent to which I never took my arm out of my pocket). Besides having no time, I felt as if my secret alienated me from them because, number one, I'd no doubt have to censor myself all the time; and number two, the conversations they'd strike up, motorbike motors, sports scores, girls' legs, were not exactly what I had on my mind.

In the state I was in, my legs practically gave out the day I rushed up close enough to our house to make out a military vehicle parked outside, partly camouflaged along our hedge. An officer motioned me to the door while five French soldiers stood waiting, machine-guns at the ready. I put my arms up to reassure them the person they were looking for was safe and sound.

But they didn't ransack the upper quarters — didn't go further than the foyer, where Janusz and Krzysztof were manipulating pipes. I'll never

forget the look Janusz gave me, reassessing me as a traitor. Krzysztof knocked chairs over on his way into the bathroom in a move I deemed futile. The French tried to talk him out. A short silence ensued. We heard glass shattering.

'Il se suicide!' yelled a soldier, attempting to smash the door-handle with the butt of his machine-gun. The officer ordered the others outside around the house and I followed them. Krzysztof had chosen the direction of the vineyards. The shots didn't dissuade him; he took his chances. I was convinced a bullet got him, because from far away I could see his shirt-back bloodstained. Later, though, I discovered blood in the bathroom, so I hoped that only the window had been behind the injury — after all, he'd kept running.

Janusz had been a passive onlooker until the gunshots shook him out of his stupor, but the officer got hold of him before he got his second leg out the door. I feared he'd kill me if the officer didn't manage to hold on to him. He kept calling me a word I was glad not to have understood. Pimmichen scolded the French officer. 'They're not criminals! I forbid you to treat my guests like that in my house. *Pas comme ça chez moi!*'

Janusz looked on hopefully as their argument metamorphosed into a discussion. With the dignity of a queen, Pimmi crossed the room, oblivious to the fact that her skirt was unzipped at the side, her feet were crushing the backs of her orthopaedic shoes. She pulled a sealed, signed document out of a drawer. She'd rolled it up, tied a red ribbon around it, so Janusz didn't recognise it until she extended it, at which point he looked at her with big eyes and put up another show of resistance: it was the document they'd come with the first day, granting them shelter in our house. Pimmichen, convinced she was within her rights, had her heart set on proving it. Her French was grandiose; one would've thought she was reading a treaty to Louis XIV.

The facts were that their real names were Sergey Karganov and Fedor Kalinin; they were Russians, not Poles; and this document had been forged by an underground organisation helping them to obtain freedom. The bottom line was that the Soviets were claiming back their soldiers, some of

whom were doing all they could to remain in the lands they'd found themselves in. The governments of these free Western countries were collaborating with the Soviet Union, handing them back over, no qualms over their unwillingness to go. We heard that those who committed suicide rather than return, as now and again proved the case, suffered less than they would have as deserters under the Stalinist regime. It was a scandal back then, the Soviet Mission of Repatriation.

We left their belongings where they lay for over a year. Pimmichen and I did at last go through them, and dug out two pairs of socks, a change of underpants each, sixteen envelopes containing what we found out were pumpkin seeds, two bare crosses, one empty bottle and a deck of fifty-one cards. To continue the inventory, we found a pad of paper tucked in one of their sleeping bags. On it were their first, often misspelled German words, jotted down with an illustration in the margin. I still remember that sein, the infinitive of the verb 'to be', consisted of a stick figure with only its widespread arms deviating from a soldier-like stance, and, more curiously, a smile on an otherwise blank face.

XV

Pimmichen was bewildered when she saw me come in with the oils and canvases. I crossed the living room swiftly before she could ask any questions. She cut me off at the staircase, looking me dubiously up and down. 'Is this your latest tactic to seduce Edeltraud? If you've become that desperate, soon you'll be cutting off your ear.'

'No, Pimmichen, I'm just doing it for me.'

'Nothing we do creatively is for ourselves. It's only done for someone else, if only for that someone in our head.' She pulled the wooden case out of my grip, pouted at the line of tubes, set it behind her out of my reach.

'Well, I can assure you, there's no Edeltraud upstairs.' What I meant by 'upstairs' was 'in my head' — a common German expression, oben, better said 'above'.

'Knock, knock.' Pimmi reached up to knock my forehead, 'Hello? Anyone living up there? Edeltraud! How long have you been closed up in that tiny space? Why don't you come on out, get some fresh air? He's keeping you closed up? Thinks I don't know you're there; thinks his grandma's stupid.'

'Very funny.' I stepped back, trying to laugh despite the tenseness of my face.

'I think you know what I mean.'

'No, and I don't want to know.' I went to step around her but she blocked me off.

'I think you know exactly what I mean.'

'I shall see you later, Pimmi.' As I tried to push past, her tickles made up for her lack of strength and the canvases fell.

'I know where she lives.'

'Do you?'

'Yes. I do.' She was on the first step, blocking me by gripping both rails. 'Oh, it doesn't bother me. It's not my affair.'

I mustered my strength to sound amused. 'And . . . where does Edeltraud supposedly live?'

'She lives, as you said, oben.' Her face was weathered but her blue eyes were still sharp, intelligent. A faint upward curve on her lips, she rotated her crooked index finger, designating first my head, then the ceiling, up the stairs, testing my reaction with every shift in position.

I tried to keep my eyes level with hers but it was too much for me. I felt my nervousness beginning to show. 'Upstairs where?'

Her finger tilted three times towards the guest room, then, after the truth had sparked between our eyes, drilled towards me until it was pointing straight between my eyes, pressing me there. 'In your head.'

'I see.'

'You spend your time up there walking along streams, admiring waterfalls, the stars; you tell her your secrets, then you kiss — ah, that first kiss! Even if it's your own soft wrist, she's become real in your mind. You miss her, hurry home, can't wait to tell her about your day. I had such a pretendant living with me at my parents' house. Lucas.'

I burst out laughing, doubled over. 'Pimmi, that's the most ridiculous story I've ever heard! The most utterly ridiculous!'

'You're embarrassed. It's perfectly normal.'

'First you say I have no artistic inclination, and now suddenly I'm capable of making up a human being from head to foot! Boy, do I have talent!'

'Who says she's invented? You set your eyes on her somewhere. My Lucas was the son of a prominent auctioneer. I used to watch him on Saturday afternoons as he stood up on the podium, holding up objects for the public to see. All I saw was him, effeminate as he was if you grasp my euphemism. It wasn't the person I made up, it was our love story.'

'I assure you, I've never kissed my wrist. I don't even have one on this side.'

She tousled my hair, strands fell over my face. 'You're too shy; you don't know how to go about it. With what's happened to you, you don't believe anyone would love you, but you're wrong, mein Süßer. I've been thinking about it. Why don't you join a Catholic youth group? You'll meet some nice ladies who'll learn to appreciate your special qualities, who'll help you forget about the girl upstairs. As you get older, don't worry, your face will give in to gravity. Look at mine.' She pulled the loose skin of her face down and made an expression worthy of a dead bass. 'Time heals everything, even scars. They get stashed away in the pleats.'

The onrush of emotions got the better of me. First, intense fear at her having come close to the truth; then the unexpected, violent slackening of it. Self-pity from her telling me how I must feel, my sudden self-awareness: small and mutilated in a big empty house, with no mother, father, sister.

Pimmichen sat down next to me, using her yellowed handkerchief to pat my eyes. Her head vacillated involuntarily from side to side. She grew older; the house bigger, emptier; I, smaller, smaller, and she couldn't wipe fast enough.

Pimmichen decided painting would be a healthy outlet for my accumulated energy. I took advantage of her good mood to announce that I'd used up the last of the money in my parents' safe. She said I'd done well, she'd help me to purchase whatever material I wanted, she believed in trial and error. Art courses taken too soon could stifle the development of anything new. With that, she told me she'd reserve, for my use only, a bank account she'd inherited from her aunt, who in her youth had lost two suitors in one of the last duels to take place in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. They took ten paces, turned around, shot each other.

She groaned as she bent over to remove a long black hair caught in the join between the bottom step and its supporting framework, rolled it into a tiny knot. 'Don't worry. When you're famous, they'll be fighting over you.'

After that, I had a recurring dream of Pimmichen needing an extra pillow to prop up her legs. I took one from Elsa's room. As soon as Pimmi touched it she gave it back. 'Oh, sorry, I thought there were others. I don't want to take yours.'

'It's not mine.'

'That's strange, for it's still warm — how can that be?'

I could get no sound out of my mouth in order to lie.

But the nightmare that unsettled me most, though I dreamt it only once, was of her confronting me with letters addressed to Baumeistergasse 9, 1016 Wien. 'They're for someone named Elsa Kor. Do you know an Elsa Kor?'

My heart skipped a beat. Who knew she was in this house? Maybe one of her brothers from America? I said, 'It's just a mistake, somebody has the wrong street. I'll hand them back to the postman first thing in the morning.'

'How in the world can it be a mistake when they are the fruit of your hand?' She thrust the letters out for me to take.

To my astonishment, they were in my own handwriting. Not only had I been stupid enough to write down a return address, none other than Baumeistergasse 9, but in place of a stamp, someone had glued on an old school photo of me with a bowl cut. I noticed that the envelopes had been opened, and, even worse, were postmarked from three years ago! In the dream I realised my grandmother had known about Elsa all these years, had intercepted every letter, but had said nothing.

xvi

I gave Elsa the cashmere coat my father had bought my mother in Paris on their honeymoon during the summer sales. It had been an old joke between them, how she'd lugged it all the way from Montmartre to their hotel in Saint-Germain in what was to be a record heatwave. Elsa was still cold. The heat escaped under the roof and, with her door closed, the warmth of the house penetrated less. The price of wood did not stop me from buying it, but, as I told her, it was not always available, and when it was, it was in limited bundles of chips and quartered logs. She asked me why I didn't just go to the forest and chop down a few trees myself if the French were keeping all the good wood for themselves. This got my pride. I gave it a go at dusk, but the axe was unwieldy and, after missing the tree but not my boot, I abandoned the idea.

Elsa rolled the tip of her paintbrush lightly over black so that minute beads like caviar stuck to the hairs. Her timidity didn't last long. Within days she was submerging it down to the collar, staining the wooden handle, transporting undiluted globs, enough to fill an oyster shell, which didn't always make it to the canvas. Embarrassed, she glanced down at her coat and around her, then resumed her handiwork as I brooded over the landing place she hadn't seen on her hem or the cuff of her sleeve.

I wanted to tell her not to use the canvases to test the colours — they were expensive and too bulky for me to carry more than two at a time — but I didn't want her to think me stingy, or be distracted by my petty concerns. She went through a dozen a week, proud of how hard she was trying. I think she simply had no idea of the cost. She was too alienated from the real world, and whose fault was that?

Her concentration was so intense she forgot about me. To win her attention I would stretch, push my yawns further than they would've gone on their own, roll around in an exaggerated fashion to crack my back. The crease between her eyebrows let me know I was being a nudnik — Yiddish

for something like pest. The questions I made myself ask — 'Do you think you'll be famous one day?' 'Could you fancy being rich as the Pope?' — probably didn't merit answers, which is why they got none.

Feigning interest in what she was doing got me further. 'What's the name of that green?' 'That's a lovely brush stroke — how did you do that?' Her explanations nevertheless contained a hint of impatience. Maybe I asked too many questions. The only ones that truly interested her — 'Are you hungry? Thirsty? Is there anything I can get you downtown?' — usually won me a few instants of attention and a warmer tone of voice, unless asked too early, before hunger, thirst or any other need had manifested itself.

Despite all this, I loved to watch her. She positioned herself at the window and her face would change according to what she saw, even if this was impossible because the shade was lowered. Her dark eyes could brighten up with feeling, or the light inside them could switch off, leaving them dull and still. I didn't ask her what it was she saw, though I drove myself crazy wondering. A noisy, bustling city? Fields of corn, buzzing flies and bumblebees? Children giggling in knee-deep snow? The bleak horizon of a flooded world, blue meeting blue, the curtains of mankind closing? I knew it was one of those questions that would not get an answer.

Without being unrecognisable, the objects she painted the first year simply lacked substance. Her bottles were soft, her melting candles cold, the flame on the wicks frankly stiff, and, from some technical deficiency I couldn't determine, her skies were without exception artificial. At the end of the day, when it was clear nothing had come of what she'd tried to depict, work gave way to play. She exaggerated the traits of her self-portraits — eyebrows rose to grotesque heights, chins fell down to the ground, noses turned into muzzles before she covered the canvas with swish-swashes.

I was much more indispensable to her during the process of destruction than I was during her long attempts at creation. Then, the moment I'd long awaited. She pulled up a chair for me, stretched out her legs on my lap, and actually looked at me. My new status was that of the willing ear. She criticised herself extensively, analysed what she'd done wrong. Her conclusions were optimistic: all we needed was patience, perseverance, a

book on sketching, on shadow and light, on depth, tone, proportion, *trompe-l'oeil*. I was up and ready to go: she'd said the magic word, 'we'.

The cluttered shop I went to was kept by an elderly couple who soon got to know me. It wasn't infrequent that I slipped in a minute before closing to purchase a yellow pigment, then was waiting at the door before they opened next morning to purchase another. If you didn't hold both tubes up in the light, you couldn't tell them apart. They elbowed each other when they saw me coming in rain or snow without an umbrella, which I never brought because I simply had too much to carry as it was, and often had to resort to my mouth for help. Sometimes I paced from the sketchbooks to the charcoal, canvases or turpentine, frustrated, indecisive, worried over the correct choice and price. Their eyes followed me with unconcealed awe. To them I was an impassioned, prolific artist whom fame would ultimately embrace. They handed me the articles religiously, as if they, too, were part of the great cycle of art in the making.

I must have worn down the footpath between Baumeistergasse and Goldschlagstraße, a walk as dusty as it was noisy with reconstruction. I fell into the habit of watching my shoes advance step by step. The tips were detaching from the soles, the seams coming apart, the leather cracking. One morning I thought to myself I must be getting used to the French troops because I was noticing them less, maybe because I was too busy staring down at my feet. Barely had the thought crossed my mind when it became a common sight to see lines of tanks ploughing down the streets. The French troops were leaving Austria for Indochina, where France was still at war. If one had to cross the road it could be a long wait. The infrastructure in our section of the city became degraded, identity controls became less frequent. I took advantage of the situation to stop going to school and was glad no one did anything to force me. I was at last free.

Elsa found many uses for my freedom. She was overtaken by a boundless zest for life, and decided exercise would now form part of her daily routine. She had no ballet barre, so I had to lift one short leg up gradually until she said ouch, then let it down, this twenty times over. Then the other leg. Her knee should be turned out, her toes pointed. Speaking of which, could I please help her arch her feet more? Yes, if I just held the toes like that —

why didn't I put my knees on them? Not too much weight! My arm was tired? Crouch down to rest; she could use just my back. Higher, lower. Her heel dug into my spine; if she lost her balance she grabbed my hair. She had no mirror — could I hold the candle up so she could see what she was doing? I coveted her shadow, would have snatched it off the wall and made it mine.

My grandmother was warming her hands on a cup of tea, frowning at the steam. 'Edeltraud has ruined your wallet, not just your health. I just received a polite reminder from the bank, Mein Gott! I'm going to have to stick my nose into those bankbooks and visit my banker to shuffle the fat around a bit. Look at you — pale, lifeless.'

'I know, Grandma. She's getting on my nerves, too.'

'Why don't you go see this Dr Gregor of ours? He's good. These past years he has kept me ticking beyond my time. He's right next door, what could be easier?'

'There's nothing he can do.'

'He'll be able to help.'

'With what? A love potion?'

'You were just talking about your nerves.'

'If she would just behave differently I'd be okay.'

'Let him see you first, then he can see her.'

'He can't see her.'

'I understand.' With a shrewd look, she blew the steam away. 'Afraid if you own up at last she'll disappear?'

'It's not hocus-pocus like you think. She'll just get up on her own and go.'

'She'll have to come out in the open one way or the other if you ever want to heal.'

I couldn't decide whether the tasks Elsa gave me were to test my affection or torture me. Once, I caught her peeking out a corner of the blind. She was so entranced by the snowflakes she hadn't heard me come in, or had chosen to ignore me. She begged me to cross town for a bowl of snow from Aspernbrücke. A bowl from our garden wouldn't do. I could have given her any snow — how would she have ever known the difference? — but I proved my love to her, if not to myself, by going all the way to the bridge in question. When I came back, red and chilled to the bone, her face fell. She said I must've held the bowl too long in my hand: the snow had melted. Couldn't I go back, and carry it back this time in a basket, so it would remain crisp and so white as to crunch between her teeth? Please — she'd so dreamed of compressing a snowball from Aspernbrücke in her hands!

Likewise, she bid me to bring her back leaves that didn't exist outside her faulty memory. A maple leaf with blue veins, a white lily pod big as an elephant ear, a pointed leaf with velvety stripes that smelt of mint — she couldn't remember its name but could draw it. Regularly, she made me go to the horse-drawn carriages in central Vienna, a popular tourist attraction, and rub my hand on a horse's neck. How foolish I felt, at my age, standing there patting the horsy, but I did it. She brought my palm close to her face; her deep inhalations against my skin gratified me. But most of my tasks brought no such reward. She had me fetch her heavy textbooks — philosophy, astronomy, biology, zoology, Latin. One out of two I was obliged to return. It wasn't biology she'd asked for, it was botany! It wasn't Latin, it was the history of Latin America!

As nice as I was to her, it became common for her to complain about my tone of voice. On one occasion she clipped her lips together with a pair of my mother's earrings I'd just given her, so they whitened and puckered grotesquely. I didn't think it was very funny. I hadn't said more than her name when she removed them with a swing of her hand and burst out, 'Please, Johannes! Stop snapping at me all the time!'

She was the one who'd just snapped, not me.

Of the dozens of poems I wrote to her during this period, I will include one, representative of the state of mind she left me in.

An Empty Frame

*A window pane is but heaven's frame,
An eternal painting of a majestic hand,
Whose palette an' brush must e'er change,
From raging greys to blues no less bland.*

*Darkness is painted with points of light,
Noon with darkness at its feet,
Pigment endlessly shuffled, rearrang'd,
Daybreak's pink at dawn already obsolete*

*Only mankind's oils grow cold and dry,
Catching life in his frame as he would,
Trapping seconds, penning runaway days,
Stillness in itself a falsehood.*

*My angel, you have taken the chore,
To make truth of a spectrum of lies,
Looking for less, you are looking for more,
Are you, too, searching for the violet sky?*

*Abandon life, leave my affections behind,
Treat me with cursing and blame,
'Tis only artifice and fame you will find,
Lost in the rich vastness of your empty frame.*

Folding my poem in four, with overzealous attention to the final crease, she said, 'We humans can never repaint reality as perfectly as God, therefore reality is frankly of no interest to me.'

To be spiteful, I asked her to name one single thing that wasn't grounded in reality.

'Unicorn,' she replied. 'Centaur. Sphinx. Dragon. Griffin. Minotaur. Harpy. Nixie. Medusa.' When she was mad, she liked to show off.

'A unicorn is nothing but a horse with a horn. A minotaur is just a man whose head has been replaced by a bull's.' I didn't want to venture further because I was unsure exactly what the others were made up of outside of

bird and woman. 'Why don't you come up with something entirely on the other side? With nothing from this earth? Hmm? You can't. All you do is take reality, steal snips and pieces from it here and there, and shuffle them around.'

The way she bit her nail, I could tell my challenge was worth some brainwork to her. I knew her well: if she could prove me wrong, she would do it in a heartbeat. Hours went by; neither of us spoke. I resisted offering lunch, wanting her to be the one to have to ask, for once. My belly made inelegant roils, it irritated me that hers didn't. At last she turned her canvas around for me to see. She'd painted herself as a paper doll holding a pot of sunflowers, each of whose six sparse petals was triangular and rigid enough to break; the middles of the sunflowers were hexagonal rather than round.

'Oh.' I lifted my eyebrows. 'How novel.'

'Are you still dwelling on that childishness? Don't you see? Well, it's good you don't. The sunflowers are six-pointed stars. There are other symbols. You don't see them, do you?'

'No.' I resented her ready supposition of my ignorance all the more because it was right.

The day at long last came when Elsa was satisfied with one of her paintings. Her smiles were so sweet, my hope was renewed, after a year and a half of rejection. She rushed to me giggling, threw her arms around my neck, but before I could get any hopes up for what any young man in my shoes would have given his back teeth for, she wrapped my arm around her waist and did a sort of ballet spin. When I understood she was trying to get me to play the part of a male ballet dancer, I felt preposterous. Then without warning she leaned back and I nearly dropped her. I wished she'd keep still but she stood doing little impatient jumps in front of me.

'Lift me up, Johannes!'

'How?'

'Put your hand here; lift as I jump.'

I hadn't been expecting her to matter-of-factly set my hand under her most forbidden part. Of all the dimwitted things to do, I refused! Sure, I wanted to — I'd wanted to for years — but I dreaded the humiliation in store for me if I wasn't strong enough to lift her off the ground.

'Come on. Don't be a party pooper!' Her back was sweating and she smelt sweet, almost peppery. Her hair was dishevelled, her eyes dark and alive. I noticed two freckles on her cheek I'd never seen before. Her chest moved sharply with her effort, in and out, I had trouble keeping my eyes off it. My desire, to my embarrassment, was beginning to show.

'Please.' She got closer, lifted herself up on her tiptoes, her eyes level with my chin, stood with her arms in a ballet pose over her head, her breasts sticking out.

I gave it a try, mostly so she wouldn't discover what was pressing against her hipbone. I strained to get her halfway up but her soft belly smacked me in the face, was smothering me. She pressed hard down on my shoulders to push herself up higher, my legs about to give in under the weight. Suddenly I heard a loud knock, followed by Elsa's shriek. I deduced that Pimmichen had just barged in and was face to face with Elsa, her bony finger pointing the way out of the house. But no, Elsa had only clipped her head good and hard on the ceiling. Her body slackened and I let her down. She wasn't crying, as I'd thought, but laughing to tears. I even got a hug out of it. She hadn't been so high-spirited in ages. Five minutes of attention was all it took for me to forget the long span of mistreatment I'd undergone — mistreatment I now deemed against all analytical reasoning to be an exception to the rule. This was the Elsa I used to know.

'Nice of you to come down to see your moth-eaten ancestor. We live in the same house, unless you have forgotten? Rescue me — my pillows aren't comfy.'

Giving the cushions a few good punches, I noted reddish-violet blotches on Pimmichen's skin.

'How are you feeling?' she asked me before I could her.

'I should be the one asking you.'

'I'm feeling achy and moss-backed, just as I should at my age. What concerns me is you. You have a long life ahead of you after I'm gone.'

'Fine and dandy.'

'Have you gone to confession lately?'

'If it makes you happy, I'll go next Sunday.'

'It's Sunday today. There's evening Mass.'

I found an excuse about having to return upstairs to finish a painting before it dried. In rearranging a hair clip she brought more of her pinkish scalp into view.

'How's Edeltraud?'

I grinned. 'There's hope. We're getting along much better.'

'You're enjoying your life together upstairs?'

'We danced ballet this afternoon. I twirled her up, down, all around. You should've seen us, it was stupendous.'

'One can presume she was light as a feather?'

'Depends. Not always.'

I noticed white hairs had recently grown on her chin.

'Tell me, how do you imagine her, Pimmi?'

'Well . . . I'd say she's thin and very light — so light I never hear her. It could be her, just as that little scratching could be a mouse. She has golden waves down her back. A long, graceful neck. A straight, thin nose, a tall, intelligent forehead, tiny teeth like a doll, a voice so soft you must close your eyes to hear it. Big blue eyes full of compassion. Cute ears that can listen for hours . . . Tiny nimble hands . . . She comes and goes as you wish, just like a fairy . . .'

I nodded my head, thinking how different her description was from Elsa.

'Now you tell me, Johannes, how is it you imagine her? That's what really counts.'

I rested my back against her headrest, pulled her cover over my legs as I'd done years earlier when we were both at the end of our tethers. 'Well, if you really want to know, she doesn't always listen to me. In fact she rarely does. She doesn't outright tell me to be quiet, but she has her silent ways of letting me know what she'd like and wouldn't like me to do. She has her way of getting whatever she wants, whenever she wants. She's headstrong, stubborn as a mule. She has a crease between her eyebrows from thinking all the time. She presses her lips together, and from how she moves them you can tell whether what she's thinking about is good or bad. It's true, she has small hands and feet, but I'd say other than that, she's rather solid. She has a good back, shoulders, a strong chest . . .'

'You mean bust?'

'Yes. She's very feminine.'

'Ah.' Pimmichen nodded discerningly.

'She has long hair like you said, only it's dark, wild. She doesn't comb it much. Her eyes are dark too; you can barely make out the pupils, especially if she's angry.' I continued, despite the curious face Pimmichen was making, 'Her forehead isn't high, but believe me, she's too intelligent for my good — she guesses everything in my head. If she puts her ankles together her knees won't touch. Soft round knees as tempting to pat as a baby's head. She has a freckle here and one here.' I pointed to two places on my face.

Pimmichen cleared her throat. Hands on knees wasn't something one talked about back then. 'You seem to know her as well as yourself.'

Feeling the heat in my face, I turned my attention to her pill box that I opened and closed like an uncanny mute mouth. 'I've been living with her for some years now.'

'You didn't tell me anything about her neck.'

I had to think. I knew the back of her neck, yes, but the front — there was nothing particular about it. I'd never really paid attention to it; my eyes were

usually fixed higher or lower. I shifted positions. 'It's a neck . . .'

My grandmother scrutinised me with that slight 'Got you!' smile of hers.

I repeated, 'It's a neck, Pimmi. A very normal neck.'

We were by now both lying down, facing each other.

'And her ears?' Pimmichen reached a hand out to play with mine.
'Yoodilo-i-hoo? Her ears?'

I closed my eyes. Her ears. I couldn't see them; her hair was always covering them, even when she pinned it up. Did she not like them? I'd seen the lobes but not the whole ears. Or had I? Both at once?

'Well? You can claim all necks are basically the standard pedestal to hold the old knocker up, but there is nothing more personal than a pair of ears. They can be elongated, top heavy, droopy at the bottom, thick, fleshy, rigid, cartilaginous, stuck against the head, sticking out like little catchers, gently rippled like wet sand on a beach, a valley of dense little hills . . . Their lobes can be attached, detached . . .'

I tried hard to envision the ears that would suit Elsa. 'Two delicate shells in which gentle folds, curves and rolls combine to form exquisite . . .' I was at a loss for words. That was the first thing I'd do next time I saw her, take a good hard look at her ears!

'I see she's not finished in parts. Well, maybe that isn't so bad after all. You can start erasing her from there.'

xvii

The following morning Dr Gregor was already there when I arose. He and my grandmother were speaking in low tones. As I approached, they were too preoccupied to bid me the time of day.

Dr Gregor continued, 'No, ma'am, his name is confidential. But as I was saying, he came to consult me because of . . . a problem. It's none of my business who he caught it from, but it is my business to stop the disease from spreading. He might have been embarrassed and trying to justify himself . . . but just before he left, he confided in me that he'd seen of late . . . in the same brothel-house . . . an acquaintance of ours. He said he'd seen, ah-hm, Herr Betzler . . . there.' Dr Gregor cleared his throat. 'Regularly.'

My grandmother turned to look at me, shocked.

'Excuse me. I mean, Herr Betzler the father.'

My grandmother and I were more than a little confused.

'It was only right to confirm the facts first hand before I alarmed anyone, or got anyone's hopes up. Of course I didn't believe that of Herr Betzler or I would have come to you straight away. You must understand, the situation was delicate. Mind you, it's my duty to cure disease, inform patients of health risks. Not to judge. I prescribe medicines, not morals.'

My grandmother could contain herself no longer, 'Well, was it him or not?'

'You must know that . . . Herr Betzler has had a cranial injury.'

'He's alive? He's been found?' My grandmother's expression lit up, to cloud over as quickly. 'You're saying it was him in the brothel?'

'He wasn't there in the way you are assuming, ma'am. I mean, he wasn't there as a client. He was in a room, but he was, um, how can I say this, only watching.'

'A voyeur?'

'You may call it that, but I repeat, he was not a client. He wasn't participating in the . . . doings. From what I've gathered, he was in the room as part of the programme, part of the service, if you prefer. I'm very sorry to have to tell you this.'

'That can't be,' said Pimmichen. 'He wouldn't need the money. He has a family. No, it's not my son. There's a mistake. You didn't see properly. Please, don't say any more — I've had enough pain with all I've imagined. I'll see you next time I'm sick, Doctor. I pray that will be none too soon.'

'He must have been put there by the prostitutes. He's being used as an accessory, a kind of aid. You always have deranged people who pay money for this kind of . . .'

'A king's ransom would not have turned his head to do that. You don't know my boy or you'd never be there giving mouth to this . . . stinking slander. I'm sorry to say so after you went to the trouble to . . . to do whatever you had to do. Do go now.'

'It's sordid, taking advantage of someone not in possession of his faculties,' said Dr Gregor.

'You're right! The only way he could be in such a hole is if they'd knocked him out cold. You said yourself he was the victim of a head injury.'

'If the fracture were recent, I would have informed the police. But because my medical knowledge tells me this is not the case, I thought it best to keep the whole affair quiet.'

'I'll strangle every painted lolly with my own bare hands . . . May God burn their wretched house in hell!'

'Bringing him out was worse than escorting him out of a hornet's nest. He punched and kicked — just did not want to leave. I was forced to inject a sedative. His memory has suffered. Five women of the house came to his "rescue", and a certain "Madeleine" spat in my face. The director of the establishment came to see what all the uproar was about. On learning who I

was, and who Herr Betzler was, he let him go on the condition I paid for what he said your son owed for room and board.'

'The nerve! Are you sure?'

'This Madeleine groped around in her, pardon me, brassiere, and paid his due for him.'

'And he didn't say anything? He didn't come to his senses?'

'I repeat: Herr Betzler is not in possession of his faculties. And perhaps never will be again.'

'I want him home. Take me to where he is — galley, dump or dunghouse!'

'He's in my office. Still under the effect of the sedative. Prepare yourselves for what you have to face.'

A buxom young nurse with curly red hair and a freckled face, Dr Gregor's soon-to-be wife, was pinning my father's shoulders to the examining table. Every time she prevented him from sitting up, he laughed or cocked his head and gave her flirtatious looks. He shifted around and groats of concrete fell from the worker's overalls he was wearing. Dr Gregor gave the nurse's elbow an affectionate squeeze before hoisting the examining table up so that my father was in a sitting position.

The physical changes in my father might not have been as radical as I'd braced myself for, but the changes to his person were. His jaw, set minimally more to the fore than it used to be, left him with a less alert expression that bordered on phlegmatic, all the more so because his eyebrows were knitted into some unanswered — and perhaps unanswerable — question. His build was heavier than it had been, which had the effect of reducing his facial features, at least relatively, making his personality appear that much weaker. His head was tilted forward, depriving him of his once proud bearing, and it was this detail that made me struggle to be brave. From the snivelling I could hear beside me, I can say my grandmother wasn't doing much better.

Pimmi used the hand she'd just wiped her eyes with to cross herself and went for an embrace, whereby he pulled back.

'Wilhelm! Wilhelm! It's your mother! Your own mother!' She beat her breast to illustrate the strength of their relationship. 'Willie? Don't you remember me? Mutti? *Mamma!*'

My father gazed blankly at her. In an absurd pantomime of 'mother', she framed her face with her hands, while straining her features into a lachrymose smile. I think my father was taking her for some nutty old bat. The nurse's coughs drew his gaze to her instead.

'Willie? Willie!' My grandmother waved her handkerchief in high arcs to catch his eye again. 'Little Johannes? Your son, remember? Yes. Little Johannes . . . That's right . . .' She gave me a push. 'Go on, Johannes! Go and kiss your father!'

My father was staring at me in a meaningful way that led me to believe he was indeed remembering me. But as I stepped closer I understood that it was not me he'd been captivated by, it was the disharmony of my face. All of a sudden he crossed both arms over his face and uttered a series of short, strident screams that caught me unawares.

Moving me aside with his elbow, Dr Gregor ordered, 'Out of his field of vision, quick! Turn around — don't you see you're upsetting him?'

I don't know whether it was the nurse's trained grip or simply the fact of being touched by her that had the effect of calming my father down, but whichever it was enabled Dr Gregor to administer an injection in safety, after which the nurse pressed my father's head against her cushiony bosom and rocked him as she would an oversized baby.

My grandmother watched in silence, three fingers working her chin. Dr Gregor took some catalogues and pamphlets out of a filing cabinet and escorted us to the adjoining room.

'Don't lose hope, Frau Betzler,' he said. 'Vienna has specialists known worldwide for such cases; institutions that will take the burden off your

hands. I guarantee you tiptop medical teams . . . clean facilities . . . He will be in the best hands.'

'Just out of a whorehouse and you want to throw him in the nuthouse?' Pimmichen paced back and forth holding her forehead, as if the weight of the decision was too much. She drew both palms down her face and motioned me back to my father. 'Doctor, I thank you for all your help until now, but there's one house he needs now, one house only. It's called home.'

Over the week and days to come, Pimmi was a slave to my father and I provided all the support I could, giving him every sort of basic care. But for some reason, rather than giving my life meaning, as did my care of Elsa, it depressed me through and through, which depressed me more by making me feel guilty about caring more about her than him. No doubt it was because he was more like some dried casing my father had discarded. Whatever we did, told him or showed him from his old life, such as his wedding pictures, he remembered nothing. His house was as foreign to him as an institution, and we ourselves were no more than a nurse and guard. The only person he missed, judging from his irregular fits, which obliged us to tie one of his limbs to my grandmother's four-poster bed with a belt before he took to the streets, was the prostitute 'Madeleine', whom he called out for.

One cloudy afternoon, the eleventh day or so, he was more jittery than usual as I was adjusting the buckle around his wrist with a hand towel so it would chafe less. After shoving Pimmi back with both legs and knocking my brow with his elbow, he stopped in mid-motion and grinned at some point behind me. Turning around, I jumped to see a figure.

The woman could have been in her twenties, as she could have been in her forties — gone to seed in the one instance or held in place by a miracle and a few stitches in the other. Her face was colourfully though not skilfully painted. The bars of green under her brows rendered her eyes less green, and whatever stuff she had applied to her skin gave her the look of a wax doll, an impression underlined by moth-like false eyelashes ungluing at the bases. Her dress, or rather lack of a dress, exposed her legs, thin up to the

knees but widening out well thereafter, along with the squares of her black net stockings. A ridiculous scarf, looking like a three-metre snake that had been tarred and feathered, was coiling in front of what I guessed to be an impressive cleavage. Her trump card was her hair — luscious, long, curly and red, though from the violet glints it sent off, I doubted naturally so.

'Who are you?' I asked.

'I didn't hear you knock,' Pimmichen snapped.

'I didn't,' replied the woman.

'Then who gave you permission to come in?'

She made a jab in my father's direction, her thumb sticking out like a hitchhiker's. 'Sounded to me like he did.'

'Madeleine. Madeleine!' My father dragged himself over as far as the bedpost allowed and gave her legs a one arm hug.

'After what you did to my son, you dare show yourself bare-faced here? "Bare-faced" being a manner of speaking.'

'Sorry?'

'Remove yourself sofort from this proper abode and take your pungent aromas with you!'

'Listen here, you old battleaxe. It's a wonder you can still smell, though with such a nose I guess it's not so surprising. You certainly can't see, 'cause if you could, you'd see I took good care of your fry. If he's alive, you have me to thank.' She tossed the tail (or head?) of her snake over her shoulder. 'I saved him from starvation, to start with — he's not exactly what I'd call rattle-boned — and from a good beating more than once.'

She bent over to give my father a kiss practically on the mouth. After undoing the belt, she gripped his hand between her thighs to massage the red welts with both hands.

My grandmother said icily, 'I've been informed as to what acts you put him up to. And I will call the authorities if you don't remove yourself now.'

'Nothing illegal about our work. Just give me the name of whatever authority you want — they're some of our best clients.' She squeezed her thighs to stop my father from moving his hand up.

'You dared have my son witness your filthy copulations!' my grandmother cried.

'Grandma, don't get upset,' I said. 'I'll handle this.'

'Would you have preferred ten apes a night knocking at his back door, if you get my meaning? That's what he was in line for! I saved him from their clutches, brought him back to our house, which is a pretty decent one compared to theirs. Nearly cost me my neck. And don't you go accusing no one about what you don't know donkey about. He was half dead when they found him, and no way to know what name to mark on the grave he had one foot in. Wherever he escaped from — prison, camp or devil knows where — that's where the damage was done.'

'Madeleine's a nice woman! The nicest woman I've ever known!'

My grandmother and I were astonished to hear these, the most coherent phrases my father had spoken since he'd been back home.

By then Pimmi was beside herself with anger. 'Instead of helping this gentleman in need, you lured him into your foul trade!'

'Listen here, you old-liner, we were just working together. What's wrong with that? I did all the dirty work, if that's what you're worried about. No one touched a hair on your poor babe's head — that is, besides me.' She ran her fingers along his balding temples and gave a laugh that betrayed a growing nervousness.

My father made his lips smack for another kiss.

I slammed my fist down on my grandmother's chest of drawers. 'I think it is time to put an end to this!'

Madeleine shammed a yawn and stretch until I thought her lacy frivolities would cease to contain certain aspects of her anatomy. I saw that her hand was trembling when she took my father by the hand, but she seemed to

stroll in a leisurely enough fashion from room to room, her snake swinging like a long tail behind her as she looked up and around at details of the house with a greedy, ill-at-ease smile. She picked up a silver ashtray, rubbed it against her stocking to admire the shine — or perhaps her face — before setting it back down. My father was sticking to her heels like a star-struck fan while my grandmother and I kept five paces back as if trailing a pickpocket.

'This is his house, isn't it?' she asked, flicking something that looked like fluff off her long, varnished fingernail.

'Don't even think about it,' my grandmother retorted.

I cut across her path. 'You've caused enough trouble. I think you should do what you've been asked to do and leave before we are forced to resort to non-verbal means.'

Without warning my father charged at me, like some drunkard at a beer festival. 'I'll knock your block off! Right off! Got that? Madeleine stays here.' He rested his forehead against mine and breathed like an enraged animal.

'Yes, yes, my teddy bear. Don't get all worked up.' Madeleine pinched his cheek. 'Shh, calm down, don't sweat. Why don't you go and get me a brush? A brush? You know how Maddie likes you to brush her hair. Will you do that for your little Maddie?'

My father was immediately off from room to room, banging around obnoxiously.

Madeleine gave her hair a toss and glowered at my grandmother. 'Just a word on where you stand, old fart. My teddy bear here can still have children. Take it from me. Golden rule number one. As long as a woman's ovaries are functioning, consider her as having a lethal weapon aimed at your temple. Golden rule number two. Be nice to whoever your little lovie-boy is sleeping with. The world could turn upside down for you in a night. You see? No, didn't I already say the old bat couldn't see? Well, I can. And what future do I see in my crystal ball? I see a baby on its way in . . . I see an old hag on her way out . . .'

My grandmother had begun escorting the woman out by the arm, but at this point the woman, resisting her, pushed her back towards the staircase. Before she could deliver a second more dangerous push, I caught her by the fuzzy contour one could best name a collar.

'Leave her alone or I'm calling the police,' I said. 'This is *her* house.'

'Legally, I think you'll find it's his. She's just a guest. Not even a paying guest.'

'My father is not in his right mind. '

'That's true and you know it, you shameless hussy,' my grandmother said.

Just then my father came around the corner and presented Madeleine with my mother's bronze-handled brush, held in both hands as delicately as a dove. 'Oh, thank you for this magnificent brush,' she said. 'Really, you're giving it to me? It's mine, all mine?' She reminded me for some reason of Josef Ritter, whose uniform once gave him the guts to brave my father. 'How sweet! Can you use it to brush Maddie's hair?'

'Yes, yes, yes.' He set to brushing her long hair with reverence.

'You understand well, seems to me, teddy bear. You don't seem in any *abnormal* state of mind. Tell me, are you *abnormal*?'

My father gave her a salacious smile, and rocked his head sideways, imitating her example.

'You won't fool anyone,' my grandmother managed to get out, despite the trembling that had got the better of her. 'A fool can see what you're doing. Trying to take advantage of a mentally unstable man.'

'Mentally unstable? Do you have the papers to prove that? Any official certificate? Slander, oh slander! It's going to be a cold night for you outside. Not that I don't have a good address . . . You could say I was the one who sent you.' She stepped closer to my grandmother who took another step back.

'Back off or I'll throw you out myself!' I stepped up until we were just short of physical contact.

Madeleine was smiling at me as if I'd meant my menace to be sexy. At that moment my grandmother screamed and I turned just in time to see my father coming at me with an old Chinese vase of ours deep enough to hold one-third of a man. If Madeleine hadn't motioned at him to stop, I would have been smashed to smithereens along with the vase. My father only awaited the word for the deed to be done.

'I wasn't talking about you. You can stay,' she said magnanimously. 'But let me make one thing clear. If he's the master of the house, there's only one lady of the house from now on. And that's me.'

Later on that evening, as I walked past my grandmother's room, I saw my father masqueraded in his swallow-tailed coat and lavalier, with all four limbs attached to the bedposts, putting up no resistance to what she was performing (I choose the word *performing* because it seemed to me like a performance intended more for spectators than for herself). I wouldn't have looked, but the door was wide open and she was laughing to herself or at least that's what the noises perhaps more in line with what she was doing sounded like.

Elsa painted more vigorously, caring not whether her night was day, or her day night. Her self-portraits became less substantial than paper dolls, in time less than the reflection of oneself in a winter's windowpane, and finally were reduced to a residue of light. Her blossoms took on vast proportions; her leaves gradually shrank until they disappeared, naked stems streamed across the sky. A first tiny thorn appeared on a poppy one day, then golden horns on a sunflower, the sky bled. The stems became dissociated from the blossoms, then there was a series consisting of only stems, this time perfectly stiff. A vertical green line in the middle of blue. Parallel green lines standing, slanting.

'Isn't there a detail that bothers you?' Elsa was facing her easel with her back to me.

I remembered her ears, which she still had never let me see up close. 'Let's see . . .' I stalked up behind her, moved her hair up on one side.

She swatted my hand. 'Cut it out. The bottom doesn't strike you as blank?'

'Not really.'

'What should be there?'

'A flower pot? Earth? Beats me. Roots?'

'A signature.'

'Oh.'

'A very important "oh". How can you exhibit works without a signature?'

'Sorry, I . . . um . . . didn't notice.'

'You must start noticing the details that will save or damn us. Dear God lives in details.'

'Then why didn't you sign them?'

'It has to be your name.'

'You can sign for me.'

'You have to believe these are yours. You have to feel that you're the one who painted them. You're the artist, Johannes, not me. You'll be the one to face the public, the criticism; to bring us help. Not me. Remember, I don't exist.'

I looked at the paintings with a cooler disposition. What did she mean? Was I 'the artist' because I was creating our world, a world in which she was both as inseparably connected to me and yet as non-existent to others as my own shadow? Or did she have the cheek to insinuate I was a dictator rising upon and extinguishing her, my victim, for the sake of my vanity?

'Well, do you feel capable of signing them?'

Troubled, I retorted, 'I can write — you know it well! Don't put me down all the time!'

'I don't mean physically, I mean artistically. Do you feel these are worthy of you?'

'Why not? Pass me a paintbrush. Move over.'

'Wait. How will you sign?'

'You'll see. Make room.'

'You'll ruin them. You have to practise. Try this one. If you're a schlemiel and slop it up, it doesn't count.'

The letters came out thick; the gaps filled until we were left with a smudge. Elsa had that nasty crease between her eyes. 'It would be more catchy if you shortened your name to J Betz. Artists often change their names. It's part of their forging reality to suit their own taste.'

I spent two days experimenting.

'Too pretentious.' 'Too mousy.' 'Johannes, where's your mind? You're always somewhere else!' 'It must be a wink at the outer world!' 'Wrap the J around the Betz.' 'Hook the Betz with the J!' 'Tilt the J so it leans on the Betz. Leans — I didn't say topples over.'

At last she gave me permission to go ahead. She set her chin on my shoulder as if she were my second head — or should I say my first, since mine clearly didn't count — and guided my every move. 'Now hold your hand steady.' 'Lower — no, higher!' She made me so nervous it was no wonder things turned out the way they did.

Hitting her small white fist in the palm of her hand to accent certain words, she despaired over my leaden hand! If I had just listened! Light and flowery! Couldn't I tell the difference between 'J Betz' (her voice high and crisp) and 'J Betz' (at a low pitch, slow and retarded)? I painted a clover on the stem of my J, asked her if that made it more light and flowery.

She didn't speak to me for two whole days, or it might have been the other way around: I was equally taciturn. The morning of the third day I came up with her breakfast tray to find the other nine paintings in three rows on the floor. I knew that was the most I'd get by way of an apology. She offered me no advice as I signed them, even forced herself to look away while I laboured on my knees. Instead of thanking me when I was done, all she had

the nerve to say, after a sneaky sideways glimpse at them, was that if I became famous it would be thanks to her.

The success of the paintings in Vienna was, I led her to believe, immediate. After my supposed inaugural exhibition I told her I received offers from Ernst Köhler, a talent scout from Berlin; Engelbert Stumme, a connoisseur from Trier; and Herbert Ranzenberger, from the Feine Kunst Galerie in Innsbruck, who said I hid much in my simple forms; whereby I supposedly answered, 'Do we not hide "much" in the simple forms of our heart? In the simple squares of our homes?'

By the hour, Elsa indulged in words such as 'stirring', 'powerful', 'original' — made me repeat them without a semblance of modesty, moped over others, such as 'incomplete'. She became so engrossed with their opinions it became clear to me she was losing track of the reason I'd convinced her to paint in the first place. Her works had become art for the sake of art.

I led her to believe that there were to be other exhibitions throughout our territory, which after the war was vast; her work might even find its way abroad. I pretended to know fame, acclaim, admiration. I became familiar with intimidated smiles, people being flattered if I stepped on their foot. I was always the last to leave, relishing the silence before stepping over the discarded cigarette butts, overlapping footprints. I watched Elsa close her eyes to picture the beauty, the grandeur of walking by my side — or perhaps in my place — in Casablanca, Cairo, Rome, Volksstadt (formerly Stalingrad), sipping champagne in high-domed galleries, jostling in crowds for space. I watched her travel to the four corners of her mind as she sat with her infantile bowed legs stretched out on the floor of a dishevelled attic room.

Elsa handed me a blue canvas that represented the sky. My signature had to be blue this time, so it would barely be seen, and only by those who knew where to look. I descended the cold stone steps to the cellar and had to force the door with all that was stacked behind it. I could hardly get in any more. I blew away what dust I could from the canvases nearest me, snatched away the fresh cobwebs that were within my reach. I wedged the

painting between two others. It took a lot of shoving before the door would close again.

Part III

xviii

Madeleine was wearing my mother's housecoat, having breakfast in my grandmother's bedroom, where she spent most of her time — more specifically, in the four-poster bed, which had become her permanent nesting place. Pimmichen had been obliged to move to my parents' bedroom. Because Madeleine was a chain-smoker, there was a fog about her as thick as pea soup; well, maybe not so opaque because it didn't stop me recognising a sapphire pendant necklace that dangled into her cleavage; it was a wedding anniversary gift from my father to my mother. I might come across as weak for keeping my resentment to myself — although I'm sure it showed in my attitude — but what silenced me was the fact that my father's state was improving as a result of her company, however much it eats me up to say so.

'Get me another ashtray, will you? A silver one. This crystal is too heavy on my lap.'

'Yes, my Maddie. No problem.'

'Can you stir my coffee for me? My fingernails aren't dry. Damn it, you just burnt me! You have to learn to be more gentle, my dear.'

Mocking aristocratic manners, she held out her hand as if rehearsing for the Czar to kiss it. While my father brought his lips to just above her skin, no pucker and no noise — he hadn't forgotten the proper way to perform a Handkuß — she looked at me in an equivocal way, making me feel awkward. I'd come down to say something and found myself standing there dumbly, having forgotten what it was.

Madeleine appraised herself in the trumeau mirror over the mantelpiece across the room, fluffed up her red hair, fingered it away from her cleavage and turned her eyes to the reflection of my father waiting obediently by her bedside. 'Dear? Would you roll up that Persian rug for me? Those curlicues or whatever the heck they are give me a headache.'

My father lifted the foot of her bed, with her in it, pulled the rug out from under it and dragged it out of the room.

'Don't go too far. And you see that thingamajig over there, that gold thingy with the wings?'

My father put his right hand on it and, with his left, pinched his nose between his eyes, where his reading glasses always used to hurt him. 'Yes, um . . . the . . . the pendulum?'

'The *pendulum*. The little bugger must have chronic hiccups. My head is splitting. Just stuff it in a drawer. I can still hear it — get it out! Oh, before you go would you mind taking that portrait down? Seeing her that young makes me travel a century back every time I look at it. I'm getting motion sickness.'

'I already told you. I don't mind *anything*, if it's for you. Honestly.'

In lower spirits than I'd been of late, if that was possible, I dragged my feet to the gas range to make Pimmi's and Elsa's breakfast. I reheated diluted tea and toasted both sides of the stale bread in a pan. The coffee and sugar cubes Madeleine shared with my father were, as she'd said to him loudly enough for us to overhear, compliments of an old friend. From what I could gather she had truckloads of those — old friends, I mean. Without warning, Pimmi stepped out from behind the kitchen dresser and grabbed me by the wrist. Fully dressed, ready to go, she said, 'We're going to Dr Gregor's now. This has to end.'

'Ah, Frau Betzler. Johannes. Good thing you've come. Saves me posting this.'

'I hope it's the certificate I need to consign my son into better hands.'

'I thought he was doing best in your hands? No, it's Herr Betzler's laboratory analysis.'

My grandmother took it from him and brought it to the tip of her nose. 'Don't tell me this gonococcus bacterium means venereal disease?'

'He will have to be treated. Take antibiotics.'

'Cupid's itch?'

'A little more serious, but nothing he won't survive.'

'You know the low-down harlot who gave it to him?'

'Not personally.'

'That Madeleine you told us about. She's living at home with him. You have to come and see with your own eyes what's been going on, and hopefully you can do something about it. That's why we stayed put in your waiting room until one leg then another fell asleep. Mind you, our heads weren't far behind.'

'I'd better examine her to see if she's infected.'

'Just examine her behaviour. That's noxious enough. It's a disgrace. Take him away, lock him up. Whatever it takes to get him away from her.'

'Has his general condition worsened?'

My grandmother looked at me for help and, after I paused too long, not knowing how to answer, Dr Gregor joined her, crossing his arms, waiting.

'Well . . .' I began, fumbling for words, 'it's that, generally, mostly, he's actually been doing better since she's been with him. He doesn't have fits any more. His speech has, to be honest, made headway. I think my grandmother means that . . . this Madeleine woman has him by the nose, worse than a bullring. Nothing else matters to him, least of all us.'

Dr Gregor's disapproving face caused my grandmother to look away. She got up and peered out his office window at our house.

'Isn't that to be expected if he has no memory of you?' Dr Gregor asked. 'Whereas he knows her. What are your real motives for wanting him put in an institution? No jealousy involved in this change of mind? Purely your son's well-being? I certainly recommend such institutions when I believe the care of specialised staff will be to a patient's advantage. But I already told you, I prescribe medication, not morals.'

'Just come and see the no-good she's up to, Doctor, dragging him down into her unhealthy life. Don't we owe that to him?' Pimmichen shuffled back towards him, her orthopaedic shoes undone because her feet were swollen.

Dr Gregor ultimately gave in and, after he'd finished with his other patients, followed my grandmother and me back to our house. We led him into their room, where Pimmi and I stood mouths agape. Not only had the bed been made, an all-time first, but the furniture had been rearranged and many of my grandmother's effects removed, giving a general impression of more space. My father was in the hallway on his knees, assembling a hand drill. He'd lined up the drill tips according to size and something about them made it look as if he was playing with toy soldiers. He took us in briefly with what looked like mild curiosity or unsettled confusion, and nodded before returning to what he was doing. This was another first-time sign of progress.

There was a familiar smell I couldn't place: fragrant, comforting. We followed it into the kitchen, where we were dumbfounded by what we saw. Madeleine sat leaning back on a kitchen chair, stark naked, her legs up on the bench, using a wooden spatula to streak whatever was warming in a cooking pot on to them. Whatever it was had also gathered on her upper lip like an old field-marshal's mustachio and set her pubic hairs in a triangular frosty frame. She started, and for a split-second there was embarrassment on her face before she recovered back to her thick-skinned self and dropped another of Pimmi's holy candles into the pot.

'Inform her where my office is,' Dr Gregor ordered as he took his leave.

My grandmother brought her hands to her hips, drew herself up with an intake of breath and burst out, 'I demand decency in this house!'

Poking the candle with the spatula to make it melt faster, her stance one of determined defensiveness, Madeleine snapped, 'You think hairy legs and a big bush are decent?'

'You horrid carrier of disease!' My grandmother waved Dr Gregor's prescription in her face until it caught in her moustache, upon which she was content to let it dangle. Madeleine ripped it off.

'People who live in glasshouses shouldn't throw stones. You look pretty disease-ridden yourself, old bag!'

In order to keep my eyes off her body, I picked up a cold strip of wax from the bench to examine it. It reminded me of a millipede — a smooth body with hundreds of short black legs underneath.

'She's a hairy primate. An animal,' my grandmother said to me. 'A primate who thinks waxing herself will make her human . . .'

'That's below the belt,' said Madeleine.

'Your specialty, from what I gather.'

'And yours? Into cobwebs? It'll do you good to die. Woodworms will be the first thing to wiggle in you for over a century!'

Madeleine tried to get up, but the wax applied to her private area had hardened on to the upholstery, adhering this section of her painfully to the chair. She called out at the top of her lungs, 'Teddy! Come quick!'

Pimmichen didn't wait for my father to come running. 'Leave him be! I don't intend to remain here another day. Decency has no price. Something you wouldn't know.'

I followed her as she stomped and ranted about the house, flinging items into her old monogrammed leather trunk, a relic from the days when the wealthy had servants to carry such heavy luggage for them. Nothing I did or said had any impact, but the pain in her chest did at some point. She staggered to the edge of the ottoman in the boudoir and held her side. I talked her into letting me unpack her things, and helped her to recline. Just as I'd persuaded her to relax, she saw the walls and what else had changed while she and I were away.

'The nerve of her, bringing her cheap scabs of art here *chez nous!* She can take them right back to her house of ill-repute! That's where such eyesores belong — to go with the sores and scabs they have everywhere else! Does she think she's doing us a favour bringing that second-rate trash in here? I take that back! *First-rate trash! Quelle merde! Quelles croûtes!*'

'Pimmi, stop. They're mine. I . . . I don't know how they got here.'

'Ah! Ah?' Her smile came with great effort.

I went to get the spectacles she asked for, knowing it was an excuse for her to gather herself together. I knew it was a bad sign when I came back and she'd turned one of the canvases on its side, was stepping forward and back on shaky legs, resorting to the rickety three-legged escritoire for balance whenever she cocked her head.

I turned it right side up again. 'The stems go down.'

'Those are stems?'

'From the sunflowers. Look here.'

'I thought they were kites in the sky. Aren't they kites?'

'I think I should have a little bit of an idea what they are.'

'Sorry, but what are those green ribbons on the kites' tails?'

'Those are leaves.'

'They look like ribbons to me. Leaves don't grow side by side like that, evenly spread like the rungs of a ladder. Look how tiny they are, out of proportion for such giant blossoms. And the woman? Did she fall victim to a rolling-pin? Do you want my glasses?'

She held them out for me to take. When I didn't she sat down, breathless, her fist to her heart. 'My, my. So that's what you've been doing up there all those hours. My, my . . .'

It felt as if I had been the one painstakingly applying a thousand tubes of pigment to as many canvases. I forgot all about Elsa; I was alone to defend my work. Because my name was on them, they'd become mine — entirely, indivisibly mine. I stared at my fiascos, feeling miserable, misunderstood.

'Oh, don't pay any attention to a thorny old rose like me. My roots are too deep in the ground to understand the modern forms of expression you young people come up with. Not bad for a beginner.' She coughed a few times. 'But I would just suggest spending more time in the garden, looking

at real leaves, getting outside to meet real people. Too much time in that little room, crammed with all your canvases and God knows what or whom, and you've forgotten what real life looks like.'

Alone again, I laid my head on the banister, unable to go up and face Elsa after the truth had been spoken so bluntly. Pimmi's words kept cutting into me. My paintings: sores, scabs. Maybe that's what they were — nothing more than sickening old bandages from all the places I'd bled.

Madeleine startled me at the top of the stairs.

'Didn't know you had so much talent,' she called down. I watched in disbelief as she descended towards me with a smile so full of admiration there was something almost religious about it. 'If you ever need me to pose . . . I've already done that for loads of artists before, sat on their cubes, naked as a jaybird in the cold — those fellows can never afford heat. I only do it if I like the work . . . and I like what you do. A lot.'

For the first time I saw who was hiding behind the moth-like eyelashes, rough hide and feathers. I saw a human being with petty hopes, nonsensical dreams like anyone else's. She was also seeing me in a new light, the flattering light of the artist, and this, so soon after Pimmichen's criticism, had its full effect — I found myself unable to speak, move a muscle, breathe, and the more I didn't, the more there was something all-encompassing, replete, even congested about the moment, though neither of us was doing anything but standing there, arms at our sides. Either of us only needed to snatch at that tiny creature hovering above our heads unseen, the invisible unsaid thing it transported with its tiny transparent wings, which we couldn't quite understand but somehow felt was the regenerator of fleeting hopes, a momentary rejection of death, our vulnerability on earth, a squaring up to all the mysteries we'd never solve, plans we'd never accomplish, universal dreams never to come true. Lifting an arm up to catch it was lifting a fist to defy heaven, grant ourselves that sweet savage force of our consummate, absolute beings, that soft, fuzzy, ambrosial moment that was ours to squeeze at that precise moment — to feel wriggling, alive, soft fuzzy buzzing, vibrant — in our tight-with-life fists before we felt its sting and let it all go.

I went upstairs for the night.

xix

For a long time I had needed my lesser arm to balance the tray, but by then I'd become adept and could balance it on the good one, while the other stayed waiter-style behind my back. I'd learned how to turn the doorknob with my foot and push it open without my knee knocking the tray so that the napkin absorbed more of the tea than Pimmi or Elsa did.

'Breakfast . . .' I announced in my customary singsong.

Pimmichen's head had drooped over the edge of the bed, an arch of pearly teeth sticking partway out of her mouth so that it looked as if her jaw was broken; drool was hanging in a string down to the floor.

'Grandma!' I dropped the tray, part of me taking fearful note that she didn't react to the shatter. I undid the neck button of her nightgown and prised her dental apparatus out of her mouth.

My shaking revived her: her eyes opened, if only to bewildered slits.

'I'm here. Right by you. Everything is okay.'

She looked slightly left of me, her gums working away. 'Wilhelm? Wilhelm?'

'No, it's Johannes. Pimmichen? Do you hear me?'

'Oh, oh.'

'Breathe deep. Just like that . . .'

After what seemed impossibly long to someone young and agitated like me, she made an effort to speak. I had to move my ear closer to make out what she was saying, for there seemed to be more throat-clearing and sighing than words. 'Dearest . . . don't get your hopes up high; do something else for a job. I was wrong to encourage you. I'm afraid you won't have anything left if you continue painting for too long.' She held on to my sleeve so I'd stay bent to hear her until she'd finished. 'You need a job, with

other employees — a paid job, to learn some skills. Do something useful. Make an income. Get out. I've been selfish, may God forgive me. I wanted you by my side; I was lonely with no other family. But you have your father to take care of now, so you must get a job. You must forget all the rest.' She let go, tumbled back. I was in a state of confusion, hurt and nettled.

'You're not going anywhere, Grandma.'

'They're up there singing, hands joined in a ring — your grandfather, mother, sister. I must leave this old shell of mine behind. Rest your ear on it after I go and you'll hear I always loved you.'

'You have a few more years in you.'

'I saw a shadow. It won't be long.'

'A what? Sorry?' I asked.

'A shadow. It opened my door, was standing right there in the frame of the door, looking straight at me. There's no mistaking. Death's wings are flapping.'

'A shadow?'

'In the middle of the night. A form. It opened the door, looked at me and left. It was an annunciation, time to say my last prayers.'

'How can you see a shadow at night?'

'I did. You left the light on in the library, Johannes, so I could see the outline well. It came to me.'

'I didn't leave any light on,' I said. 'I check around the whole house before going upstairs. It would still be on if I had. Unless you got up and turned it off?'

'Then that you-know-what did.'

'She's never read a book in her life — why would she be in the library?'

'In that case it wasn't our light, it was the Lord's. My, my. Adieu.' She touched my cheek and closed her eyes.

'You're being a lunatic.'

'Shh, don't distract me. My soul must rise.'

'I assure you, you're confusing your angel with someone else.'

'The day I confuse a *whachamacallit* for an angel, I'm already dead.'

'It wasn't an angel or a shadow, I tell you.'

'Help me go in peace.'

'You're not going anywhere.'

'Be strong, sweet one.'

'It wasn't what you think, Pimmi.'

'Call it what you like. A materialised presence. A form.'

'I call it her!'

'She, he — no matter . . . Death is genderless.'

'She! It's very definitely a she!'

'I told you, it's not *her*,' she whispered.

'I don't mean Madeleine. I mean . . .'

Very slowly my grandmother opened one eye. '*Who?*'

'She came down to get a book. I wouldn't get her one before I went to bed. Damn her! She knows she's not allowed down here!'

'Who on earth are you talking about?'

'Elsa.'

'Elsa?'

'Her name is Elsa, not Edeltraud.'

She clasped her hands together in dismay. 'Johannes, you're not well. You must promise me to seek help.'

'Listen, Grandmother . . .'

'Listen you, young man. This has gone too far. You have become sick. I don't mean your body — it's fine, it has healed, nothing's wrong with you in that sense. I mean you've come down with some ailment in your mind, a mental trauma.'

'Remember the girl who used to play violin with Ute?'

'No, and I don't want to hear any more nonsense.'

'Mutter and Vater hid her during the war. Didn't you know?' Pimmichen looked at me in dread and confusion, not knowing whether or not to believe me, or not wanting to. 'Well, she's still upstairs. I never told her we lost the war.'

My grandmother was in a state of shock, at either the truth or my confession of it, thus linking her to my lie. She scanned my features, fear in her eyes.

'You're not well. If what you say were true, how could she have stayed alive all these years? On air and dust?'

'Mutter took care of her, Vater helped when he could, and I've cared for her ever since.'

She managed with a few jerks and ungainly grimaces to sit up, clinging to me for support. 'All these years?'

'Yes.'

'Johannes, the Gestapo would have found her out — they knew about your parents. Where would you be hiding this little girl?'

'She's not a little girl any more. She's a woman.'

My grandmother wiped her watery eyes. 'She doesn't exist. She never became a woman.'

'You heard her in the guest room — you fell down the stairs.'

'Do not invent what is not. Those were pigeons nesting — you left the window open. Pigeons. I remember well . . .' She waved her liver-spotted hands in front of her face as if hundreds of pigeons were diving at her.

'She's alive.'

'In your memory.'

'In this house. As alive as you and I.'

'You're ill; you must be careful what you say. And more so what you do. You could get yourself into trouble, get locked up for life opening your mouth like that!'

'Who would imprison me? I'm a hero for safeguarding her still. I'm just holding out longer than others, just in case. The world's not to be trusted.'

'It's your guilt speaking, Johannes. Maybe you wish you had helped that little girl. You're feeling guilt because of abstention — all you didn't do.'

Pimmi spent the next moments trying to talk me out of what was and had been. It was crazy: I almost began to doubt myself. The real situation, the truth, hit me as unreal — that the war had ever happened; that Austria was occupied; that my father had shrunk to a marionette whose strings were pulled by a prostitute, in our own house, a puppet stand; that the man who had won my childhood admiration had committed suicide, as had his mistress, in an aura of theatricality the day after pronouncing their wedding vows. I imagined Eva Braun swallowing poison as the Führer shot himself, Martin Bormann running out of the bunker crying, 'Hitler named me new master of the Reich! Hitler named me new master of the Reich!', running enraptured into the ruins of Berlin, never to be seen again. It was all too crazy. My own life did not feel real; how could Elsa's? Yes, her existence, too, struck me as unreal. Those years were absurd; everyone's sense of reality had shifted as much as the walls.

I took one slow step up. I took another one, just as slow. I felt the weight of my leg. The solidness of wood under my foot. The realness of the wooden banister. The doorknob was hard; the door was heavy, thus permanent. A

smell of paint and turpentine came from behind it. I pushed it open. Opened my eyes. And looked. And there, at the pinnacle of her imagined success, she lay, unconscious, a thick faded-green stain about her mouth. Her arms were extended tragically, one thrown behind her head, the other to the side, clutching an empty paint tube. She was not real, none of this had ever happened; it couldn't have. I stood there counting, but she didn't disappear. I pushed her with my foot and she rolled over on her back. She, too, was solid, heavy, real. Green paint bubbled out of her mouth.

I took her up in my arms. God knows what I did then. I slapped her face, pressed her stomach, tried to pick her up by her feet. There was more green on the floor, then came orange, yellow, blue. We were soon slipping in it. With the sliding of my feet, it turned into one dark, chaotic mess, and so did she — in fact, she began to look as if she were made of clay.

At that moment I had the choice. The question of her existence was mine. She was as much mine as if I'd shaped her myself, squeezed form out of a formless mass, pressed my fingers into her head to make two eyes, my thumb to make her mouth. I could roll her back into a ball or I could complete her, fashion her individual traits.

I couldn't leave her. I stayed with her twenty-four hours a day, from Friday until Monday, purging, curing, nurturing her. By Monday morning she could move again of her own will, not just mine. She opened her eyes briskly — the clay figure come to life — said nothing, arrogantly watched her foot twitch from side to side. She was no longer fighting for life, she was fighting for strength.

Because I'd left her as little as possible during this time, the room was filthy. The paint smeared on the bedspread, walls, lightshade had dried; food and drink receptacles had accumulated, and whatever had been or was still in them left its corresponding stain on the furniture. She played with her rapt little foot until she got what she wanted — she knocked a milk bottle off the chest at the end of her bed, along with a candle I placed there to reduce the smells that had accumulated. I offered her what hadn't spilt, some of which she swallowed before dropping the bottle. More milk and a

dribble of hardened white wax could have been added to the inventory of stains.

After Elsa dozed off, I tried to get myself together, recall what had to be done. I had to clean up, attend to the bills, write some administrative letters, see to my father's medication, find out if my grandmother needed anything on my way to the post office . . . Pimmichen! Since Friday, I'd taken her nothing, not even a glass of water.

I rushed down. Madeleine was smoking in bed, her legs propped up on the sofa cushions she'd moved there, caressing my father's head on her stomach. She didn't acknowledge my intrusion outside a queer expression it brought to her face, self-satisfied, even amused about something as she puffed away. I'd forgotten it wasn't my grandmother's room any more and raced back up. My parents' door was half shut, and all was still. I went closer, fear trading places with hope, hope trading places with fear: it seemed my impression wavered with each step. Her wrinkled, plastery face was serene, her hands clasped in prayer. The million sundries of her life were captured in a sole and final sculpture.

My grandmother didn't have the burial she'd dreamt of, either in terms of her garb (her wedding gown was no longer of a becoming fit), or in the number of people present. Her elder brother, Eggert, had passed away ages ago when I was little and her younger, Wolfgang, was a missionary priest in South Africa whom we'd heard from only twice in ten years. I found some old acquaintances listed in the back pages of her diary but was reluctant to contact them, fearing that once they knew I was alone, they might take to calling in unexpectedly to see how I was faring. One of them might offer a son or grandson to move in with me to combat my solitude, or ask if a member of their family could rent a room; after all, why would I want to live in such a house all by myself?

Alone, I was faced with the organisation of a funeral that proved as expensive as cruel. Should the coffin be lined or unlined? Noble wood or common, which would resist the natural elements less? Handles of bronze or a cheaper industrial metal? I wish I could've made rational decisions, told

myself that my grandmother was dead, so what difference would it make to her? Nonetheless, economic considerations made me heavy-hearted, as if they were proof that I didn't care about my own grandmother, and the undertaker was used to turning this to his advantage.

St Anna-Kapelle was far out in the seventeenth district, an area of woods, vineyards and bird sanctuaries. Only the hunched-over priest, my father, Dr Gregor and I were present. Gladiolus wreaths bedecked Pimmichen's coffin, and Johann Sebastian Bach's *Slumber Now, Ye Eyes So Weary* was being performed, as she'd wished, even if by a baritone and organist of homey talent. It wasn't quite the seven thousand pipes she'd wanted, but neither was it a two-octave harmonium. Despite his age, the priest swung the thurible as actively as any acolyte and, having dipped the aspergillum in Holy Water, thrust it about enough to sprinkle the living. Unfortunately, he spoke mostly in Latin so his sermon sounded rather impersonal.

A group of American tourists entered the church, most likely the visiting family of an occupier. I could understand their loud whispers better than the Latin as they walked down the aisles admiring the wood carvings ('those cute little guys they cut into the pews') and tapestries ('that fabulous old fabric they still have'). I heard one of the motherly-looking women remark, 'Oh look over there, someone's getting their funeral done!') My father twisted himself each way a finger pointed.

Outside, the diggers shovelled away. To them, it was just another manual job. My grandmother's name and year of birth had long been inscribed on my grandfather's granite monument, promising him company on a date which had been left blank. In the summer sun, I reflected on the final declaration of their togetherness:

Hans Georg Betzler, 1867–1934

Leonore Maria Luise Betzler, *née* von Rostendorff-Ecken, 1860–1948

I thought to myself, how beautiful for a couple to be buried in a common grave. It gave the illusion of a happiness so complete it granted them eternal oblivion to the rest of the world.

After these two incidents, Pimmichen's death and Elsa's near death, I tricked my father into believing Madeleine was calling him from the cellar, after which I locked him in. With him safely out of the way, I had a bone to pick with her concerning the neglect that had led to my grandmother's death.

Her excuses were prepared in advance. 'I had your father to take care of — you didn't think I was obliged to take care of the whole family? It was her time anyway. What were you planning to do: wait around until she mummified? Maybe I did hear her calling out for an aspirin once or twice. I thought you must have given it to her because I didn't hear her after. You really think one aspirin would've made her immortal? I did have mercy! She has her peace now, and so does everyone else!'

To make a long story short, I ended up carrying her outside, biting, smacking, kicking, clawing. Among her threats: 'I'll be back with your father and you'll be the one kicked out! Don't forget, you're not a minor any more, we don't have to put you up! We'll marry and the house will be mine! I'll have no pity for you!' She tore off her boots, pulled them up over her arms like long black gloves and set to breaking the entrance window to get back in but I dissuaded her by standing on the inside, wielding the neck of a Schnapps bottle, compliments of another old friend of hers. (I'd broken the bottom jagged in front of her, after having downed a few good gulps.) Her last appeal was to my conscience: 'You're sending your baby brother or sister out on the streets, you bastard!'

By then, my father was in a frame of mind that justified my committing him to an institution. Altogether uncourageously, I left the house for as long as it took for the psychiatric team to tote him off. Dr Gregor was truly an ace. I gave him the last bottle of wine my father hadn't broken from Pimbo's dusty pre-war collection.

Two down, one to go. Elsa. The fear of finding her unconscious again plagued me. I couldn't get more than an hour or two of sleep a night, and it took five or six of insomnia to get that much. The paint had left dark green lines between her teeth, and even after I scraped at it with a pin a residue remained. She complained of pains in her abdomen that came and went,

stiffness in her joints. The veins under her eyes, fine and gently protruding like a leaf's, stayed with her too, and gave her a round-the-clock tired look.

She could give me no coherent reason for her act; she didn't know why she'd done it — just did, that's all. She sat on the edge of the bed, looked at the walls, looked at the ceiling, looked at the floor, but never at me. I shouted, 'Why, why? Give me one good reason why!'

'Why not? Why do I have the right to live? What is the meaning of hundreds, thousands, millions dead, those I loved deeply dead and I left alive?'

I could ask her all the questions I wanted, all I got back were more questions. She was an expert at counter-questioning, playing stupid when she didn't want to discuss a matter, playing the smart alec when she did, and on those rare occasions when her back was against the wall she was a master of quotes in one of her handy dead languages that she could translate into meaning whatever she wanted, or recitations of some abstruse mathematical law some ancient nitwit had come up with x thousand years before technology.

I paced about, kicking at the pile of dirty clothes and sheets — her subtle way of reminding me her laundry needed to be done. Something shiny caught my eye: a family brooch I'd given her, still pinned to a blouse. I didn't know where to walk any more; the walls were oppressive, seemed to confront me every way I turned. I stopped in the middle of her room, feeling sick and dizzy. 'Elsa. Pay attention. I have something to confess to you. Don't say anything until I'm done.'

I became aware of myself through Elsa's dark intelligent eyes, which put me at a gross disadvantage. I went to rub my hands together and for a split-second thought I felt my other hand.

'Now . . . Elsa . . . I'm sure, I'm quite sure you would rather have been somewhere else all these years than in this house with me, and you probably were all the while, in your mind. I tried to make you happy, do everything I could to please you, but I'm afraid that was never enough. No. You're not happy.'

I secretly wished she'd deny it but she didn't, so I bent over to pick up some laundry, slamming the bunched-up material into the basket over and over to help me pursue my words. 'You can't imagine what I feel when I open your door every morning. It's like my heart is about to explode. I'm two people — I'm the stupid servant boy who obeys your every command, but I'm also the other who is wanting to hold you, to keep you. I love you, Elsa. I love you more than I do my own self, and I will prove to you how much, for I'm willing to give you happiness that will lead to my own unhappiness. I know this doesn't change anything for you. For you, I guess I'm just your bread and butter, your room and board, you think you need me to survive . . .'

She raised her palm. 'I must stop you.'

'Don't interrupt! The truth is, you don't need me at all! Not one single bit! But before I go on, I want you to know that everything I did up until now, I did only because I love you, even if it was wrong because it was based on a lie. The truth is, I'm not helping you at all, I'm destroying you. The other day, with what happened . . . I don't need more proof. It's long since time for me to tell you . . .'

She rushed to me and hugged me. 'No, don't say it. It's not your fault!'

I was by then sobbing. 'Yes, it is my fault, it's all my fault because . . .'

'No, no!' She covered my mouth. 'You've been kind to me! And I doubted you. I was thinking, just before everything went black, that if what you said about the war wasn't true, if there was any way to escape, I would be on my jolly way. You'd take me to the hospital if it was at all possible, to wherever you had to, to save me. Me, I thought only of me.'

Her eyes were full of compassion; mine were wild with trouble. I shook my head and was owning up to my guilt in measured, solemn words, but she clenched my mouth until it hurt and, holding me thus, gave me a sharp warning look not to speak further.

'I've been selfish these past years,' she said. 'You were perfectly right: only dwelling on my own miseries, never giving a thought to you.' With her free hand she fingered my scars. 'Oh, just look at you! You've had your share of

pain and hard facts to face and you're not wallowing in it! All these years you've never thought about going to see a medical specialist, when you've spent so much money on my every whim. Don't say the contrary, Johannes, when you've been so good . . .'

I freed myself, went to deny what she was saying, but she meant business. 'No! Shut up! I let you speak! Now let me.'

I was shocked; I'd never seen her fierce like that before. I think she realised she'd shown some part of herself I hadn't known existed, for when she spoke again, her voice was more prepossessing than I'd ever known it.

'Compared to others, I've gone unharmed, isn't that right? Thanks to you I survived and I remain intact inside these four walls. What do you have me to thank for? You can blame me for the deaths of your mother and father. That's all. They are the direct results of my being here. The consequences of my remaining alive, of my life, of my having ever lived. The truth is, I don't know if I would have risked my life for anyone, the way you and your parents did. Frankly, I don't think I would have. I've had many years in here to think about it, you know. I never could have been as selfless. You know what that little thought makes me feel like? That thought tickling me every day like a dove feather in the ear and eye? A cuckoo! I feel as if I threw warm, fluffy birds out of their own nest. I'm cold and hard and unfeeling because most of the time I'm quite frankly glad to be the one who's alive.'

'Elsa, nothing is as you think . . .'

'Shh!' She put a finger to her lips, pretended to glare at me. 'You really think I'm so blind? You think I don't know? I don't hear? I don't see? Oh Johannes, stupid, stupid Johannes . . . It's a prison sentence I've been given from on high. It's no coincidence I've been put here and made to live on.'

'When will you let me finish what I'm trying to say?' I implored.

'Never!' She pressed herself against me, held both sides of my face, peered up into my eyes. She felt me resist, tilted her head back with closed eyes, parted lips.

Bewitched though I was, I made the decision to hold back until I had said what I came to say. But it was as if she read my thoughts, for at that very moment she tore my shirt open and stood up on her toes to kiss under my chin. She did so with an overt abandon that showed that stifling my words was her priority. It was like heaven and hell — she was offering me a taste of what I had longed for since time out of mind, yet did not feel free to accept. My each and every sensation was tainted: I knew I wasn't the one she thought she was kissing. Most ironically of all, a fraction of me didn't trust her, felt that she'd known all along I was deceiving her, which meant she was the one deceiving me. I scrutinised her face mercilessly for any telltale sign, but it expressed undiluted kindness, and I soon dismissed my nonsensical theory. How could I have entertained such suspicions?

She stroked my hair, repeated how horrible she'd been, how she'd just woken up to how badly I was doing. I went to kiss her neck, but she dropped her chin to stop me. Now she was the one resisting. No, I told myself, don't misinterpret. She just wants you to kiss her face, which I did, but my kisses were too ardent and she turned away, or was she just offering me her other cheek?

We fell to our knees and it felt as if we were sinking into the earth, that loving each other we would die together, and dying gave us only that much longer to love each other. I had never seen her before — or any woman, come to that — and yet what I saw for the first time I simply recognised. She was so incredibly soft. Our arms and legs enlaced and I ached to pull her against me forcibly until she crossed through the skin, bones and flesh of my chest and remained inside me.

'I love you, I love you,' I openly confessed.

'I love you, I love you.' Her songlike echoes were sincere, but I could've sworn that one barely perceptible false note lingered in the air, and before it went away succeeded in injecting a tiny doubt into my heart.

XX

For as long as I'd known her as an adult, Elsa had been confined to a space behind a wall, under the floor, in the smallest room above. She had been there years before I'd even known of her. Too many years in all. That may be why her notion of time was so unlike mine. She didn't divide it into weeks, months and years. So many of her days had been undivided by light and darkness that she just didn't divide. To her it was all part of one life, hers, and though her past could still be caged and kept safe in her one mind, her present didn't have to be. She might have been condemned to these spaces physically, but she'd learnt to let her mind wander out of them. Her life situation was the opposite of mine. I was physically mobile, but my mind remained with her constantly, captured within these same spaces. I envied her mental freedom as much as she did my corporal freedom. Little by little, my imagination suffered. In my mind I could visit her, but she couldn't come out to visit me. Hard as I tried, my image of her died as soon as I freed it from her confinement. One step out the door and it faded. Elsa was dying in my memory because I had too few memories of her on this side of my life. I began to feel walled in alive, grew claustrophobic even in the open air, where her room forever shut its wooden mouth on me, as well as the window, its only eye.

It was a stuffy, mosquito-infested summer night when I told her the whole house was hers on condition she kept clear of the windows and stayed down on all fours. Beads of sweat ran down her temples as I followed along as a sort of guide, indicating the rooms. At first she stopped advancing every four steps (mine) to swat at mosquitoes on her cheeks and legs, but I think it was her nerves for so many could not have been real. Then she picked up the pace, but stopped in her tracks like a startled horse after she'd rounded each corner, as if she'd come face to face with someone standing there — or had thought she might. If anyone was watching us from outside, all they would've seen was one silhouette, my own, wandering aimlessly about.

Her shyness didn't last long. After her tour of the bottom floor she knocked her head into my shin and brushed past me. Her hair had fallen over her face, and her laughter came from her throat so she sounded like some unearthly animal. With thumb and index finger she encouraged my desire, poking fun at the easy result. Half of me hoped she'd continue, while the other remained tense, expecting her to tweak me there. With uncontrollable giggles she undressed me down to the socks and pulled me down. Before I'd let my weight down on her she scuttled off, leaving me with my arse naked against the cold. I reached for my clothes to find them gone.

Telltale echoes of where she was came first from upstairs, then downstairs: she would not stay put. I began to regret my decision — didn't put it past her to sneak outside. I reminded myself only I had the keys to get out, but then realised they were in my trouser pocket. At one point, when her silence lasted too long, I cried out her name and sensed that I was alone in an empty house. My fear was answered with more giggles and uncanny sounds I couldn't pinpoint, and for a second I scared myself into believing she was a spirit come to haunt me.

I headed down the hall that led me past Pimmichen's room. The bathroom door was open and I found her half submerged, her big toe sticking up the tap as a trickle of water ran noiselessly over her foot. On seeing me, she kicked her bow-shaped legs about ecstatically, her heels thumping in the water. I saw my trousers balled up under her head and took them back as if my concern was not wanting them wet. The keys were still there: my anxiety was dispelled in a heartbeat.

Moonlight shone through the steamy window, and the water made the light jiggle on her narrow face as her ear-to-ear grin danced about like a boat bouncing on a sea. She was just having fun: it was a joy to witness. I had trouble understanding myself. Why did I suspect her of acts that never would have occurred to her? Why could I not believe what was in front of my own eyes?

'Comb my hair!' She paid for her order in advance with a wet smack on the pucker and the honour of drying her.

There were too many knots for me to undo, so I simplified matters with a pair of scissors. She cast tense glances down at the locks landing at her feet. I had to nag her to keep her head straight. I was trying to get the sides even when, in thinking I must be careful not to cut her ears, I remembered I'd still never seen them up close. I snipped away until her hair matched their shape — two fragile question marks. They existed, even if they seemed to supplement her beauty rather than perform a function. She was at last complete. Feeling her ears exposed, she fingered my work and scolded me from top to toe. I replied what did it matter? I was the only one who could see her.

I know this will make me sound as mad as a March hare, but the constant threat of discovery and execution heightened our sense of being alive. Given that I couldn't keep the curtains permanently closed without drawing attention, Elsa was forced to cross the house as if her life depended on it, scuttling along on her elbows like a soldier, and sometimes stayed put in some recess until the coast was clear. The tiniest details most people ignored in life had great importance in ours. We lived among ominous clouds of *what ifs*. *What if* I weren't home and someone were listening at the door? *What if* someone was controlling how much water we used? *What if* someone went through our rubbish? *What if* a neighbour saw only me through the window, but with my mouth moving because I was talking to her? These ominous clouds were foes, but they were our friends too. Thanks to them, putting out the rubbish, hanging her clothes on the line at night was enough to bring adrenalin to my veins, and hers as she waited inside for me, holding her breath. Common chores, tedious, demoralising and destructive to other couples, on the contrary, vivified our existence. Once accomplished, they cast us into embraces.

We used the toilet one after the other before we flushed. I proposed the same system as far as our bath was concerned, but with her indefatigable logic she asked, 'Why can't we each have our own half bath?'

Offended by what I took as a sign of rejection, for I had hoped she would suggest we bathe together, I replied, 'I'm afraid I'm not used to half baths.'

She said, 'With the greater mass of your youthful muscular body, a quarter bath would become a half bath, a half bath would likewise become a three-quarter bath, and a gentleman doesn't discuss fractions with a lady.'

It was no use arguing with her, she knew how to wrap a sour word inside a sugary compliment. In a nutshell, the hours' worth of chores I was in the habit of performing in the service of her bodily needs — the same needs as any infant but, I'd say with all respect, on a greater scale — she could now do on her own, and that made me happy.

She was like a toddler discovering a home: every object had to have a history. She'd look it over until I half expected her to stick it in her mouth. 'What's this?' 'How about this?' Wherever the commonplace truth stopped, I adorned it with tales. She found her way to Ute's door, which I didn't want to open, but her eagerness got the upper hand. She picked up Ute's Tracht — the faded green dress of her childhood — and held it up against her chest, where it looked farcically shrunken. She crossed the room to Ute's violin case. 'This?'

I removed the violin and studied the ribbed markings on its back. 'Yes, this first belonged to an Italian, Dante Molevare, who used it to seduce women. He looked in their eyes as his fingers teased the strings, his bow loving the instrument. He seduced Olivia Tatti, an orphan turned nun whom he refused to marry, despite the fact that she bore his child. Unable to endure the rejection, she set herself on fire under his villa. To protect his reputation he rushed down, tearing off his cape to smother the flames. Misinterpreting this show of heroism for love, she threw herself at him one last time. The only place he wasn't scorched was where her face had pressed into his, and it was said that when he walked the streets of Rome, her face could be made out as clearly as if she'd thrust it into clay.'

Elsa's partial smile, mocking yet a pinch entertained at one corner, urged me on. 'Sixty-three years later, the violin was inherited by his nephew and kept in his attic. Upon his death, his wife sold it to a widower from Como. One day the widower came home early to see his only child, Clara, weeping, with the governess striking her knuckles for every imperfect note. He dismissed the governess on the spot and the violin was untouched for

eleven years. Clara married a Swiss man. None of their children wanted to play, so Clara donated it to a Romanian so he could make money for his family in the streets. But for a quicker profit he sold it at a Viennese fair, to a luthier who put it in the window of his shop at a reasonable price, because of the chip off the side from Clara's once having dropped it. One day . . .'

Elsa picked up where I left off: 'A man happened to be walking by and was struck by the workmanship. He worked long years as an underpaid tailor and spent more than he earned to buy his child this violin. He warned the child, "The violin is a spiteful instrument. If you don't take care of it every day, warm up all its strings, it will sing only nasty things to you." The cost of the lessons was draining his family, the soup was thinning, his two sons were of age to go to yeshiva. He was pressed to sell the violin to the business associate of an acquaintance whose daughter wished to take up music. The girls were the same age, but the poor man's daughter had five years of lessons behind her. The rich man's girl saw how sad the poor man's daughter was at handing over her instrument. She told her that if she helped her learn, she, in turn, could practise on the violin. In no time they became best friends; the violin was what it had been made to be: a source of harmony.'

Elsa twisted the pegs, plucked the strings. 'Once upon a time, after many years of not touching it, Elsa remembered her father's words.' She swung the violin into place under her chin.

'Don't! The neighbours will know it can't be me playing with only one hand!'

The bow seemed to hurt the strings; the high-pitched notes were coarse, scratchy and ruthless on the ear. I had no trouble pulling the violin away. I was about to shush her peals of laughter when I saw tears streaking her face and wondered if she was really laughing. She buried her face in mine and I thought of the face bored into Dante Molevare's.

My visit to the mental hospital was nothing like what Dr Gregor and his glossy brochures had prepared me for. The living quarters may well have

been cleaned every day but they still stank to hell. With a handkerchief to my mouth I followed the head nurse down a long, over-lit corridor where one patient was finger-painting the wall with his excrement. Greasy individuals were slumped in poses of lassitude in filthy, bolted-down armchairs. One patient was having an argument with himself, another one was preaching to an imaginary military crowd, another chanting 'That's a no no' to his cradled fist. The banging, moaning and howling were as demoralising as the white-eyed laughter. The institute's employees, doctor and custodian alike, waded through this foul red tide of madness as if nothing were out of line.

By the time I made it to my father, I was ready to turn around and run. He'd turned into one of the immobile many. His inner being had wandered off somewhere. What was left was no more than the mould any apprentice would have left behind in an art school's graveyard of such figures: empty, hardened, calloused by life, petrified in their last attempted position. Even so, I couldn't stomach his being among those lunatics, who might once have been as normal and caring as he, but to me were inconceivable as anything else but lunatics. I told myself I must find a solution. Anything — death itself — would be preferable to this.

I touched Elsa's reflection in the mirror, slid my hand from her cheek to her collarbone, edged it down to her breast. She arched her back under my touch, her buttons straining under the pressure. I flicked at them, but the reflection of her dress remained in place. She helped me, let it fall to her feet. Her face chilled, seeing herself naked. I breathed on the glass to clothe her in hot vapour, spun her a gossamer gown shaped by my own fantasy. When she relaxed again, was steamy with desire, I ripped through it with my fingers, went down on my knees to rub it with my lips. She ran her fingers down my own reflection, shielding me with her own breathing. I erased and re-erased these barriers of her desire. Soon I was longing for whole lengths of the cold mirror as we both scraped at each other's unattainable selves, knowing the stabbing ecstasy of wanting and not getting.

Another time I craved her so penetratingly with just my eyes, she fell back on the bed and went through the motions she guessed I was dictating. We were wild with desire, my eyes never leaving hers but pulling some part of her, closer and closer, grafting it to my core, two slits, the sap seeping sweet. Then her face grew perplexed as if an unexpected rain had dampened our leafy, lush paradise. And that's when I heard, to my utter consternation, my father. My plan was backfiring.

'I think your butler is calling for the maid again,' Elsa said. She sat up, scratched her knee and sighed.

What was happening shouldn't have been, considering the amount of medicine I'd made sure he'd swallowed. This wasn't the first time he'd awoken from a deep sleep, called out for help, and fallen back asleep.

'Oh Lord,' I said. 'He's senile; what can I do?'

'Where's he got himself to this time? In the cellar, polishing silver we don't use? In the attic, greasing your Great-Grandpa's riding boots? Retirement, you know, might be more charitable than fruitless labour.'

I brushed away her questions with a wave of my hand. 'He's been with the family a long time. I do what I can for him, put him up as I can. Besides, he'd never accept wages otherwise. I know the old fellow. And he won't have it being in the way. It's not as if he disturbs us much.'

I was justifying myself too much to sound credible. Elsa looked at me, puzzled, but didn't pick up on the grotesqueness of this last falsehood. When I'd brought my father back home covertly and locked him up where there was little chance he'd be found, I was sure my making up this story about him being an old butler — in the event he be heard — would push me to do what I should long since have already done.

Slowly but surely, Elsa continued to adapt to her new role as lady of the house. She tied my shoes to her knees, attached an apron above her breasts, and shuffled between refrigerator and bench top. One would've thought it a normal manner of moving about. To protect her eyes from the pans spattering grease at eye level she rummaged through a drawer for my grandmother's glasses to wear. They were powerful reading glasses, so she

had to feel her way back to the cooking range blindly, hands out in front of her. Doing the dishes, she joked, 'Life would have been kinder to me had I been born a dwarf.'

She read in a cookbook how to make my favourite Austrian dish, which Bavarians claim Bavarian, and purists Czech, before the Empire appropriated it: crispy roast pork with red cabbage. She had a ball, so to speak, preparing a *Serviettenknödel*, a giant, ball-like dumpling made out of stale bread, wrapped in a tea towel and boiled in water. We were in stitches over it, especially when she claimed it looked American to her and pretended to pitch it like a baseball. I knew she was making a double effort: one, to cook; two, to deprive herself of what she cooked, in particular the crisp pork. But, once she'd tasted it, her diet was forgotten. Thereafter, we ate the same meals, from the same pot. I was pleased with this romantic turn of events — that is, until we both started putting on weight.

I was helping her bottle preserves in the back room behind the kitchen when we heard a prolonged yell followed by a thud. Elsa went in pursuit of it, stooping as she ran but still too tall for the windows.

'Ignore it! It's nothing!' I tried to push her back down but she resisted. After a short chase I caught her by the waist, but she gripped the doorframe and, with a few good kicks, got free of me. She used the raspberry-stained spoon she was still holding to undo the antique lock to Ute's room and her whole body to thrust it open.

Completely drugged, my father had fallen off his foldaway and was lying flat on his face with no sign of life.

'*Mein Gott!* Loosen the poor fellow's collar! Make sure he doesn't choke on his tongue!' Elsa cried.

'Get out. I'll take care of this.'

'Air! Is he breathing?' Obstinate, she turned him over. Almost in answer to her question, he farted twice.

She turned his face to the light and I tried to stand strategically so as to shade it. It looked so altered anyway, I didn't see how anyone could

recognise my father in that simpleton's guise. She did. 'Oh my God, Herr Betzler! *Herr Betzler!*'

She lifted his eyelids and felt his throat for a pulse. Reassured he was still living, she lifted his legs, I suppose to get the blood to his brain. She was the closest she'd ever come to ugly as she twisted back to shout at me, 'How could you say he was your *butler*? How could you tell me such a lie! You told me your father was dead!'

'He's worse than dead! Now you finally see what happened to him! I'd rather he was dead. You wait until he comes to.'

The truth is, if Elsa hadn't found out about him, I might just have put him out of his misery quite soon. I'd been increasing his dose of sedatives, and needed just a boost of courage to tilt the pill bottle a fraction more.

The architecture of the brothel-house itself was surprisingly classic, and the interior immaculate, cosy though over-perfumed. The ground floor was used as an extensive sitting room, with a bar to the far right and a broad red-carpeted stairway funnelling out the back and up to the individual rooms. The armchairs were arranged in horseshoes and rounds of five and six, in which businessmen were conducting meetings, old buddies were slapping their knees over beer-garden memories, and some lone individuals were reading or writing in the sole company of their drink. A house-mate of Madeleine's, taking her place on a high stool at the bar, was having trouble keeping her mules on the footrest, which was a metal rod. The heels were so high that they reminded me of cloven hooves. A group gone boisterous, watching her slip and slide in her place, invited her to join them. I had the feeling it wasn't the first time she'd staged this skit.

Two robust men blocked the entrance, along with a short, squat man in his fifties, olive-skinned and bushy enough of moustache to compensate for his baldness. When I'd solicited admission he had looked me over before nodding at the others to let me in. I took him for the boss and approached him when he went to the bar for a glass of water. My reason for having to see Madeleine — I needed her not for me but for the good, the health of my

father — was met with a burlesque thatched grin. I actually had to pay before I went up just to talk, and no drop in the bucket, after which he invited me in a patronising strut and flick of his stocky arm to have a few drinks beforehand. For the moment, he bragged, Madeleine was busy with 'another client'.

Madeleine awaited whomever was next in a coldly professional position on her regal bed, her right leg bent, her left arm thrown over a heap of satin pillows. She was surrounded on three sides by an avalanche of purple velvet. The fourth wall was a mirror, against which her bed was pressed and in which the room was duplicated, as if the reality of the room could become dreamlike by passing over to this plane, and whatever took place in it could count more, or not count at all, depending on the viewer. Above her, a ceiling fixture soared like a giant octopus with electrified suction cups.

Her expression didn't change when she saw me, but her foot twitched like a crouching cat's tail. Finally she spoke in a soft if charged voice. 'You know, I'm entitled to refuse clients.'

I took off my hat, was kneading it out of shape and becoming conscious of something knotty under my shoe. I looked down to see that I was standing on the tail of a zebra skin. 'I'm not here for *that*.'

'That?'

'What you think.'

'You know what I think?' Her eyes narrowed.

I wished I hadn't come and it must have shown in my face, and my voice too — I made three attempts to speak before I had the sense to shut up.

'So, you can't handle Pop? My care's not going to be free this time. You know that?'

I nodded and found myself dumbly taking note of the zebra skin's pattern.

'Listen, I'm not going to make you go down on your knees to beg for forgiveness. If I make you go down, it'll be to do something better than that.'

She patted the bed beside her and, after a reasonable wait, said, 'Don't be scared. I'm not going to bite.' As if to appease my doubts she crossed her arms behind her head. I noticed she was still wearing my mother's pendant. 'So. I'm all ears. Contrary to what you believe, those are the orifices most of you fellers come to me for.'

At the end of our snowy drive, our mailbox stood like a low-perched birdhouse, a blank book of snow keeping its page on its slanted roof, icicles growing from the awnings like a row of bestial arctic teeth. I flinched on discovering the letter bent inside, addressed to my parents, Herr and Frau Wilhelm Betzler. It was from America, from a certain E. Affelbaum, and though I don't remember the address, I remember it was something like 11211 E 115 Street, New York, NY 10011 — all in hundreds, thousands: to each his number, building, apartment, life, stacked up higher and higher out of everyone's way. The stamp was of the Statue of Liberty. Cut-throat financial liberty. Sexual liberty. The letter filled me with foreboding: what did this E. Affelbaum want from us — or rather *who* did he want? Who was this pest? A voice inside rationalised that it wasn't addressed to me, I wasn't answerable for my parents, so why should I have to even open it? I reduced it to shreds, let it join the snowflakes.

After stomping the snow off my boots I was surprised to find breakfast dishes still on the table, the bathroom still in its morning disarray; our bed had not even been made. I found Elsa napping, so I put down the basket of groceries and tiptoed away to take advantage of being alone to go over some legal papers. But as dinnertime approached, and no sweet aroma beckoned me down, I conceded to myself that I'd been shamefully lazy lately.

I thought she would still be lounging around, but her usual spot was vacant. I looked around and started when I caught sight of her. She was leaning on the back wall in the library, facing me squarely as if she'd been waiting for me, her prey. Blank squares of canvas seemed to have materialised at her feet. One rested on her easel, which stood on its segmented wooden legs like a faithful pet. Dipping her chin, she gave me a sadistic smile that could have been interpreted as loathing just as easily as lust. The haircut I'd given her made her hair stand up every which way; I noticed it was going white with a sort of aesthetic regularity: its new colour

— 'salt and pepper', as she referred to it — accentuated the rapacity of her eyes, the maturity of her face. She took me in, with the doorway framing me, in a way that let me know it was my portrait that interested her.

Elsa hadn't touched a canvas in ages, long enough to give me hope that she was happy. But today some un-nameable aspect of her face had shifted a degree.

'Elsa?'

'Yes?'

'How are you feeling?'

'Fine.'

'Are you sure?'

'Tell me, sweet Johannes, should I not be?'

Slowly, slowly I approached her. It was unclear to me whether we'd strike each other's cheeks or reach out to caress them. For a split second our actions were so intricately linked, we were attached to one another as a man and his shadow.

I crossed my arms in discontent. 'May I ask, what is it you're doing?'

'Guess.' She filled something in, her wrist moving in small, controlled circles. Rather than looking at what she was doing, she smiled at me in a defiant manner. I couldn't see what she was painting but I wondered if it wasn't my own eye, for while she focused her attention on me — or should I say on it — she kept dipping the paintbrush in bright blue. She knew what I'd just wondered and it tickled her, either because I was on the right track or because she had triumphantly led me astray.

'You're painting.'

'Bravo.'

'After what happened, you dare paint again?'

'I am painting for pleasure, not for a purpose.' She picked up a tube of black.

'I forbid you to touch that!'

Gloating at my disapproval, she twisted the tube until a dab made it out on to her palette. Another shrewd look to my eye and she jabbed the wooden tip of her handle into it. With a cruel twist she made what I assumed must be the pupil. I picked up a few of the empty canvases she'd spread about and flung them towards the tiled stove. Only then did she seem less sure of herself, particularly when I broke the wooden frames with my foot and rolled the canvases up like storm-weathered sails.

'You have no right to do that!' Her hands, joined together as in prayer, cupped her nose and chin, which, together with her short hair sticking up and her enlarged eyes, made her look like a frightened bird.

'It's my house; I have every right!'

'I'm not in prison, you know! I'm free to walk out!'

'Walk out to your death?'

'I'm free to walk to my death! It's my death, mine, not yours!'

'Be my guest.' I acted as if I couldn't care less and lent undue attention to the contents I drew out of my pockets — matches, a bluish marble that reminded me of the earth, receipts — while hoping she'd back down. I was aware of her gazing at me in disbelief, but she didn't move. Just as I had started to breathe more easily, she called my bluff and bolted for the front door. I ran after her and caught her by the arm, and pushed her as easily as a child against the wall. I didn't mean to scare her but I was desperate.

'You are not alone in this! If you get yourself killed, you get me killed! Your death is my death! Your life is my life! We're linked, *verdammt* — don't you understand? Like Siamese twins! Separate us and we'll die!'

She twisted and turned to escape my grip, but never with sufficient force, repeating, 'Let me go! Let me out of this twenty-cell prison!' She just wanted to convince me that I needed her more than she did me.

I gave her what I knew she really wanted — a bear hug to control her. Gradually her thrashing stopped and the hug became more mutual.

While she'd been challenging me she'd been catty, wilful, independent. She was another person now: tenderhearted, submissive, dependent on me. She looked up at me with compassion, tears welling in her softened brown eyes. I asked myself which Elsa was the genuine one and which the impostor.

'I was making a surprise for you.' She nodded at the easel. 'It was for you. Still is, if you want it.' She blinked the tears out of her eyes and wiped them away.

I looked from her to the back of the frame. What was it she had painted? Was it my portrait? Was she ridiculing me? I was afraid that if I moved to look, she'd make a run for it. I tightened my grip, kept her by me.

I stood frozen in front of the canvas. I felt her rapid pulse beating in my hand, my legs getting weak. The painting was unfinished, and as simplistic as any child's drawing, yet I was sure it had something to do with what had just happened between us. There were two stick figures standing within the crude frame of a house. They were side by side, facing the viewer. I happened to be standing in front of the taller male figure, and she happened to be standing in front of the female. Or was it a coincidence, and not a manipulation on her part? It looked as if they were holding hands, yet if one looked carefully (and believe me, I did — in fact I couldn't take my eyes off this one detail) they weren't really. At first the two arms had seemed to cross at the wrists, like two lines forming a top-heavy x.

I brought my face closer to examine the brushstroke, and that's when the shock hit me. The arms came down to join at the wrists, but the hands were not a continuation of the same brushstroke. From where they joined, each then deflected away. We weren't holding hands, we were handcuffed together. And this corresponded more or less to what I was doing then and there — holding her tightly by the wrist. None of the facial features had been drawn in yet, except for one of my eyes — wide, inquisitive, blue — which seemed to be examining me as much as I was examining it. I was going crazy. What did it mean? Was I some sort of tyrant, keeping her at my

side by force? Or was she the one with the power, keeping me emotionally leashed to her like a dog? Or was it just a naïve portrait of the two of us, and there I was reading all kinds of cutting messages into it?

I had to know — I had to — but it was complicated. I could not formulate the question with meaningful precision. All I did was nod my head, clear my throat.

'Do . . . do you . . . like it?' she asked ingenuously.

I scrutinised the rest of the canvas for a clue, but as I said, it was unfinished. Our faces were blank; she'd painted nothing around the house, nothing besides us in the house.

'It's too soon to say . . . !'

I changed my mind and didn't confiscate her oils.

After that, I sneaked in every chance I had. For several weeks, nothing on the canvas changed. I never saw Elsa return to it, yet she must have, for one afternoon, just by chance, I took another peek at it and found a new detail. A vertical line cut my face in two, as a horizontal line did hers. I pondered the significance of this. Why would her eyes be separated from her mouth? Did it mean her eyes and brain were somehow higher than her mouth and body, the latter more concerned with physical gratification? But she still hadn't drawn in the eyes, nor the mouth, so what was I worrying about? The line on my face was easier to understand — it was faithful to my appearance. I turned my eyes back to hers. Why was her line different to mine? Did it suggest we saw the world differently? Did it insinuate that our viewpoints clashed? Was I somehow vertical, standing, and she not? I racked my mind with these questions, and countless others. Over a week went by and I was given no additional clue.

Just past noon a few days later I heard the floor creaking. She was in the library again, walking about. Thinking I heard her leave, I hastened in. To my surprise, she was seated on top of a pile of books, reading. She looked up with a victorious smile when she saw my eyes stray to the easel. I

snatched up the first book I came across and left. Thereafter, I seized upon any excuse to walk past the library. I romped about emptying waste-bins into one another, in and out for the mail, whatever would take me past that doorway. She didn't go anywhere else until late in the afternoon. As I'd hoped, she'd painted something. Almost imperceptible, at about the level of our ankles, a small crack ran between us. Why had she even bothered? Maybe it was only to make the wall behind us solid. Without the crack, the house had looked like an empty frame, open front and back.

Days passed and leaves grew from the crack. The crack in fact wasn't a crack at all, it became the stem of a houseplant. I had a good mind to blot it out with white. If I didn't, it was only because I was afraid that might stop her from continuing. I should have, should have killed it before it grew against the back of the wall, its leaves unfolding like morning hands awakening. It made its way between us, entwined our legs, arms, bodies, necks. Soon it was a tree cramped within a house, the top bent over under the ceiling, the branches reaching far out the windows, the roots pushing down through the floor and wandering outdoors, like great muscular fingers lifting up the house. The house was a cracked pot, too small for its savage tree. All that remained of Elsa and me was two bleak faces. Not even. The horizontal and vertical lines in front of them had been integrated into windowpanes so we were each looking out of our own individual window. All that could still be seen of us, really, were two cunning brown eyes in Elsa's case, and two blue, blind and fish-like, in mine.

What was she telling me? Was it good — a symbol that our love would grow? Did she dream of something growing between us? A child? No, it was bad. I could feel it. She knew more than I did and I was the one being duped.

Without knocking, I walked straight into the bathroom where I found her soaking in the bath, pinkish and slippery. She'd used half a bottle of shampoo to make a layer of bubbles, though I'd told her a hundred times not to waste it in this way. I held the canvas in front of her flushed face.

'Tell me what it means. I want to hear it from your mouth. What is the meaning?'

Slightly embarrassed over the excess of suds, she clutched at some, used them to lather her hair. Only when she lifted her arms did her breasts sit high on her chest, as they had before. 'It means I only had one canvas, Johannes. You took away the rest. It's common to paint one subject over another. For centuries artists have done that. Read art history.'

'I want to understand. Please, just tell me what it is I'm looking at.'

She shrugged her shoulders, high bumps of foam fluffing over them like fleece. That, in light of the Aesop's fable that my grandmother used to read to me at bedtime — 'The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing' — aroused more misgivings in me.

'A landscape over a dual portrait,' she replied.

'Why? I want the reason.'

'I thought you didn't like it. Oh, you did?' She beamed, crossing her hands over her heart, splashing a flock of foam at me. 'I didn't think you cared, you never said a word to me about it.'

I eyed her suspiciously. Was she sincere? Her lips looked as if she was suppressing laughter, and just before they failed, she ducked her head under the water. Air bubbled up. I felt a fool. She surfaced dynamically and the water of her supposed half bath flew over the edge on to my feet. I watched a boulder of foam settle lightly down.

'You want me to scrape the tree away?' She was as excited as a child. 'I can. If you really liked how it was before, I will!'

I was just starting to be convinced I was wrong, that I'd been mistaken about her, that she was innocence itself, pure, unselfconscious, when I studied the painting once more. Her eyes came off as cunning because they had two points of light in them. Mine didn't have two such fine white points. Why not? My indignation was returning when another thought came to me. The lights I saw could also be interpreted as faith. Yes, enduring faith. A religious faith that I didn't share, a belief in something beyond. 'Please, Elsa. You must tell me now. What do you know that I don't?'

She considered my face, shifted her eyes from feature to feature, preparing her words. 'That you have too much imagination for your own good, but besides that, you're the cutest boy on earth . . .' She threw her sudsy arms around me and beckoned me into the bathtub, fully dressed. But I wasn't as dumb as she thought. I was beginning to detect a pattern — her unquenchable desire for me overtook her whenever I was on to her. Whenever I believed her to be the little lamb she pretended to be, she had no desire for me whatsoever; on the contrary, she spurned me without scruple.

She gave it another try, wanting to dull my mind by dunking it into the pleasures of the body, and deadening it by degrees. If only there weren't that little crack . . . And why hadn't she planted her landscape *around* the house?

Madeleine and my father returned from their Kitzbühel resort holiday tanned, slimmed, healthier in complexion and, to top it off, in new matching coats which I must admit were almost respectable-looking. My father actually smiled on seeing me, not as his son, but as some cohabitant he'd grown accustomed to. As he unpacked their new personal effects, singing a tune a mulattress once did to us at a hunting banquet of Günter Boom's (an old bachelor friend of my father's, and this, in passing, is English not German), 'Nehever gehet mah sihllay ahz offah yah,' I headed for the door.

Madeleine bailed me up, as I'd feared. 'Listen, this trip cost more than I was expecting. I need more cash.'

'*Again?* Every trip you've taken you've gone over budget. Switzerland, it was the change in currency. Como, Italy's tourist traps. Baden Baden, the mineral springs.'

'Just hand me over a thousand and I'll be fine.'

'You will, but I won't.'

'It's not your dough anyway, it's your father's, so I wouldn't be tight-fisted about it if I were you.'

'I don't have any more ready cash. Our bankbooks are showing figures that are getting embarrassingly low. You've been burning the candle at both ends. Look around you — this is all that's left. You want me to start digging into the house? It's up to you.'

'Be careful. I've held my tongue until now. But if I do start digging into the house, you might have to fork out more than I'm asking you for now. I think you know what, or rather *who*, I'm talking about.'

I was thunderstruck. Without knowing what I was doing, I emptied desk drawers and gave her whatever I found. She didn't take the coins. Though it wasn't a third of what she'd hoped for, she seemed satisfied.

At once, I warned Elsa that I was having to pay Madeleine to keep her quiet. Elsa naturally interpreted this as a German out to destroy a Jew and make a profit out of it. I advised her to keep her distance, and to not talk to Madeleine, should their paths happen to cross. That very night Elsa, completely shaken, sneaked back up to my room without having made it down to the bathroom, told me I'd better go and see what was going on.

I descended the stairs softly. From halfway down I saw Madeleine on the sofa, balancing on her arms so that her bottom wasn't touching it, with some stranger holding her legs up and out in a V as he exerted himself. I was so beside myself, I might have dragged him away by the ear if Elsa hadn't convinced me to wait until morning and respond more sensibly.

The following morning my father was up early, singing his old tune as he washed in the bathroom. Wanting to join him, Madeleine was undoing the knot of my mother's housecoat belt on the wrong side of the door.

'Madeleine.' I led her aside by the elbow. 'It's time we had a little talk.'

'Ooh . . . some bug's nipping at your tail.'

'You could say that.'

'What about?'

'About last night, *for example*.'

'Right. I knew that'd come up sooner or later. I know what's got your goat. Here,' she pulled a roll of bills from her brassiere, counted and held out half. 'You gave, and now you reap tenfold.'

I backed away from it, scandalised that she'd misunderstood my intentions. 'That's not what I meant. Not at all!'

'Who're you trying to kid? Money's money. There's no such thing as clean money. Buy yourself a banana for twopence? What about the natives who were overworked till they dropped dead so those bananas could be chopped down cheap for some darned company? Pitch a coin into a collection box — how many innocent folk did your holy church massacre? I don't kill anyone. There's no blood on *my* money.'

'Madeleine, this can't go on in this house. Under this roof. Money is not the problem.'

She hooked on to my bicep. 'Let's be partners. Business partners. We could turn this house into a chic, first-rate bordello. Look how many rooms there are! Imagine how much so many girls could rake in! We'd get the cream of the crop into this house.'

'It's out of the question. Even the thought's revolting.'

'Look. You got the house. I got me. You got someone fine up there who does good work, or so it seems from the way you keep her closed up and all to yourself. I got the know-how and the contacts. Let's do something fair, like fifty-fifty — what do you say? Spit here!'

'I'm not in the habit of spitting, though your idea has brought me closer than I've ever been.'

'It's legal. It's upfront. And you? You've got a nerve to play prude with me. Like I don't know you're hiding her from the brothel you got her from. Throats have been slit for less. Not that anyone will ever know, if it's up to me. But to stay quiet, I have to stay happy.'

I was so relieved that she was miles from the truth in assuming Elsa was a lady of pleasure that I could have kissed her on the spot, and then turned right around and told her off for her assumption. I set my hand on her

shoulder, kindly but authoritatively, and told her it was no, whatever the consequences.

My father came out of the bathroom, pinching the skin of his Adam's apple so he could breathe better. I hoped he wasn't becoming asthmatic. He looked from her to me as if he were trying to blink through a cloud and was spotting a sparrow that disappeared and reappeared. This wasn't the first time I'd seen him straining his features like this, but this time his squinting was so concentrated, I backed off and turned to the belt that he had let fall behind him, a raw leather specimen of Madeline's taste. Consequently I didn't see what happened next. I just heard two blows and spun around to see her on her back, propped up on her elbows, blood dripping from her nose.

'Water!'

'What have you done with my wife?' he shouted down at her.

She was sobbing mutely, holding the bridge of her nose.

'What you're wearing, it's hers! Roswita's!' He stomped away, checking left and right as if he might have missed her, then came back and grabbed Madeleine by the throat. 'Where's my wife?'

'I don't know. Really!' She coughed and pointed her bare foot at me. 'Ask him!'

My father approached me in half footsteps. His blinking had grown so chronic, I didn't know if he was furnishing a greater effort to remember or hold back tears. But he didn't confront me; simply walked past so just our shoulders touched.

Sick to my stomach that my father had struck a woman — be she whatever type of woman — I handed Madeleine a towel for her face. He was beyond hope.

'They're all the same . . .' she bawled. 'They just use you to mend their private lives, then they ditch you. Always beat you up in the end, too — yes sirree, blame's all yours. Seeing you all ugly, they have no regrets letting the street-cleaners sweep you back to hell . . .'

She couldn't stop crying — or talking. Crying set loose her words, or talking set loose her tears: I don't know which. She told me how she'd been abandoned in the streets when she was only six by her mother, who'd just met some Czech man; how she didn't even know her father's name, and neither did her mother, it could have been any of several; and many more sordid details, until I half pitied her. As I admitted later to Elsa, my calming her ended in a brotherly hug.

'You'd better watch out,' Elsa warned. 'Don't you see she's a manipulator? She's losing her hold on your father, so now she's making a move on you.'

'No more a manipulator than other women,' I replied, and, in afterthought, 'like you.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'If you see it that way, I could say you're a manipulator too. Look, you got me in the end, didn't you?'

I'll skip over all the stupid things I went on to say, because frankly I'm embarrassed. Suffice to say, our fight was a two-hour ordeal. Her answers alone give an idea of the inane I put forward. She answered that Jews were never looking to steal Germanic blood, that Jews married Jews — any Jew's parents would've been hurt if a son or daughter wished it otherwise. She swore it was true, on her own head — if it had been on mine, I wouldn't have believed a word. She mentioned the irony in the Nuremberg Laws prohibiting marriage between Aryans and Jews, even though back then it had remained unspoken within the Jewish community. Among those generous donations of her stores of knowledge: their calendar, lunar and having thirteen months, was far more ancient than the Gregorian (which incidentally I learned was ours); it then would've been the year 5713 (she thought — counting on her fingers once gave 5715 and later 5713). Just as Christians were divided into Catholics, Protestants, Baptists, Quakers and what have you, so were Jews into Orthodox, Conservative, Hasidim, Reform . . . Fresh fuel for an explosion: Christianity and Islam developed from Judaism! The best of all was when she claimed that Jesus, Mary, Joseph and the twelve disciples were Jewish! I didn't know what lies she'd been fed, but set her straight on that one. This led to a heated debate, even

though I was no great believer myself. What I didn't wade into. She gave me detailed historical accounts until I could listen no more to the sandy desert yesteryears, right or wrong.

It took time to assimilate what she had said. Somehow, whatever one learns as a child in school leaves behind a solid core. It's impossible to replace this core within oneself; one can only grow on from it, go on from there. One's beliefs through life resemble the rings of a tree, each year solidifying what we successively thought, doubted, believed. Nature takes no note of the contradictory ideas, all of which are packed in, one after another, to make the trunk we are: the compact, unified remainder of our diametric yesteryears.

For some days there was calm, and the relationship between Madeleine and my father picked up again, though more weakly on his part. My father was sleeping in till noon, taking two naps a day, and still he tucked himself in straight after dinner. Those rare hours when he wasn't out like a light, he was aloof to her lovey-dovey petting, her terms of endearment, but that was the extent of his protest to her hand squeezes, forehead kissing, her bending over backwards to cook him meals or to give him sponge-baths in bed (otherwise he didn't wash). It didn't seem he was silent as a matter of will or against his will, but rather just silent at heart. Madeleine nagged him to go with her on another trip. With persistence she actually succeeded in getting him to nod at the destination: Salzburg. I didn't mind supplying the money to see them go — I would have paid double, in truth, had she asked.

It was 3 am. Their suitcases were standing by the door. Their train was scheduled for 7 am. Madeleine had the tickets I'd given her the cash for, but was going to pay for the hotel and meals herself. I was sound asleep; so was Elsa and probably the whole neighbourhood. Suddenly, out of the blue, there was shouting and screaming. I thought my father was killing her. I hustled down in my pyjama trousers and found them on the floor beside their bed, where they'd slid, along with the bedclothes. He was precariously seated on her chest, slapping her with the palm and back of his hand, from

side to side, shouting, 'Whore! Whore!' She'd grabbed a pillow and was making a pathetic counter-attack by smothering his face.

The instant he saw me, his hand stopped in mid-air, whereupon she somehow squirmed her leg around and kicked him under the chin four times until she knocked him over.

'Find someone else to put up with you, you brute!' she shouted, and got to her feet, red marks all over her face. 'Go and find your wife — go! A lot of comfort you're gonna get from her! Ha! A lot of warmth!' She threw a coat over her lacy nightdress and screwed her bare legs into her boots. 'You'll regret swapping me, after all I've done for you! And put up with in this goddamn loony bin!'

In record time, as if she were practised in exiting at break-neck speed, she strode over to the foyer and grabbed a suitcase. 'I call it quits!'

I pointed out the dangers of taking to the streets at that hour, but she spoke loudly to the wall behind which my father was likely to be, if he hadn't moved. 'Plenty of time ahead of me for a nice walk! Some fresh air!' She rounded the corner so he could see her and threw his ticket down. 'Come or not, I don't give a damn! You do what you want! But if you come, you'll need this!'

It was the only time she ever looked at me in half defeat, as if she were counting on me to convey the message if, as the lost look on his face indicated, he'd missed it.

My father stayed still on the floor, enthroned on his pillow with the fallen bedclothes twisted about his shoulders like the cloak of a fallen king. I let him be, slumped down myself in the armchair nearest him, and sat waiting until the first pink streaks of morning eased into the sky. It was time to warn Elsa that the coast would not be clear at seven, as I'd thought.

'Johannes.' We turned, startled. My father had been standing at the door of my room.

He uncrossed his arms and they dropped to his sides. 'It can't be.'

We didn't know what to do or say, each for our own reasons. Neither did he. He pivoted, straightened himself, and gave the length of balustrade orderly chops as he descended. About six minutes later I heard a shot, short, remote and muffled, like an inoffensive cough.

xxii

I was forced to sell our furniture to pay the inheritance taxes. Inexperienced as I was, I'd made the usual mistake of telling the truth. I should have told the Bürgermeister it had been given to me in my parents' lifetime, or used family connections to procure official valuations of lesser worth. This common practice (there was theory and practice in affairs of succession) was called, ironically enough, Chuzbe, a Yiddish word that translates roughly as 'managing cleverly'. I had no idea the state took into account everything, from my father's watch (which I wore) to a portrait my grandmother had posed for when she was sixteen. Since my father had given a good part of my mother's jewellery to Madeleine, and I a few pieces to Elsa, some valuables actually escaped the inventory. My only other option would've been to mortgage the house, but I was warned by my grandmother's notary that if I didn't keep up the payments, the bank would be entitled to sell the house out from under me.

The auction was scheduled for Saturday at Dorotheum, the oldest auction house in the world. There was pushing and shoving when the doors opened as there weren't enough seats, and two-thirds of the crowd stood packed like sardines in the back, their envy growing with the passing hours. Among other lots — Baroque, Empire, Viennese Thonet, Jugendstil, Art Deco, Bauhaus, Biedermeier — familiar furniture of ours was positioned at strategic points of the showroom, looking as out of place to me as newcomers at a cocktail party edging themselves close to the chattering clusters without actually being let in.

Above, as many styles of chandeliers were dangling, including three Empire ones of ours. They were strung up a trifle lopsided so that the gilded branches looked about to release their harvest of glass teardrops. By chance I was not far from my grandfather's leather armchair. Tempted to sit in it, I must have glanced over once too often, for a fat woman got the idea, pushed past me and plopped herself down.

The first object to be sold was our Louis XVI cylinder desk with marquetry decoration, which had come down to us from Pimmichen's side. Several hands were raised, and the bidding went three times higher than the value printed in the catalogue. This made me anticipate a healthy sum for my mother's dresser, but the auctioneer's flowery description failed to incite a single person to lift his hand. After he scolded the public for their lack of appreciation, and cut the opening figure in half, there was an exchange that petered out in a matter of seconds and the hammer came down.

The most cumbersome pieces were left behind for later transportation arrangements, but most buyers walked away with what they'd come for. A young couple lugged off our Empire commode in rosewood, breathless over the bulk as much as, I guessed, the bargain they'd struck. The room was expeditiously stripped, the ceilings, walls. I felt helpless watching it all. The rugs were next; the floor was bared, our Bokhara pulled out from under my feet.

Of course no one knew these objects had once belonged to my family, that I'd spent my life among them. Everyone was only concerned about the new addition to their own home or antique shop. The total taken would have been sufficient to pay the taxes I owed, but the percentage due to the auctioneers had to be deducted, as did transport costs. Only after their next sale, in which I sold our mirrors (down to the last trumeau and bathroom glass), as well as my grandmother's piano, was I able to break even.

All at once, every room in our house looked bigger, as if the walls had miraculously moved out. The interior, without being devoid of possessions, was empty enough to echo. A cough, a word, like a footstep, was sonorously doubled yet inexplicably hollow. Absent vitrines, secretaires, pier-glasses, armoires left rectangular markings along the walls like doorways leading nowhere. The light-toned quadrates on the floor testified to our missing rugs. Night-time's unwelcome boost of the imagination turned these into ghost traps eerily inviting me down to who knew where. Coin-like dents were left by chairs and sofas. Three such dents designated the position of our former piano — a corner I avoided because of its singular melancholic silence. Defects I'd never noticed now mercilessly drew the eye: paint peeling, wallpaper ungluing, chintzes coming apart.

Order became a problem. Absent beds gave way to linen heaps in otherwise bare rooms. The want of chests, drawers, wardrobes led to the formation of many a composite dune. The auctioneers had assured me that the bookcases made specially to fit our library would fetch a high price, and they were right, but as a consequence the leather-bound volumes hit the floor as well.

Winter came and the house grew cold. The wooden stoves contained cold ashes. Having no other choice, I chopped, kicked and swore down a tree in our back yard. Hoping to find a discarded item to help me ignite the damp timber, I climbed up to the attic. I'd already used up whatever I could for this purpose: there were no more rotting straw seats, no more brooms, no more anything. Far to the back of the attic sagged the powdery drapes of what must have once been flourishing webs, delicately laced and taut. There, I found the boxes I'd been looking for. I swept the grime off and took a look inside: the banned books my mother had salvaged. We had to keep warm.

Madeleine's former 'house' had refused to take her back, after she'd left them twice. It wasn't only 'a resentment thing', she told me, though that had a part in it, but more of 'a competition thing'. Her place had been taken. With all the foreigners in the city, there had been an influx of younger and prettier — and thus higher-selling — aspiring professionals. I was forced to take her back in. If I didn't want her up on the roof crying out the truth, she said, I'd better put a roof over her head. After this vile intrusion she behaved fairly enough. She was out working on the streets all night, home sleeping all day, or at least three or so days a week when she actually came around. Where she spent the other days I didn't care to know; nor did she care to tell. Our paths only crossed on rare occasions. She and Elsa were still civil enough when they happened to meet, though as sparse as ever in their words. On the whole, they avoided each other as much as they could. Elsa was afraid of Madeleine, whom she saw as a harlot and scheming blackmailer. And Madeleine was too proud to pay tribute to Elsa, whom she considered now held the rank of a kept lady.

I knew I had to get a job or it would mean utter ruin. I had no idea how to go about it. Along with my parents and grandparents, I had always assumed

I'd work for the family business. My father had told me as a child that the day I had enough experience, he'd be of retirement age, so I'd take over. He'd pass the torch on to me, he said, just as his father had to him, and I would to his future grandson, when the time came.

Of course there was no more factory. It had been bombed while producing war material it shouldn't have been. As a general rule, whoever wasn't around was blamed for whatever couldn't be proven, in order to keep the survivors out of trouble, and no one made an exception of my father. His car had never been found among the debris. My grandmother had suspected it had been stolen by one of his employees, who'd gone across the border to sell it in Hungary. Even if this wasn't the case, I would never have got it back — or anything else, at that — since the factory was situated in what was now the Soviet sector.

Naturally, the car and factory had been insured, but there were clauses in the contract exempting the company from compensating for damage or loss due to war. My hopes revived briefly with the Marshall Plan, and although I cannot minimise the help this programme was to countless others, it was of no direct benefit to me.

Sitting in a coffee shop, I went over the situations vacant with a sole *kleiner Brauner* for company — brown in a manner of speaking: this brew of coffee with its dribble of milk was an aquarelle sort of beige, but it was the cheapest beverage one could order. It was either that or a glass of hot milk. Just wetting my lip with it from time to time, I could make it last hours, a practice that made me a fiend of the waiter whose job it was to incite poor people like me to more profitable consumption. Every quarter-hour he slipped the list of drinks on top of whichever advertisement my finger was pointing to and asked me if he still couldn't get me anything — beer, sparkling water, a hot coffee or espresso? Usually, I was sensitive to such pressure, but whatever I ordered would have lightened my pocket of what I needed for Elsa's next meal, so the answer was the same as the last and the next: no.

Not that there were pages of vacancies; never even a whole one. It was giving thought to each that took time. The majority were for construction

and reconstruction jobs, for which I was physically unqualified. Others sought dynamic young men who had completed their studies. I didn't even have my high-school diploma so there was no point getting my hopes up there. Too bad I was too old to be a newspaper delivery boy, glass-blower's apprentice, petrol station attendant, bellboy, cloakroom keeper . . . Typesetter would have been a step towards journalism, but who in their right mind would employ someone manually limited like me? Maybe I was being negative, maybe just realistic, but those afternoons I convinced myself of being defeated without giving anything or anyone — perhaps most of all myself — a try.

In the streets I had more guts. One of my habitual bakers was, according to the sign in his cracked window, looking for part-time assistance. I popped in to say help had come. He didn't see it that way. I went to half a dozen factories, offered to work on the line. No one would take me with one hand and no experience. I offered to work for half the minimum wage, facing up to what they themselves were insinuating — 'one hand, half a person' — but that didn't change their minds. I offered to do it for free until I'd proven myself; still they shook their heads. They said that if I got injured, they would be liable. I tried railway stations, the post office, the municipal authorities, thinking that the Austrian government, by not paying me a correct pension, would at least compensate me this way. How wrong I was. Someone from the latter did, nevertheless, refer me to the *Wiener Arbeitsamt*.

I almost turned around when from outside I saw the crowd milling about in the fluorescent-lit hallway. Stepping inside was worse. Though it contained humans, the body odour was worse than in certain areas of Schönbrunn's zoological garden. Just finding the elbow room to fill out an application required an appreciable effort, but not as much as the next step: having one's picture taken by a token-fed machine. This meant offering oneself as spectacle to a public of bored, moping faces in an attempt, against all odds, to smile. The office closed before my turn came, and this was to happen twice more before my name was called.

The skinny brunette whose hair was parted into two limp plaits edged her index fingers in behind her glasses to rub her eyes. They were watery when

she opened them to catch me studying the poster behind her of our republic's double-headed eagle. It had originated from the Hapsburgs' coat of arms, but when the Austro–Hungarian Empire fell, Austria had kept it and put the imperialistic bird to work with a hammer and scythe. Or was it a sickle? I knew nothing of farming. I started to remark that even it had employment, but she cut me short.

'Your application is incomplete. What are your qualifications?' She picked up a pen, tapped it on the line as rapidly as a sewing machine needle.

'Well . . . I'm hard-working . . . I'm honest . . .' I tried to come up with other qualities.

'How would you know if you're hard-working if you never worked before?'

Her pen continued to tap away, destabilising me further.

'At home. At home I have always worked hard. Cooking. Cleaning. All that. It's a lot of work, you know.'

She smiled but, as my eyes were drawn to the gap between her two front teeth, her expression turned acid. 'My husband never bought that. Thank you. Next!'

I stood up but couldn't bring myself to move. I wanted to make a favourable impression somehow, but another man was occupying my chair and she'd forgotten I'd ever been there.

In the meantime, taxes had to be paid, piles of bills had to be faced. I received letters from bailiffs threatening to show up at the door, and if I didn't open up, a court order would entitle a locksmith to do so. I could only imagine what Elsa would think at that! At the bailiff's discretion, possessions could be confiscated, sold to cover my debts. Panic inspired my next decisions. I had the house stripped of its oak panelling, stone cornices, imported Florentine floor tiles, as well as the antique doors to our rooms with their embossed bronze handles. The front door stayed, but the lion's-head knocker did not. These were sold at auction, my debts reimbursed, my anxiety appeased. Momentarily.

The extracted cornices left scars in the wall that frowned at me from above. Empty doorways gaped like toothless mouths, shocked at what I'd done. The foyer and living room looked as if they were in mid-construction, as, come to think of it, did most of the rest of the house. No corner was snug any more. It felt rather as if Elsa and I — and Madeleine too, I suppose — were living clandestinely in a house that wasn't ours. In these unnaturally bare surroundings I found myself focusing on the cracks in the wall, the ceiling. They seemed to multiply, to grow overnight, centimetre by centimetre. They grew in a slow, twining movement one way, then another. I had visions of leaves growing out of them.

Elsa reacted to all this with integrity. She put her hands on her hips the way she used to and scolded me. 'Johannes. Don't expect me to stand by and say nothing! I know you're broke. I've been a burden. You've had to put food in my mouth, clothes on my back, and money into the palm of that Hure because of me!'

'Me? Owner of such a house? Most of Vienna would love to be broke like me.'

'The grander the house, the grander its expenses. The greedier the Hure . . .'

'These are no concerns for a woman.'

'I have a brain just like you or any other man!'

'That you have already proven, but maths is not finance, any more than Marxism on paper is communism. Book-smart people like you can't manage real life.'

'Don't underestimate me.'

'Precisely what you're doing to me.'

'I'm not going to just stand by and do nothing. I'm going to help.'

'There's nothing you can do.'

'I can try to pay her myself.'

'I won't have it.'

'Allow me at least to pay my way. That will help.'

'Your "way" is my responsibility.'

'I'm not a kept woman!' I saw the old fire light up in her eyes. 'If a boat were sinking and a man and woman were both on it, what good would it do for the man to bail the water out by himself? The boat sank, they both drowned — how many lives would he have saved? Zilch. If they bailed the water out together and the boat remained afloat, how many lives will each one have saved? Two.'

I shook my head at my old Elsa with her rhetorical arguments, which she pulled out of her hat at will. Sensing a breach in my defences she took her chance to change my mind. 'I have a talent, a craft, you know. You invested in it; you should get something out of it.' She waited for me to catch on but I didn't. 'My painting! If you let me, I can do one per day, at least, maybe even two. You just sell them at whatever price you choose, and use the money to keep the house going. And that Hure's mouth from going!'

'I appreciate the thought, but no thanks.'

'Can you still afford arrogance? My father always said arrogance was an expensive vice. A man has to pay for it all his life, and in life after life it continues to tax his soul.'

'In case you didn't know, there's a difference between real money and pocket-money.'

She kept jabbing me with her finger, forcing me to maintain my lie. 'But look at the success I was having before my accident! You said yourself I was having great success! I was "someone small who touched the whole world"! You said! Why do you deny it now? To humiliate me? To make me feel like I'm nothing, that I've never accomplished anything? That I've never done any good in my life?'

'Critical success, yes.' I swallowed. 'Yes. Commercial success too — it's true, but you forget, I had to reimburse the costs — you have no idea the grease it takes to keep the old gears turning. Do you have any idea the cost

of renting halls, having invitations printed, purchasing materials, paying for transport, insurance? Art is for prestige, not profit.'

'You don't have to do it so fancy this time around. Just sell right here in Vienna. No message on my side, no fuss on yours. However, and for whatever you can.'

'That's kind, sweet Elsa, but the greatest help you can be to me at this point is to let me find the solutions myself.'

'Let me tell you something that's going to surprise you, sweet Johannes. I want to do it. It's the only thing I have wanted to do for ages, and, to be perfectly honest, I don't even think I would be doing it for you. The truth is, I would be doing it for me! Just the idea of having a purpose in my life again, a goal, a reason for getting out of bed in the morning and going back to bed exhausted at night, with sore feet and tired hands and a spent mind, and I feel the life flowing back into my veins, my body and entire being swelling. I feel like I'm going to blossom, to open my arms towards the sun and lick the rain, feel bees tickle my ears, birds kiss my face, stab me in the cheeks with their little beaks until I feel. Can you understand that?'

I held her tightly against me, stroked her hair and heard myself agreeing. It felt as if she were showing me a six-foot hole in the ground, opening the lid of a coffin and saying, 'Welcome to my home,' and I was tipping my hat politely and stepping in. There was no way around it. I couldn't be the one to deny her the fantasies we had mutually planted in our minds. I myself was taken in by her appetite for these false fruits.

Elsa worked on canvases of much smaller dimensions than those she used to work with. She didn't like to stand any more; it put too much weight on her legs. She preferred to lie on her back with the canvas resting against her thighs, or on her side with her arm supporting her head. She painted more or less what she used to — rootless flowers in the sky. I say more or less but there was a definite 'less' about them I couldn't put my finger on. They were cheery enough, friendly, but there was something decoratively pretty and assertively meaningless about each work, despite the prodigious variation, like a sample book of wallpapers.

I went to Stadtpark to try my luck. People walking by paused to look at them for the duration of two missed paces. About the grounds string instruments were being played by professionals in need of money. Some soloists played for hours for a handful of coins in their cases. Times were hard. Pedestrians could attend open-air concerts for free. Times were easier for them.

I sold two paintings for seven Schillings each. To give one an idea of how much that represented, 1.75 *Schillings* could buy you a half-litre of Kreugel back then, and 1.8 *Schillings* a round-trip tram ride, if I remember correctly. I was in high spirits and couldn't wait to tell Elsa. The buyers were both British occupiers who had a taste for these flowery compositions, or at least some relative back home supposedly did. My cheer was short-lived. The next buyer put his hand on the back of my neck in an oddly sentimental way before leaving with my little painting under his arm. I watched him until he was almost out of sight and saw him toss something in the rubbish bin that could very well have been my painting. My suspicions were confirmed with the next sale. An old Viennese gentleman patted me on the back. 'Lots of luck, to you, J Betz. Lots of luck. Keep your head high.' It was then that I understood I wasn't selling paintings, I was receiving charity. I saw myself through their eyes. I wasn't a talented artist, I was an invalid, an outcast from another time and place, begging outdoors for a few scraps to eat!

It was unbearable; I felt myself turn into their image of me, and the sweet, sad melodies about the park lured me deeper into the role. As quickly as I could, I gathered up the unsold works. A couple strolled up the path towards me, arm in arm. Although I hadn't seen him since my childhood, I recognised him instantly. It was Andreas, one of the twins who had been at the birthday party my mother gave me when I was twelve. His pretty young Austrian girlfriend stopped in front of a canvas and remarked, 'Look, my favourite flowers, lilies. They smell so fine.' I felt around for something in the basket, to keep my face down, and luckily they kept walking. They must've been ten steps away when an old man on a nearby park bench blurted in my direction, 'Tell me, what's your name, son?'

I didn't want to answer, fearing Andreas might hear. The old man hobbled over, took a painting out and examined it with his one good eye, which was

only good in comparison to the other, which was blind. I felt sorry for him and would have spoken to him, but I also wanted to be gone in case the others came back my way. In a moment of indecision I told him to keep the painting. He helped himself to two more without asking.

'You're a good kid.' He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and added fresh blood from his nose before holding one of my own paintings out to me. 'Fifty Schillings?' I was taken aback. 'You're a good kid,' he spattered between coughs and I got away.

I chose a little-used path that cut across the back of the park and headed off, head down. Shrubs were catching my cardigan. I was cross with myself: in a park so vast, what were the chances of bumping into the same people again on the main path? When I looked up I couldn't believe it: Andreas and his girlfriend were not ten metres in front of me. Mud was now sucking at my shoes, and Andreas was cursing as he walked on tiptoes in a futile attempt to keep his own clean. She was clutching his arm as she slipped from side to side.

Our eyes met and it was only then that I realised that it was a mutually bad surprise — Andreas had recognised me first time, and had gone to the same trouble I had to avoid me. The expression on his face remained uncertain. We were about to pass each other on the narrow path, and the closer we got to that distasteful point, the more we glanced at each other furtively. His reaction would depend on mine, and vice versa. I dreaded faking and the thought of my voice soaring too high.

'Let's go,' his girlfriend said as she guided him past me. When I checked over my shoulder to see if they were out of sight, I saw her flirtatiously overdoing it each time she slid into him.

How often did I wait for hours until Elsa was asleep. Only then was it safe to bring down a load of family souvenirs, a complicated manoeuvre at the best of times. The stone stairs down to the cellar were still clear, but the door wouldn't open much because of the solid block of Elsa's old paintings behind it. I had no other option but to remove a hundred or so and stock them on the stone steps, freeing the door but choking up the stairs. I entered the cellar from the outside hatch, pushed the paintings back to make room,

and, in doing so, blocked the door for good. It was in this dim space that I deposited a new basket of miscellaneous things every forty-eight hours, more often than not at the oddest hours.

When Elsa's freshly painted little works were dry, she handed me a basket of them and I supposedly left for Stadtpark. In truth, I never went back to Stadtpark again. I returned to the cellar, swapped the basket of paintings for one of my family mementoes and lugged it to the flea market. One season it was leather volumes I sold; another, second-hand clothes; another, trinkets, figurines, chinoiseries, singeries, pill boxes, Meissen porcelain: in short, whatever souvenirs were left in the house. The flea market was not the gay, entertaining place it is today. It was a depressing gathering of hungry people doing whatever they could to survive. Old ladies sold cakes, and, if they couldn't sell them, that would be their food for the week. I saw one man sell the same set of silver candle-holders three times. An accomplice followed whoever had just bought them and the candle-holders reappeared on the man's stand by the end of the month. The flea market was known as the cheapest place you could buy back your stolen watch. Today, you can leave your umbrella by the fish stand the time it takes to eat. Back then, people came with umbrellas and left with umbrellas, but not necessarily the same ones. Thefts were a chain process even among the honest.

I sold my dear family's belongings cheaply, but at least I managed to sell. My reward was, in part, the ready cash. More immediately, though, it was walking back home with a basket lighter in weight. Pimmichen's flowing dress with huge polka dots, which had made us cover our mouths and widen our eyes at each other every summer she'd worn it, was snatched up by a stylish American negress. Vater's smoking pipes were, after a few months of patience, taken up by an exuberant Austrian from Linz searching for objects to open a museum specialising in anthropological artefacts. He said the objects had to have had contact with a man's body to qualify, upon which he noticed my stub and showered me with little smiles I hope to have misunderstood.

Every now and then I waited behind a tree on our front lawn for Madeleine to leave, entered the house mutely, and, in answer to Elsa's pestering, let banknote after banknote fall after me like a trail of dead leaves

that she raked up with greedy fingers. She threw them up in the air with happy shrieks and watched them settle around her again. Unfortunately, I used most of them to buy her more paintbrushes or turpentine or oil paint. I convinced her to accept smaller canvases still, claiming they were easier to sell — no one had much wall space any more. The last batches I gave her were no bigger than postcards.

To confess all, I was afraid the illusion in which we were living would pop like a pin-pricked bubble if ever I failed to keep up the act. I was happy to see her happy. Her happiness was like a drug to me, and, like any drug addict, I was willing to sell anything for it. After some troublesome reflection, I put aside my scruples about selling Ute's violin.

I expected it to go within an hour. I was still at the flea market when the crowd had thinned, the stands had dispatched, rubbish sullied the ground. All day long, children had sawed the strings, with startled giggles at the sour digestion-like sounds they produced. The parents handed me the instrument back, apologetic for having used it as a temporary amusement for their child. Some of the children wailed as they were escorted away. Remembering Ute, I felt sad, out of key with the world.

The next day two American soldiers looked it over before one played a folk tune two strings at a time, sliding his fingers from note to note, yet there was nothing of the Hungarian gypsy in the music he made. People started crowding around, a few started clapping and one called out, 'Yee haw!' The man's friend stepped back to distance himself from the spectacle. He gave his temple a few pokes, indicating that his friend was crazy. I gloated over a sure sale, but when the American was done, it became as plain as day no such notion had crossed his mind. He made deep bows. 'Thank you . . . thank you . . . Please, no autographs . . .'

The third day, to demonstrate the instrument's quality as well as to draw more attention, I ran the bow over the open strings myself. I attracted the curiosity of some browsers, who watched me for a short spell. Then a lady stepped forward and something clinked in the violin case. In no time she was followed by a man, who sprinkled all his foreign coins in. I was abashed by the misunderstanding — they thought I was a violinist whose

war misfortunes no longer permitted him to play. Again, charity! I left the market in a stormy frame of mind.

I decided to take it to the old violin maker Elsa had said her father had purchased it from. I knew the area roughly. Maybe he was still alive and would remember it from its chip. I walked up and down every narrow street, scouring the neighbouring blocks, but his shop was gone. Many people from that area were gone. A shallow belt of water was flowing smooth and noiseless along the gutter until it reached a man face down, whereupon it bubbled and split in two. Thinking the man was drowning, I dropped the violin and rushed to help, but it was just an old black coat someone had discarded. I went back for the violin, looked around, once and again. Now it was gone too. I walked around for two hours, not wanting to believe it. The cobblestones proved bare of anything remotely resembling a black case — the gutter ran free. And that was the end of the violin story. Unless it has continued without me.

I forgot to mention an important detail. I safeguarded whatever money I made, which corresponded roughly to whatever money Elsa thought she'd made, inside Pimmichen's old leather chest. Often I went to bed at night sick with worry, only to find that a few days later more money had been added in. And not just any old way. If I left the money in a big messy heap of small notes, bigger notes were added in just as messily so it would trick me by looking the same. If mine had been arranged in neat stacks, the stacks were thickened evenly, the sum doubled, trebled, maybe more; I never really checked. Instead I pulled my hand back quickly before it was crushed by the heavy lid.

I asked no questions, but I knew very well that Madeleine had put it there. Despite what I had told Elsa about her continuing to blackmail me, the truth was that not only was she not blackmailing me any more, she was actually supporting us. The three of us held and kept each other up in this crazy way for a good period of time, Elsa and I rising above reality with the giddy earnestness of a totem pole, neither of us acknowledging who kept who up or looking down to see.

Part IV

xxiii

Dr Gregor crossed his arms on his desk and looked at his watch. Some old man in the waiting room had a coughing fit.

'It's not for me, it's for this unmarried friend of mine,' I explained, flapping my hand on his desk as my words accelerated uncontrollably. 'It's not really for him — more for this woman friend of his. You see, because of family circumstances, they've been meeting without a chaperone. Their relationship developed more rapidly than . . .'

Dr Gregor leaned his chair back and bent a ruler. 'He got the girl into trouble?'

'Well, that's what she's saying. He doesn't know what to think.'

'If she doesn't want her doctor to know about this, I can try to fit her into my schedule next week. Might be a long wait, though. I'm short on time these days.'

'But if it ends up not being true . . . you see, he's not sure, and really, neither is she, not a hundred per cent, she just thinks. What I'm saying is, if it ends up not being that, knowing him, he'd have preferred that no one knew.'

'Rabbit test.'

'Sorry?'

'A modern and reliable test. During pregnancy, a woman's urine contains a hormone, hCG. The laboratory injects her urine into a rabbit and if it's present, the rabbit's ovaries will show it in the next few days.'

'What happens to the rabbit?'

'It has to be killed in any case, so the ovaries can be examined.'

'Oh God. Is there any other way of knowing for sure? Something this friend of mine could check on his own?'

'How many cycles has she missed? Did she tell him?'

'A few days, I think.'

'I see, I see. Tell this friend of yours to give it a few more weeks. She could well be late. One out of four times a pregnancy doesn't make it past three months anyway. That could be the easiest way out of troubled waters.'

He stood up, signalling that it was time for me to go. He wouldn't accept remuneration, but did accept my hand.

'Thank you,' I said. 'I'll tell him that. You've been a great help. Once again.'

He led me out, to receive impatient and dirty looks from the growing number of patients in the waiting room. Then he stepped outside after me and his face turned stern. 'He should turn to me for help before she and he do anything drastic.'

'You mean abortion?'

'I mean marriage!' he burst out, shaking me like a lolly-smuggling schoolchild. If he hadn't helped my family so much in the past, I would never have taken it. 'Don't get hooked up, boy, with that woman. People around this neighbourhood talk. As a general rule, whoever you'd have to marry isn't *worth* marrying. Sex is one thing. Marriage another. I'm not talking to you as a medical man now, I'm talking to you plain man to man. Don't fall into that trap — it's as old as Mother Earth. You're a smart kid. Your face's nothing plastic surgery couldn't take care of. What that slut needs is a good kick in the arse, send her flying to the moon!'

The more I denied it, the more he retaliated with a thorough tongue-lashing. I trudged home, downcast and humiliated that he could actually think I meant Madeleine. Who did he take me for? Who did he think he was? It would be my right, my choice anyway, to be with whomever the heck I chose! Oh Lord, so that's what the whole neighbourhood thought . . .

On my way in, I checked the mail with an expression similar to a bloodhound left in a car on a hot summer day. What I least expected was good news. It turned out I'd been offered a job at Knopphart's, a company that specialised in mailings and opinion polls in the household goods sector. To the devil with Dr Gregor! To the devil with the neighbours, the whole wide world!

According to my new employer's secretary, Frau Schmitt, it was thanks to the civil servant I thought I'd displeased ages before. It took me a while to even remember her. Apparently she'd written on top of my application three words: 'Take this man!' Frau Schmitt had kept my application so she could hire me at the next vacancy, but because jobs were still scarce, and those lucky enough to have them held on to them tooth and nail, the next vacancy had only just come up.

Frau Schmitt was the right arm of Herr Demner, our boss, who never came to the office in person. He worked two floors above and used the telephone if he had a word to say. She spoke on his behalf: 'If Herr Demner sees your foot up on that chair, *nein nein nein!*' 'Herr Demner wouldn't be happy with such laxness.' 'No crackers during work time, Frau Farrenkoft; *Herr Demner* would have a fit!'

On my first day I discovered I was the only man ever to have been hired on that floor, which won me a shower of chauvinistic jokes. The two oldest — and, coincidentally, least attractive — women were the only ones who were married. Frau Rösler, nicknamed Godmum, and Frau Schmulka. Both had substantial bosoms resting upon their bellies, and varicose veins like mapped streams on their legs.

Camilla Hühdanz, a young, wavy-haired blonde known by her colleagues as Tussi, was, as her nickname hinted, a bimbo who, throughout the workday, leaned over her drawer where her mirror was hidden to touch up her makeup. That's what Frau Schmitt meant by laxness. Every other time Tussi was caught. We couldn't help but keep our eyes on her activities, to see whether she'd be caught anew, and it was our slowed typing pace that probably caused Frau Schmitt to come parading back through the room.

Sometimes a man would come to pick Tussi up after work, which made her jittery all day beforehand. Godmum said Tussi and the fellow were getting serious when Tussi didn't mind Frau Schmitt's scolding — that meant Tussi was planning on quitting as soon as the knot was tied. When the man stopped showing up, Tussi threw droopy stares out the window for about a week, then the routine resumed until the next one came along.

The other two women, Astrid Farrenkopf and Petra Kunkel, had a streak of adolescence in their middle age, which was probably just past thirty. Both war widows, they shared their lunches, cigarettes, perfume, and, if their feet hurt, made a spectacle of themselves pulling off each other's boots, their legs up in the air. They didn't like anyone younger or prettier than themselves, which at least left Godmum and Frau Schmulka safe.

Every time a survey came back, we were to count the positive and negative responses until two of us came up with the same figures. That was the essence of our work. There were to be no mistakes, especially at our typing machines. We were allowed to use correction tape but it was hard to get the key back to exactly where it had been. Two out of three times a chalky white letter stood too high or too low up on the black one and we would be scolded for lack of dexterity. Years later, someone would invent a white liquid that hardened when it dried, making it visually melt into the paper, but we didn't have such labour-savers back then. Our waste-paper bins were checked to see how much paper we were wasting. Godmum was the only one who didn't stuff bad envelopes in her pockets, facing the criticism of a full bin but at least remaining honest. Astrid and Petra were not to be trusted — they would drop theirs in someone else's bin if they thought they could get away with it. Luckily, the 'i' on Astrid's typewriter was not centred properly, so her dirty tricks did not escape the critical eye of Frau Schmitt.

During lunch break we had half an hour to eat our sandwiches at our desks and, if need be, were allowed to have a cigarette. Then on the dot, our fingers were to be back in place, ready to go. With the two catty ones seated behind me, I was never at ease. Their smoke curled around me in a slinky manner until once, while I was trying to wave it away with subtle flicks of my elbow, a tomato slice fell out of my sandwich and rolled across the

floor. Their chatting stopped mid-phrase. I could picture them making faces at each other, waiting to see what I'd do. Awkwardly, I leaned over, picked it up and dropped it in an envelope. They burst out giggling, and it might very well have had nothing to do with my tomato, but that's just the way those two made a person feel — like the subject of their mockery.

That evening, during inspection, they began to giggle as soon as Frau Schmitt reached her arm into my waste-paper bin. Naturally, this put her on her guard and in no time she had the tomato slice hooked by her little finger and was holding it up high.

'What's this?' she questioned me, absolutely stunned.

I felt the blood rise to my face and spread to my ears. 'A slice of tomato, ma'am.'

Astrid and Petra shrieked and were reprimanded. 'Hush up! If Herr Demner hears you cackling like hens during work hours, what will he say?' Frau Schmitt turned back to me. 'What is a tomato doing in one of Knoppfart's mailing envelopes?'

'I'm sorry, ma'am, I didn't want to stain the bin — nor throw it out the window for the inconvenience it might cause if it landed on somebody. Or the hazard, should some poor soul slip on it during the course of the day.' I stood as dignified as I could, considering the cause I was defending, 'And I could hardly be expected to eat it once it fell on the floor.' I cleared my throat. 'Next time I shall take care to hold the two pieces of bread together more securely.'

By then, Godmum and Frau Schmulka's corpulent bodies were shaking with laughter. Tussi was covering her mouth, and Frau Schmitt, despite herself, had to laugh too, though she was the first to pull herself back together. 'Quiet now! Herr Demner is paying us to work, not to split our sides!'

As we were punching out our cards, Godmum put her arm around me, asked if by any chance I happened to be a bachelor. Tussi made haste to insert her card into the time-clock and head off — no goodbyes. Out of the

corner of my eye I saw Astrid and Petra exchange sarcastic raised eyebrows.

Godmum continued. 'Usually I can tell, but you're a mysterious one to figure out.' With her fingers she combed my hair every which way except along its natural course.

'What was his answer?' Frau Schmulka asked Godmum, adding her heavy arm to my shoulders.

'I'm . . . taken.' I felt tense as soon as I'd spoken. I'd never owned up to it in public before — in fact I'd never told a living soul besides Pimmichen.

'That doesn't exactly mean married,' said Godmum, playing with my muscles as if I were a piece of matrimonial merchandise she was checking.

'You're perfectly right to ask him,' Frau Schmulka praised Godmum, pulling my lips back to expose my teeth, whose state apparently satisfied her, even though she'd done it as a joke. 'One never knows.'

'I likely will be. Soon.'

'Ha-ha! Likely. Have you popped the question?' Godmum asked.

'She doesn't have a choice. She'll have to, and that's that.'

Godmum and Frau Schmulka roared at this.

I was crossing Währingergürtel on my way home when something odd happened to me. A car, still far away, was accelerating in my direction, the motor straining as the driver shifted gears. I was on the pedestrian crossing so there was no danger; that is, it was natural to assume the driver would stop, but the sound of the accelerating motor made me freeze in the middle like a frightened animal, round-eyed and paralysed. Only when the car was at a standstill was I able to regain control of myself.

That was the first but not the last such incident. The next time, a car was moving towards the red light at less than ten kilometres per hour and I found myself unable to keep walking. I couldn't get my eyes off the headlights closing in on me. The light turned green, the driver blew his horn, and by then cars were passing him on either side at full speed. The

accident I feared, I almost provoked. In the beginning, if the cars were stopped, I was able to step out in front of them. But as time went on my mistrust amplified, and soon I had a hunch that a given driver was waiting for me to do just that before stepping on the gas. Yet, when the cars weren't stopped, I was convinced no one would or could see me. It was crazy and made something as simple as going home a real exercise. I looked left and right in a frenzy, and only ventured out if there was no car in sight and no car expected to be near during the time it would take me to cross. But during the time it took to confirm that, a car usually turned into the road, or I felt it was just a matter of seconds before one would. If I hadn't waited so long, I would have had time to make it over on my hand and knees.

To some extent, walking with other pedestrians reassured me. I positioned myself so they'd cushion me from the oncoming vehicles. I couldn't believe what a scaredy-cat I'd turned into. Once, in the middle of the street, I clutched an old lady's arm. She thought I was helping her across when she was helping me. The irony of it all was that I wanted to get home to Elsa rapidly and this foolishness prolonged the journey at least threefold.

What haunted me the whole while was the idea of death. When it was windy I anticipated flowerpots crashing down on my head. In bad districts I couldn't get my mind off murderers in obscure doorways waiting with cord or blade ready. Any freak accident would be a catastrophe, especially when I was so close to clearing it all up with Elsa, bringing our lives into order and her out of hiding. It was only a matter of a few months — a baby born and there could be no turning back, she couldn't leave me — but before that, with one slash of fate's sword, her world, her very idea of the world, could be cut in pieces, only to be fitted back together by someone else — someone else's explanation of what had been, what had happened, what I'd done and why — rather than mine. Fear stuck to me closer than my own shadow. I shuddered at each tram that passed me by, seeing myself mangled underneath it.

I was about to put my key in the door when I heard a stick snapping behind me in the garden. I turned to see a man half hidden in the trees, a colossal man with a head of unruly curls bluntly cut at the neck, observing

me. He stumbled towards me, swinging his arms. Despite the anger and confusion weighing down his features, he was unusually handsome.

'I won't hide who I am. Yes, I am Max Schulz.'

He looked — and smelled — drunk. My arm, which he'd clutched forcefully, he was now resorting to for balance.

'Who?'

'You must have heard of me. Max Schulz,' he pronounced more markedly, drawing out the 'u'.

I shrugged.

'Come on. Max. Her first boyfriend. Yes? No? Okay, so it wasn't yesterday. I heard she once lived here. You wouldn't happen to know where she is now? Where I could get in touch with her?'

'No,' I answered cautiously. 'Have you tried her former house?'

'All gone. Another family is living there. New York. I heard a rumour about relatives in New York. That was . . .'

He blew through his teeth, skimming the air lithely with his free hand as if directing a symphony. 'I almost got married twice, so . . . I'm just saying, see, my life's moved on. It's just for old times' sake. I don't suppose you have any address you could give me?'

'No, unfortunately I don't.'

'Any name of someone who would? Friend of a friend?'

'Nope.'

'Well . . . then . . . Goodnight.' He swayed back to the trees, groped around in the dark and, with unstable footing, hoisted something up off the ground that had the silhouette of a woman, either dead or stone drunk. 'Sorry to have scared you,' he called back after some paces down the road in the direction of the central city. Under the streetlight, I saw it was a cello.

My key in the door, I stood in deep thought a long time before I turned it.

xxiv

One morning a little boy was seated at my desk when I arrived at work. Petra explained that his grandmother, who usually watched him, was having surgery done on her foot. Frau Schmitt warned her it had better not happen again. The boy, according to his mother, had just turned five, so logically he couldn't have been the son of her husband killed in the war, because five years — plus nine months of pregnancy, I assumed — still left some months to spare even if her husband was killed on the last day of the war, May 8 1945. I think she read my thoughts because she looked at me in her customary dissecting manner and asked me if, by any chance, I liked children.

'Otto, this is Herr Betzler's seat. Come, come, my lion,' she coaxed. His refusal left her no choice but to wrest him out by force. His small fist struck me as he retorted, 'Mean man!' By way of apology, all she said to me was, 'He's in need of a father.'

He ran to and from the employees' toilet, clacking the toilet lid, making flocks of pigeons out of paper towels. The rest of the time he played under his mother's desk with marbles, his foot hitting the back of my chair non-stop. When Frau Schmitt made her rounds, she asked me if I was sure that rascal with ants in his pants wasn't bothering me. Petra must've appreciated my strident denials. My patience was rewarded at the end of the day when the kid made a punching bag out of my back and roared in my ear — a mark of affection, according to his mother.

After that trial, Petra taught me how to type with five fingers, for I had been using only my index finger, in the old hunt-and-peck technique. She touched my hand constantly during the demonstration. From then on her face would brighten as she saw me arrive: she chatted about her son's bed-wetting, her mother's in-grown toenail, the run in her newly invented synthetic stockings — 'nylons' she called them. She made a point of saying

goodbye each night. In due course Astrid softened up too, as if her friend's change of heart won me points in her own assessment.

This unwanted attention was making me fumble in my typing, especially when I felt Petra's eyes on me. By late-morning one Friday my waste-paper bin was filled to the brim like a popcorn machine when she got up to get a list of customer names and on her way back had the nerve to drop one of her own envelopes in! I was going to drop it back in hers, indignant that she'd try her tomfoolery with me, when I saw that in place of the name and address, she had typed: 'I love you.' I was dumbstruck. I didn't know what to do, how I should react. If I left it, Frau Schmitt could have come across it. I had no choice but to stuff it in my pocket.

On some level I suppose I was flattered, as if her affection meant Elsa should value me more. Nonetheless, the workday over, I punched my card out well ahead of either her or Astrid. Frau Schmitt inspected my waste-paper bin before she inspected theirs, so this was the easiest way out and worked a couple of times. On Thursday evening of the next week, though, I was two blocks away when the light turned green and I found myself, despite the rain and the slowness of the one car in the far lane, unable to move. I recognised Petra's voice behind me, 'Johannes!'

I could tell she wasn't used to running, let alone in high-heeled pumps inadequate to protect her from the water dripping down her 'nylons'. One arm was in its sleeve but the other not, so her bright yellow raincoat was being dragged along the pavement. The raindrops streaking her face accentuated the emotion she seemed to be undergoing.

'Didn't you read what I wrote?'

'Yes.' I was at a loss for words.

'And it means nothing to you?'

'I already told Frau Rösler, I think you overheard. I . . . have someone.'

'Who?'

'You don't know her. What would it matter?'

'What's her name?'

'What's the difference? Claudia or Bettina?'

'What does she do? Where does she live?'

'Why all these questions?'

'I don't believe you. You have no one.'

'You're overly sure of yourself. You know me, my life, so well?'

'I can tell. You're just pretending to have someone. Because . . .'

'Because?'

'Because you're ashamed.'

After shaking my head at her as if she were nuts, I found the courage to continue across the road, cars or no cars. She grabbed me by the collar. I told her she was making a spectacle of us.

'You don't have to be ashamed,' she cried. 'My husband didn't live. I'm sure he would've traded places with you if anyone had given him the choice! What do a few scars matter? What's important is who you are inside! Who you are *today*, not who you were before! Who? Who are you?'

I looked at her earnestly — as earnestly as earnestly needs to, to be believed. My eyes were perhaps bulging a bit. 'I'm telling you, I have someone. Please, just believe it.' She allowed me this time to go in peace.

I dreaded going back to work the next day, but if I made out to be ill, it would have been worse. I tossed my scarf up on the coat-rack in an offhand manner. I'd fooled no one — everyone had seen my heart jump. That week was so laboriously slow it seemed to crawl by on its chin. No one asked me for a light, no one brushed past my desk, there was more smoke and less perfume.

The following Monday, everything seemed back to normal. Work over, I went to a fish shop and asked for two trout. The man showed me two small

freshwater specimens. 'Will these do?'

'No, give me bigger ones. We're two.'

He slapped two bigger fish down on brown paper and weighed them. I stepped up to the cash register and started, on seeing Petra and Astrid staring at my two fish in disbelief.

Panic went through me, as though I'd been caught red-handed committing a crime. I had a hunch they were looking to blackmail me and I'd just given them the proof they'd lacked. I left with my purchase; they left without buying so much as a mussel. I could see in shop windows that they were following me. No matter how long it took me to cross a particular road, they hung back, waiting. I realised they wanted to find out where I lived so they could spy on me. What a situation I'd put myself in! I walked right past our house. At the end of the street I stalled before turning around to see where they were. Were they hiding behind a hedge? I strolled along casually and, seeing no one, darted home, slammed the door and locked it as if I'd left hell outside.

Madeleine was on her way to work in her work clothes, so to speak. I caught her by the leather strap of her dress and ordered her to stop. After much insistence on her part, I was stupid enough to tell her why. Jumping to conclusions, she deduced that I was ashamed of her. I actually had to get down on my knees and beg her not to bolt out to 'set things straight with those two nosy broads'. I used sweeter and sweeter words to temper her and probably overstepped the line. This calmed her for the hour I figured necessary before it was safe for her to go out.

But my problems were just beginning. Thereafter it was Elsa who was mad at me. She was jealous of how I always played up to Madeleine whenever she came around, 'between boyfriends' like a vulture, waiting for me to be free. She was fed up that everyone thought the woman I shared my life with was 'that Hure'. By now, she and Madeleine couldn't bear the sight of each other. Elsa said that if I didn't kick her out by the time she had the baby, she would walk straight out the door.

After that, anything and everything seemed to make Petra and Astrid succumb to outbursts of forced laughter: Tussi's clandestine applications of mascara; a pencil falling, breaking its point on the floor. Frau Schmulka took the same tram as they did one evening, and the next day I caught her giving me a contemptuous look. This spread to Godmum, who stopped putting her arm around me. If I addressed her, she was stingy in her response — yes, no, don't know. Even her returned 'Goodnight' was abridged to a throat clearing or a gruff 'Night'.

The man from the fish shop eyed me queerly. Whatever I asked him for, he inquired, 'For two? Yes, I remember well, for two,' or 'Nothing's changed? Still two?' His eyes twinkled with irony. I wondered if they weren't all in cahoots, keeping careful note of what I was ordering. How much information had they gathered? I was more prudent, ordered one small fish, or one small fillet to be cut from one small fish. 'Only one today?' he'd chuckle. 'That enough? How's your better half doing?'

His behaviour spread like wildfire to other shopkeepers. My baker gave me a loaf of bread, remarking, 'We never see the little lady? Does she like this leavened specialty of ours?' I answered that the bread was just for me. With mock admiration he exclaimed, 'My, my, what a healthy appetite you have! All that for you alone? A wonder you're not fat like me!' He struck his paunch, eyeing my flat stomach doubtfully. 'You must feed all your crusts and crumbs to the birds? Isn't that right? Ha ha!' The dairy woman's mien was mistrustful as I piled my ration of eggs, butter, cream and milk in my basket.

I soon began going to the outskirts of town to do my shopping in a larger, more impersonal supermarket, with everything you needed in the same shop — a concept that came from America. The bread wasn't so tasty, the fish came frozen, but I was safe from scrutiny.

One Saturday morning I was on my way to this very supermarket. The clear sky and dry ground announced a fine day. I hadn't been walking thirty minutes before I heard a distinct sniffing behind me. I didn't have to turn around; their voices confirmed my intuition.

'I'd say he's telling the truth. I smell her. I do.' Petra's voice sounded more hurt than aggressive.

The same could not be said for Astrid's. 'Maybe he's homosexual and just wears women's perfume.'

'There's no perfume on him, but there's the distinctive smell of a woman. If I were an animal, I could tell you more about her. Animals are smarter than people. They don't need to believe what they hear, don't have to trust what they see. They smell the truth.'

'No wonder humans never developed their sense of smell. They're too deceptive to have ever wanted that.'

The two must have gone their own way by then, as I didn't hear them any more. I caught a glimpse of their backs in the crowd, or rather the bright yellow raincoats, so that must have been them.

That Monday they chatted during our lunch break the way they used to, so openly and literally behind my back, one would have thought the subject didn't concern me at all. I guess that was the point. They were trying to get me to react.

'You're going to be cross with me, Petra, but I spoke to her. I had to, for your own good.'

'How'd you find her?'

'I followed my nose.'

'You promised me you'd leave her alone!'

'You're going to be happy I didn't.'

'Where? What did you say? Who'd you say you were?'

'I just went there. I knew there was no chance of him being home. It was like we'd been waiting for each other. I said I was a friend of yours, that I knew him and I knew of her, and wanted the truth.'

'What did she say?'

'She told me to come in.'

I set my sandwich down, shaking so much that my coffee spilt over the edge of the cup.

'What's she like?'

'Not like I imagined at all. Didn't you expect her to be astonishingly thin, elongated, worldly? The broken-wrist kind?'

'Well, yes.'

'She's not. Quite the contrary. I'll tell you about her line of work later.'

'So they do live together?'

'Not much. She says he's with some other woman. But they're not married, you know.'

'Who?'

'He and this other woman.'

'Are they going to be?'

'According to her, they just play it day by day.'

'That doesn't sound very serious.'

'No, but it's been going on for some years.'

'Is he too much of a milksop to commit himself?'

'She hinted that the little lady is in trouble and hiding. I'm guessing she must be of his hoity-toity kind, trying to hook him, but ashamed of starting to show with no ring on her finger.'

'I never would have thought that of him.'

'Time's going by and he's still not doing anything about it.'

'What a creep.'

'He has *problems*.'

'That much we knew on our own.'

'Anyways, whatever she is, it was a relief to have spoken to her. And, you're never going to believe it!'

'What?'

'I can't here. Mm-hm. Later.'

'Isn't she going to get it for talking to you?'

'She swore she wouldn't tell him. I'm not going to let on myself, and don't you dare. That puts him at a definite disadvantage. Besides, if you really want the truth . . .'

At that moment Frau Schmitt raised her hand at us, tapping her watch. It was time. I had forgotten it was today. We were perfectly still. All across Vienna there was a five-minute halt of work in protest at the four powers' failure to give Austria back its independence. It was October 30, the same day of the Moscow Declaration ten years earlier, the three powers' official intention to free Austria from German domination. One could have heard a pin drop. I spent those five minutes thinking how happy I was that something had finally shut them up, wishing it would last all day.

I marched home in a state of fury equal to my sense of betrayal. Madeleine was gone, and so was Elsa, it seemed — she was nowhere to be found. I searched every hiding place before it occurred to me where she must be. Of course, she'd wanted her whereabouts to mock me and make me feel guilty, so where else? I tore away the thin wall and looked down at her. She kept her back to me and her nose to the skirting board, unwilling to turn her face in my direction.

'Elsa?' I said her name twice more.

She emitted a weak 'Mm?'

'Did you by any chance speak to anybody?'

'Who?' she asked.

'If you have to ask, that means yes.'

'I simply wish to know who you thought I spoke to.'

'To Astrid Farrenkopf. One of the women from work who makes me reek of cigarette smoke.'

'She says she spoke to me?'

'What if she did?' I asked.

Elsa turned her head briefly to give me a revolted look.

'So you did,' I said.

'No.'

'What if she said you promised her you wouldn't tell me?' I asked.

'What would be the point if she runs to tell you herself?'

'So you did speak to her,' I said.

'Actually, I didn't.'

'Don't give me your lies!'

She turned to face me with loathing now. 'My lies!' she laughed bitterly, 'Your big lies. Your little lies. Your half truths. Your bright truths. Your white lies. Your black lies. Not black, nor white, but grey. Razor-sharp truths; bloody lies.'

Her anger caused me to take a step back.

'She thought all along you saved me from a wretched house!'

'A wretched house? Who?' I asked.

'Madeleine. That's what you told her about me. That I was a *Hure*. From a brothel.'

'You spoke to Madeleine?'

'And what if I did?' she snapped. 'It was she who spoke to that Astrid woman, who came to call here all dolled up. I happened to overhear their

conversation. Oh yes, I eavesdropped. When the woman left, it was time for Madeleine and me to have a long-overdue talk. How dare you tell her filthy tales about me!

'That's what she assumed. I never said a word! You went along with it, I hope?'

'I would rather have died.'

I sank to the floor, wishing I could just become part of the sweet-smelling wood. Did Elsa now know that Hitler had lost the war?

She took a deep breath. 'I told Madeleine the whole truth.'

I closed my eyes for some time before I chanced looking at her again. 'What . . . what did she say?'

'What could she have said?'

'I . . . I really don't know,' I stammered.

'I can tell you one thing. She was scared to death. She says she was no accomplice to your deed. She wanted nothing to do with it, insisted she'd known nothing about it. So that wasn't what she was threatening you with at all! She was only after you because she thought you'd stolen off with me, or stolen me, and the man who "owned" me might not take too kindly!'

'Can't you see? It was better you didn't know. Look what you did the minute you did!' I fought to keep up a brave face.

'She says she hasn't taken any money from you since your father . . . since what happened. She claims she's actually been pitching in for years.'

'Would you expect her to say otherwise?'

'Maybe not. Still, she struck me as honest.'

'Her? An honest woman?' Indignantly, I rose to my feet.

'Are you such a judge of honesty? After she and I talked, I took her advice and snooped around. You always keep the cellar stairs locked, so I started there. I broke the lock off with an axe, but I couldn't get down there because

the steps were blocked with stacks of neat, square lies!' In a good imitation of my mannerisms — somewhat cruel as to the dignified manner in which I attempted to hold my lesser arm out of sight behind my back — she quoted, verbatim, what I'd told her years back about her paintings.

'Okay! So I happen to love you enough to tell you a tall tale once in a blue moon. Without me, do you know what you'd have to live with? Just like I do, every goddamn day? Knowing you're one big fat nothing! How does that feel? Because that's what you are!'

Her thumbs were like wrestlers in a headlock pushing each other back. She knew plenty about our situation, but still she pretended to be dazed, lost, somewhere else.

'Whatever lies Madeleine helped you to dig up, the bottom line is that I love you! You or she won't have trouble finding proof of that!'

A long silence ensued and Elsa let her arm fall stiffly out of the nook like a falling tree. A paper was crumpled up in her schoolgirl-like hand. I thought she had written a goodbye note to me. It took me a few seconds after flattening it out to realise it was the company envelope on which Petra had typed 'I love you'.

'So what!' I said. 'A colleague typed that. She's friends with the woman who came here.'

'I was the one who found this in your trouser pocket. Yes, I lowered myself to sticking my nose in every nook and cranny. I guess I got good at nooks and crannies some years back.'

'I can't help it if Petra Kunkel is chasing after me! She gets on my nerves — that's all. She's nothing to me. I only speak to her because we're in the same office.'

'So that's what you do with your days when I'm languishing here.'

'What? I work! That's all I do! For you, the house! All I do is work hard, then I come straight home.'

'Why do you get home so late? I'm sure the office closes before dusk. Why does it take you so long to get back?'

For the life of me, I couldn't bring myself to tell Elsa about my phobia of cars — linked to my fear of dying without having confessed to her. No, not until the baby was born could I risk it. Especially after this. Like an idiot I said, 'There are extra things to do when the office is closed.'

'I see.' She bit her lip.

'She lost her husband in the war. Maybe I remind her of him. Maybe she needs a father for her kid, I don't know.'

'How endearing! How heartwarming! There's a lot of that kind of demand going around lately.'

'How could you even think that? You know I love you. You know it by now, don't you?'

'I thought you did; that's the only reason I'm still here. The *only* reason. I *thought* you did.'

'I do. And aren't I taking care of things for us? Organising these next months, weeks? *Rathaus*, the hospital? I promise you, our lives will change once the baby comes. Please trust me. Have faith in me.' At some point I bent over her and sobbed, telling her how much I loved her, only her and no one else, why couldn't she believe me.

I took her hands in mine. My heart stopped. There was something cold, icy about them, but not the kind of cold that comes from staying still too long, needing a cup of tea or a woollen jersey. No, it wasn't that kind of cold. It was icy to the touch — the skin was — but going deeper, underneath, the blood was flowing warm, the flesh was radiating. It was that icy hotness one can only get from having been outside.

'There won't be any child.'

'Sorry?'

'There won't be any child.'

I touched her cheeks, pressed them more and more. They felt the same as her hand. She understood what I was checking and got up indignantly, a besmeared towel wrapped around her bottom. She closed the partition on herself, managing in one try and no adjustments. I stood there stupidly.

There won't be any child, she had said. And there was not. She never offered me more explanation than this.

XXV

Madeleine got into the habit of being absent for four, five months at a time. She'd found somewhere else, and I hoped she would just go for good. But she left her belongings in her room (my grandmother's actually, but I suppose I got used to calling it that). That was how I knew she'd been back — by what was missing. Her heap dwindled to a pile, her pile petered out to a last pair of boots in which she'd stuffed a reserve of lingerie — a world in itself, I discovered going through it, and her pretext for keeping a key.

She made some hostile comments to me before she moved out. 'Me? No such thing as me. I only fulfil men's fantasies. Spanking grown men who miss their mummies. Letting them believe they're with that first gal they were nuts over but never did poke. I'm nothing more than the missing one. I don't sell myself. How can I, if it's not me? I'm like an actress; everyone turns me into someone else. I'm not even me to you, am I?'

She didn't give me time to formulate my reply before she squinted at me shrewdly. 'Besides, she may think I sell my outside, but I don't sell my inside. Put my soul into a painting? Now that's indecent! Want to hang my soul up on people's walls? That's really selling yourself. That's what I call prostitution. I never sold my inside me to nobody. It's mine! It ain't for sale! Which is more than someone can say, despite her pretensions.'

That July we had the worst flood Austria had known since the sixteenth century. The Danube spread itself across the capital. A boat was of more use than a car. Even people who lived far from the riverbanks were finding themselves in knee-deep water. It flowed inside people's homes, rearranged the furniture for them. Houses acquired waterfront views; hotels, too. I saw bottles of apple wine floating in the streets like a family of ducks. Fields turned into lakes. The ducks themselves lost no time, paddling about in their element as if these water spots had existed since the beginning of time. Pairs of swans joined in.

Elsa ventured outside into this grand diluvial scene five days in a row, just as she had into the snow that winter, but was never long in coming back of her own free will. I didn't force her. She saw the flood as a long-awaited sign to cement her faith. Her every other word became 'God'. From burnt toast to having had no child — all was God's will. Soaking wet, shivering, she wrapped herself up in blankets in the middle of the floor, staring up, waiting for Him. She reminded me of a cocoon. I expected to find her one day with wings spread out behind her back; it wouldn't have surprised me one bit. God became a subject of tension and feud. He became an intruder, making us three instead of two, a competitor to be reckoned with, a rival lover — generous, loving, perfect, all-knowing and meddling.

I told her frankly that there is no one above, no one below. I didn't believe in God, not really. No more than I believed in ghosts; that is, until a noise came to my attention at night. She said there was a light that existed in the absolute, allowing us to differentiate right from wrong, just as it did truth from lies. She believed that when we mortals perished, we'd be allowed to see this light as it shone back on our lives. We'd be able to take in the truth all at once, the general essence and every minute detail of it, just like God sees a field of grass yet knows each blade. She filled me with anguish, proclaiming that our house was saturated with this light of God — didn't I see it myself?

I looked around at this 'light of God' to which she was pointing. True, there was more light — an unusually soft, diffuse light. The reason behind it, however, was boringly rational: the roof was in need of repair. The disastrous snowstorms that winter had knocked off some shingles, so there were gaps through which the light flowed in from above. On top of that, the ceiling was cracked throughout the house. Rain leaked in down the walls and light shimmered prettily off them, giving off a radiance rarely seen in interiors. Columns and crossbeams of light were added at random. Depressed as I was about the maintenance situation, I didn't have the money to do anything about it.

What I didn't do to get my old Elsa back, if only for a split-second and a single smile. I spent grocery money on treats I found in the rich Americans' quarter, brought her sugar-coated almonds, fudge, caramel popcorn. I

offered her packets from which marshmallow-topped chocolate could be made by just adding boiling water, or thick crêpes called pancakes by adding cold water and frying them in a pan of butter. One particular box of chocolates was a joy to her. The fillings weren't listed on the back and the surprises made her face glow — coconut, walnut, cream, toffee, raspberry jelly. She loved it all, could eat batches of these sweets until she'd roll from side to side with her hand on her belly like a pregnant woman.

Her face lit up from the time she saw me come in with the paper bag, all the time it took to empty it. Then it was over. I was a coward, a fool. I gave in over and over, knowing the long-term consequences but ignoring them, all for a short alleviation of guilt. Of course she couldn't get both legs into any of her clothes any more, let alone both arms. I brushed it off, sold the last family pieces to buy her new garments as luxurious as those of more opulent years. I wanted her to fancy that I had a last hidden reserve. Maybe, too, it was selfish of me. I wanted her to look as cared for as she used to be, even if it was hopeless. Nothing concealed the oiliness of her face, the blotchy skin, the unhealthy shade of sugar-saturated teeth.

Her loss of beauty gave me self-confidence. She'd joke about my having at least one good-looking half left, whereas both hers were ugly. Regularly over time, she swore my scar was getting better. I saw my body become stronger, muscular. People in the streets didn't look at me in the repelled manner they used to, weren't embarrassed any more if I caught them studying me. For some reason I captivated people. I didn't love Elsa less, but I felt reassured thinking that other men wouldn't snatch her away as greedily as they would have years earlier. I knew, too, that in her unattractive state, Elsa knew I really loved her. It was unspoken but there, hanging its heavy, embarrassed head in the air.

At work, the sound of my typing didn't keep up with the others' any more. It stood out, became an unwanted percussion. I couldn't keep my hand in the right place. Screwed-up envelopes sprouted up like wild mushrooms around my desk, poisonous to Frau Schmitt as she shuffled through them on her way past. Everyone knew the undeniable truth about my personal life. She wasn't at home any more — she was sitting on top of my desk, swinging her legs. As I threw each wad away, she gave it a little kick in the

air. When I was about to press a key, she mischievously poked another. She was visible to one and all. I could see her in Frau Schmitt's eyes as she handed me my pay, judging me: judging us. I left my job that day, knowing I'd never go back.

I was out of options. There was no more hoping for a miracle to fall from the sky. We were in desperate need of money, all the more because Madeleine was no longer around to contribute. I had a plan in mind of Elsa and me abandoning the house without letting Madeleine know where we'd gone. It felt sneaky and low, but on the other hand, that would help me keep my secret safe. My choice to sell the house wasn't only motivated by economic considerations. If I examine the real motivation, deep down inside, finance was just the truth I needed in order to lie to myself. I could have got another job. By and large I believe I wanted to sell the house so I could stop working and thereby be home more to keep a good eye and a good grip on Elsa.

I signed an exclusive contract with a real estate agent, who came with clients on Tuesday afternoons. The first, a journalist, examined the plumbing with his teenage sons and said he'd seen enough. The next to come was an architect. He didn't dwell on the decay, as most prospective buyers did, but spoke of extensive remodelling. The real estate agent was impressed, for the man understood the house better than I, who had lived in it all those years. The architect pointed out what belonged to the original structure, what had been modified over successive centuries — be it one stone to the next. He could hardly stand still and the agent was having trouble containing a smile.

I became alarmed that upstairs the man would spot Elsa's partition. My fear was well founded. He ran his hand over the phoney structure, was about to test it with his fist. I had to do something.

'If you don't mind; I need some corner for my dirty laundry without people sticking their noses in, don't I?'

The architect was startled. The real estate agent hastened with his client to the next room.

Elsa was aware of the stress I was going through. I lost my temper those days for no reason. If milk spilt, a tap or light were left on, I hammered into her that such inattention cost money and this was what had made me put the house up for sale. Really, I didn't believe a word I was saying. It was the uncertainty of our future rather than any loss of small change that was getting to me. Nevertheless, I could carry on for hours, blaming the whole situation on her. I called her a selfish, self-centred, wasteful, irresponsible vixen. Sometimes I acted tyrannically — shut off the water supply when I saw her bath was rising beyond half full. If she carried on too much about God, I went to the fuse box and switched off the electricity. If God provided her with so much light, I didn't see why she needed me to pay high electric bills for it.

For once, Elsa didn't recoil in self-pity. She told me I was acting like a jealous schmuck, treating God as a rival with whom I was on a par. 'Anyway,' she said, 'I think you've sacrificed enough of your life for me now. The time has come for you to sacrifice me, for your freedom.' Her words leaned towards irony, but her voice was serious.

'What did you just say?'

'You're free to get rid of me.'

'What do you mean?'

'Use your imagination to forget I ever existed. Let me out the door. That's the easiest. Fate will decide what becomes of me.'

'Why are you speaking such madness?'

'It's the greatest proof of love I can give you. I'm willing to sacrifice my life to give you freedom. That's the very definition of love. Giving one another space and freedom. Love isn't possessive, a way of caging someone in for your own sake. Love doesn't bind one to another. Love is as free and liberating as the air, the wind — yes, as God's light.'

I knew every compliment she gave God was a direct attack on me. She was lecturing me on my behaviour those past years, criticising me, knowing

I knew exactly what she meant. I found myself holding her against me in the most possessive of hugs.

'That isn't love at all!' I cried. 'Love means two people staying together no matter what. Love is a glue, the strongest there is, that sticks two people together! One doesn't just get rid of the other because it's easier running on two legs than stumbling along on four! It's not selfish for one to want the other there with him! That's love! You must love the person you say you love. You must stay with him. Love is a tight bond, two becoming one, not some loose open pig-pen!'

It was only then that I realised she was pleading with me to stop suffocating her.

She doubled over to catch her breath. 'You pig! Pig! Of course you can't understand! How could I have ever expected you to? Pearls to swine! It's only when you have the choice to stay with someone, the free, open choice among a hundred, a thousand other possibilities, that it has any meaning!'

We fought all through the night. If she tried to go to sleep without making up, I switched the electricity back on and shone a lamp in her face. I was childish, but then again, so was she. She called me a schlemiel, or was it schlimazel? (I get this Yiddish of hers mixed up. The former, I think, is the one who spills the soup; the latter, the one who goes through life always getting the soup spilt on him.) She told me I was a defaced klutz, and I could sleep somewhere else. With her plump legs she tried to push me out of bed. I just rocked from one buttock to the other, making fun of her the whole time, until she emptied her glass of water on my side of the mattress. I bolted to her side and pushed her over to the wet half. She got out and picked up one of her textbooks on the philosophy of metaphysics or something. She wasn't really in the mood to read — it was just a statement. The snooty look on her face said it all. What she was doing was more on her intellectual level than wasting her time on me. I switched the electricity off again.

This went on and off. Only on hearing her turn the lock downstairs did I go down on my knees and beg her for forgiveness. I spent the rest of the night with my arm gripping her, on the wet side of the mattress, but I could

feel she was still mad at me, even if she denied it every time I asked, which was about every five minutes.

The sun was up before me. I believed she was feigning sleep because she didn't know how to act, and to be honest, I was glad because neither did I. The house was a mess. Every object was a reminder of our fight and evoked details I would've preferred to forget. Her book still insulted me from its landing place, balled-up tissues full of her and my tears were scattered about like fake white blossoms waiting to be integrated into some maudlin bouquet.

With that numb sort of headache that comes from lack of sleep, I went out to buy bread. In passing a flower shop I contemplated the daisies, but this thought led me to a better idea altogether and I took the tram downtown.

It was a fiasco. Her face fell as soon as she saw the bright little bird on the table. Even as it hopped prettily from perch to perch, swinging and singing, her expression didn't alter. Taking it as a *casus belli*, as she termed it, rather than the token of peace I meant it to be, she attacked me repeatedly, saying it was a sin to cage a creature that God meant to fly.

'It was in a cage when I bought it — what does it matter whether it's here or in the pet shop or in some other purchaser's house?'

'It's a horrible sin!' She covered her face so abruptly she frightened the bird, which banged its light feathery self against its white dome. Hearing this, Elsa moaned all the more.

'Outside, a hawk or a cat will get it! It wouldn't survive. It's better off here where it's protected.'

'It'll never know life here. It'll be a pet, but never a bird. Can't you see?' There was a distinct tone to her voice. We both knew what we were really arguing about.

'If that's what you call living — getting torn to pieces and abused — be my guest. Personally, I call it dying. You love God's creature so much? Here do it yourself.' I ground open the handle of the kitchen window, despite the

years of rust. 'I'll bring you back what's left for you to look at. But I warn you, it won't be fit for a lady's eyes.'

Elsa looked sick. The bird sang, cocked its head innocently. She opened the cage a bit, then a bit more. Soon it was half open. The bird jumped faster and faster from perch to perch, thinking it was going to be fed. After a long hesitation Elsa opened the cage door completely. The bird stayed put. The breeze opened the window fully and a heavenly force seemed to beckon the bird to take its freedom. Still it didn't try to fly. Elsa reached her hand in for it, but it hopped about and flapped its wings. When she wrapped her fingers around its body and drew it out of the cage it pecked her hand and darted back inside, hunkering beside its bowl of water. I couldn't help but smile.

She reached in to take hold of it again and this time set it gently down with both hands on the windowsill, holding it a while, then loosening her fingers and letting go. The bird remained where it was, feathers ruffled. The air outside was warming with spring and had that smell of cut grass that makes one inhale deeper than usual with every breath, the soul expanding with the lungs. With a stunning dart, the bird left as if it were escaping, not as if someone had just set it free.

I spent the next hours writing this, which I slipped into the cage:

We to I

Close your eyes on me

And I will be blind

To the fair landscapes I knew

Through your thoughts and mind

Just as I'd be crippled

Left for lame behind

If ever you unwound

Your limbs from mine

Pressed together

Our blood fast dried

*Scars bind us fatally
'Til death we be tied*

*My love, tear not what
Has merged apart
To mutilate anew
Our breasts, our hearts*

*So soon we are severed
Under soil must each die
Ego's sap to be lapped
Fallen from we to I*

Elsa was downstairs reading my poem and I was awaiting her reaction, heart pounding. There was a noise. It took me a few instants to understand what it was. It was Tuesday afternoon — I'd completely forgotten. I rushed Elsa up the stairs, and yelled down to the real estate agent that I was coming.

By the time I got down, he was pacing the floor and his clients were standing partly with their backs to me, arms crossed in annoyance.

'Forgive me, I'm running late. Please, come in,' I said.

I stepped back with a startled jolt. It was Petra Kunkel and Astrid Farrenkoft.

'No harm done, Herr Betzler.' The agent smiled unctuously.

'So, Herr Eichel,' Astrid asked matter-of-factly as she walked past me, 'you told us there were how many bedrooms?'

'Eight.'

'How interesting.'

'Depends on the buyer, really. You could use the bedrooms for whatever purpose you wish — no one will force a bed inside. A man's house is his castle, isn't it, Herr Betzler? An owner can do whatever he wants?'

'Yes, yes,' I answered perfunctorily, racking my brain as to how I could throw them out without making myself look bad. They were looking around taking in every detail, which gave the impression they were indeed interested in buying. I saw Astrid's eyes scanning the uneaten breakfast for two, the empty cage holding the window open. She examined the circuit-breaker, sinks, concrete floors and bare cracking walls, confining her inquiries to considerations of the practical sort.

The women stepped past Madeleine's remaining items of lingerie with smug smiles and marched up the staircase, arms linked. Our bed was unmade, a wet mark in plain view. They gaped; the agent quickly looked away. The lamp was still on its side on the floor, and an embarrassing number of balled-up tissues sullied the sheets of the bed and the far corners of the room, where we'd flung them at one another and missed. So they'd think nothing of it, I blew my nose in one and let it drop to my feet. In a mixture of bewilderment and pity they stood there, taking in the dramatic setting of a play that was over.

Petra walked across to read the title of the book. I could tell that its being out of her league revived a certain regard she had for me. Coming back, she accidentally kicked the glass, which shattered against the wall.

'Gosh, I'm sorry.' She kneeled down to pick up the pieces.

I stopped her. 'Don't. You'll cut yourself. It's my fault — I shouldn't have left it lying around.' The bit I was holding had been part of the rim, where I noticed a trace of Elsa's lips. Wiping it, I cut my thumb.

'Oh! You're bleeding . . .'

'It's nothing.' I picked up a hardened tissue blossom and held it against the cut.

Going up the next flight, I ran my sweaty palm along the rail. The room was closed, so Elsa was complying out of loyalty to me.

'What's in there?' asked Astrid innocently. 'That must be the eighth? I've been counting.'

'Yes, but it's not presentable. As usual.' I gave Herr Eichel a resigned shrug in all its phoniness.

'Oh, I'm sure we've seen worse,' she blurted. 'We were cleaning women after the war, weren't we, Petra? We've seen it all, haven't we?'

'I'm glad you have, but I'm afraid I'm not in the habit of showing "it all".'

'We can look at the next room, a study, to the left, if you like,' Herr Eichel steered them away. 'It has more or less the same proportions as this one.'

The women pretended to take an interest, but I could tell what really intrigued them was the closed one. 'Is this sturdy, all this?' Astrid rapped the sloping ceiling with rhythmic precision. She was trying to get someone to answer. Through some of the cracks, pieces of the sky could be seen because of the missing shingles. She put her face to these and strained to see more. She went to the wall that backed on to the forbidden room and cupped her face to it.

'Are you looking for something in particular, ma'am?' I asked rudely. 'Dirty socks or dirty underpants? Have you a preference?'

Herr Eichel coughed. 'Well, you have a general idea now, don't you, ladies?'

'Oh, we do, we do . . .' muttered Astrid. Petra shook her head at me in disdain. Herr Eichel, sensitive to their initial eagerness gone tepid, escorted them away in an eruption of congenial small-talk. He threw a cold look behind him in case I was following.

After they were gone, I looked down at the footprints intruding into each room, snooping in every crook and corner, examining every incriminating detail: drop-shaped soles, followed closely by the fat dots of their high heels like the exclamation points of schoolgirls. It was as though the two women continued to pass comment on their visit in their absence. I imagined everything they would be saying and thinking: everything they could and would do.

Within an hour, Herr Eichel was back with a dentist who was considering transforming the house into a dental surgery. Downstairs he proposed a

waiting room, and the foyer could be used by his receptionist. Herr Eichel was showing him the bathroom, where a dentist could conveniently wash his hands, when I joined them with the intention of regaining Herr Eichel's favour. Barely had I set a foot inside the bathroom when I drew in a sharp breath. Over the basin, where the mirror had been years earlier, was Elsa's painting of the tree breaking out of the house. Her sharp brown eyes stared knowingly at us out of the branches. Mine, dull blue, dumb and wide, stared at me out of a cluster of leaves — exactly the way I must have been staring back at them. There was one minor alteration from before, but I had to look closely to see it. My bad eye, ever so little, almost imperceptibly, seemed about to drip, which gave it the uncanny effect of straining to look at something. I followed where the drip would go if it were heavy enough to do so, and at the bottom right-hand corner of the canvas I discovered what it was trying to look at: a signature camouflaged among the hues of green. The painting was signed for the first time in her name, not mine, but in a masterful imitation of my own style. I felt a pang like a knife, and, forgetting myself, clasped my stub to my chest. Herr Eichel helped hold me up. The dentist asked me if I had asthma.

'No. No. It's the painting. That painting.' I pointed to it, the fright I'd just undergone giving me the courage — or rather the foolhardiness — to admit it. The men inspected it, puzzled.

'It's just . . . I wasn't at all expecting it to be there. Yes . . . my grandmother painted it. She died some years back.' I improvised as best as I could. 'I don't usually use this bathroom.'

'Which one do you use?' Herr Eichel asked hopefully. 'Is there another you've never shown me? You're a mysterious one to figure out — let alone your house.'

'Two bathrooms would be good,' said the dentist. 'Just what I need. One for the clients, one for me.'

I was caught in my lie. 'I . . . to be honest . . . usually use . . . the sink in the kitchen.' I felt my face turn deep red. 'I don't like to come here to wash up, because of . . . it. You understand, old souvenirs . . . ' The towel on the floor refuted my claims, along with Elsa's wet footprints.

'So Elsa Kor was your grandmother?' asked the dentist.

He could make it out, too — it wasn't a figment of my imagination.

'Yes, she was.' I rubbed my thumb affectionately over the name. Then I realised the men were looking at my thumb in horror. I thought it was because of my cut, but when I looked down I gave out a cry. My thumb had bled green. My nerves finally gave out: I ran around the house, shouting that a leaf was growing out of my thumb.

Needless to say, the dentist decided the house was haunted by my grandmother. Poor Pimmichen. The real estate agent, on the other hand, decided I was out of my mind.

'We'll sell the house, boy,' he promised, and gave my shoulder a heart-felt squeeze before he left. But he didn't show up the following Tuesday, nor the next.

I was beside myself with rage at Elsa's having fouled up a sure sale. She told me she'd put the painting up as a peace offering after our fight; that it had been hanging on the wall half a day before I'd noticed it. So why was the signature still wet? Oil takes time to dry.

I was sick of her games, her going too far, so I did something I must confess ignominious. I revisited Frau Veidler's ruins, picked a bird skeleton out of the ashes and caged it in the white dome, one wing bone poking dramatically through the bars. It was far too decomposed to have been her bird, but Elsa didn't come close enough to work that out. She covered her face and went into hysterics.

xxvi

My contract with the real estate agent finally expired in the spring and I was in the central district looking for another. I'd tried some in my quarter, but word must have got around because their secretaries never contacted me, despite saying they would. Just as I was about to chance an agency on Schenkenstraße, I heard cries coming from one of the grand hotels a block away on Löwelstraße. Being in no big hurry, I walked over to take a look at what was going on.

What I saw became a banal sight by the end of that day. The occupiers were leaving for good, going back home where they belonged, and taking with them whatever they considered a souvenir, or had grown attached to over the past ten years and couldn't bear to part with, or felt they were entitled to for their long service — meaning whatever wasn't nailed down. No, I take that back: including what was nailed down. I saw Russian officers who, with the help of their troops, left hotels bearing antique beds, consoles, paintings, lamps, lion-footed bathtubs, marble basins. Even more unexpected, I saw the Americans doing exactly the same. The Austrians threw tantrums, insulted them no end, but were treated as ungrateful runts, and, if they got too out of control, given a knock or two with the butt of a machine-gun — just a little reminder of the recognition due to them.

I saw one troop of Americans — and this is no exaggeration, though it will sound grotesque — carrying off war material from centuries earlier: cannon, armour, lances, medieval flags. I don't know where they got their hands on these, perhaps in someone's mansion or in a museum; in any case, they no doubt found themselves back in a mansion or museum somewhere over there.

The general mood wasn't as bad as I make it seem; after all, not all Austrians had what it took to be ransacked: desirable possessions. Ecstatic people were flooding the streets. The postwar period was over. Strangers kissed strangers, linked their elbows, danced in circles, worn-down shoes

kicked high in the air. People threw confetti from their windows, the throngs in the streets shouted up to those on their balconies to jump down, holding jackets out to soften landings. The clapping and cheering were deafening. Not fond of crowds any more, I thought it best to get back before I got stuck in the celebration.

At home, yet another surprise awaited me: an orange banner strung across one of the windows with 'Sold' in bold black letters. I was hoping it wasn't a mistake — someone confusing our house with another, or, worse, some bailiff having sold it out from under me. Nervously, I wondered if Madeleine could have seen it, and then, even more paranoid, whether she wasn't behind it somehow. Two men emerged from the back yard. I recognised the real estate agent I hadn't seen for ages, and the architect.

'Seen the good news?' Herr Eichel asked, as casually as if we'd seen each other yesterday.

'I have.' I said it with rancour.

'If you really want to know, I tried to dissuade him, but I couldn't talk any sense into the man. Yours. His. What's the point with the big toot and bang of everyone leaving? I guarantee you the Russians will be back before you can scratch your rear end with the first coin. Then it won't be his any more than it'll be mine.'

The architect found this hilarious. 'That's a bunch of cow manure,' he retorted, and turned to confide in me in an undertone meant to gain all the more attention, 'I called Herr Eichel hoping it hadn't been sold after all this time, but knowing the chances must be zero. Lucky for me, the common lot has no taste. Don't believe what he or anyone else is saying.'

Herr Eichel used a side swing of his foot to decapitate mushrooms that had infested our garden. 'Being the owner of a property like this could play against you if the tide turns. You're not afraid?' he challenged the buyer with a smug smile.

'Yes, actually I am. Of another of your red-tide metaphors.'

'Okay, okay. You know the old saying: you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink. Herr Betzler, come by my office tomorrow morning. Ten, okay? We'll take care of the formalities. Make all this official. Not that the notion of private property is going to last long with the commies coming . . .'

The architect was only too glad to see him go. Circling around the house, he got on my nerves by, ironically enough, admiring every angle of it. He pointed to where O5 had been painted over and asked me if that smudge over there didn't come from a medallion bearing a coat of arms that had once distinguished the rear façade. I told him he was perfectly right and he was proud to think he'd restored another fragment of the abode's history.

He pointed up to Elsa's window. 'I'm going to rent out that room and the one next to it to students. They're reliable, usually stay until the end of the year. One down, I'll rent out to professionals needing a foothold in Vienna. I'll have the ground floor to myself. If I get rid of the staircase and build one in pine out here, put up a plaster wall, I won't see the renters going up and down. In fact, we'll have separate entrances. I'll just open up right here.' With his finger, he signalled where he could cut the wall. 'Their rent will pay for the renovation. And I'll have to put a toilet and a sink on each floor for the renters.' He fished his business card out of his back pocket and jotted down some notes.

I twiddled with my handkerchief, not knowing what to say. I tried to come up with any phrase — a banal one, a grunt of agreement — but nothing was able to make itself out of my throat.

'Back here, I'll get rid of the garden,' he went on. 'It's a lot of maintenance. Run some cement over it, make it a carpark. People will start being able to afford cars again. You know, with all that's happening, Vienna will soon be enjoying a golden era for artists, investors like us. A renaissance. Imagine, the opera soon opening! Would you have believed it just two years ago — Austria in the United Nations? Ten years of blasted foreigners telling us what to do: I tell you, Austria's ready to take its destiny into its own hands. The horizon's blue.'

'Sounds nice.'

Perceiving my ill disposition, he misunderstood. 'You're selling to build a hotel on Parkring, Herr Eichel told me? This is one of the secondary residences you inherited?'

So that's what Herr Eichel had told him. I made myself straighten my shoulders. 'Yes, that's right. In fact, I must go now and look over the plans. If you'll excuse me.'

The grand tale of the hotel on Parkring made the state of my finances seem all the more parlous and I began to fear the deal would fall through. But it didn't, and the sale price made my spirits soar. When I was a boy, it would've made us sound like millionaires, but I learned the hard way that figures are relative. It was only when I went to buy another dwelling that I realised the truth. True, the proceeds of the sale would've enabled me to buy a smaller house in good shape, but there was another problem I hadn't thought of until then. If I put everything I had into another house, there would be no cash in hand to cover the daily cost of living. Experience had taught me how much this could add up to, and how rapidly. I was thus forced to give up the idea of buying another house and look rather at flats. A large flat was nearly as expensive as a small house, sometimes more so, depending on the neighbourhood.

I calculated and recalculated, drew up budgets, made them tighter and tighter. A nice flat in a chic quarter would mean living meagrely inside grand walls. A modest flat in a bad district would give us financial freedom, time for me to find some way to get back on my feet. The older buildings were dark and pockmarked by the Russians, but the recently built ones were so cheaply constructed, block-like and utilitarian, they were eyesores. Poor immigrants sat on their doorsteps, leaned out their windowsills, smoking cigarettes, watching life go by. Children didn't have the look of children — they were little disenchanting adults, playing as routinely as if going to work. Even the cats and dogs slipping in and out had that dishonest look to them.

Going up a communal staircase was an adventure on its own, stepping over broken toys, turning sideways if I happened to encounter someone coming down, watching out for carpet not properly nailed down. Some had

lights that turned off automatically, so I had to feel my way back down in the dark to press the button again. The smells of cooking brought about unwanted intimacy with the family behind each door. The same held true with the sounds of babies crying, old folks coughing, and the unbearable sound of those aged in-between: mattress springs squeaking. I already missed the privacy of our home.

The descriptions in ads were full of white lies — dirty ones at that. I read of tiled stoves and bathtubs, but one tiled stove I saw was so rickety and soot-stained, a small log would have had to be cut into five to get in the hatch. Burning, it would have thrown out as much heat as a match consuming itself in an ashtray. Some of the baths were so small, your chin would have been on your knees — if you had the heart to get in in the first place, with the rust beard under the tap as long as Old Man Time's. You couldn't help but wonder if someone hadn't been murdered there.

I had more important considerations than aesthetics and space. In each flat I walked over to all the windows and looked out carefully. There were few places with no building across the street, and those that didn't would probably not stay that way for long. Being able to see other people was, in my opinion, almost like living with them, and this wouldn't do with Elsa. One building was so close, the woman opposite and I could have reached out our arms to shake hands. I recall a flat with a kitchen window perpendicular to one belonging to another family whose radio antenna was sticking out, while newfangled music was being emitted with the moronic lyrics of no human language (but perhaps a human baby's): 'Be bo pa lu la!' — and then in total rupture, the news came on.

Packing was a pain in the neck. I thought I'd sold most of what we had, because our place looked empty. That was before I grouped together what was left and tried to fit it into the flaking leather suitcases that had been Pimmichen's. What was left represented fifty times that amount. I went around from the tobacco shop to the fruit stand to the bookshop asking for boxes. I didn't know it would end up being a treasure hunt.

Then there was the question of Elsa's paintings. We had no room in what was to be our new home, and couldn't afford to rent storage space. I don't

think Elsa imagined just how many had accumulated under our feet. I couldn't bring myself to throw them away, which maybe was good, because anyway, the city dump would never accept such a mountain of bric-a-brac — enough to fill two rubbish trucks. Throwing them out a few at a time would have attracted less attention, but I would have had to start years earlier. In two days the architect would be at the door with his own truckload of belongings.

I could possibly leave everything where it was without saying a word, though the idea made me edgy, as if that would mean leaving behind traces of a crime. I was getting too old for all this. Enemies lurked everywhere, wanting to steal Elsa from me — spying eyes, dallying ears. I longed for a normal, prosaic life with her. It was time for us to live outside the fantasies we'd given life to in our juvenile minds.

Elsa beamed at the stacked boxes like a child who saw a predicted avalanche as recreation, while adults sat in a shelter, sick with apprehension.

'You're not going to leave me behind?' she asked excitedly, as if she were hoping I would.

I stroked her coarse hair. 'Elsa, I want our future relationship to be full of truth, honesty, mutual trust.'

'Oh, how boring! Don't promise me that! Holy Moses! I've lied to you too, before — what do you think? Do you think a man and a woman can be one hundred per cent honest to each other? Only truth, truth, truth and more of the boring truth? What do you want to do, kill all the mystery, the charm?'

I didn't recognise her face as she spoke these words, nor her manners. She tossed her hand about superficially, not to mention her chin, which had long become a double chin, so that she was transforming into a spoiled angel before my eyes. Her face had a cynical smirk to it like Madeleine's — heavy-lidded, whorish, which I'd never known existed anywhere in her. Sure, such attitudes were taking hold in those days, among the wrong kind of women seeking their so-called emancipation, but I'd never expected Elsa

to act that way. More than anything else, though, it was her words that scandalised me.

'You've lied to me before?'

'Of course I have.' She fluttered her eyelids. 'How can you expect me to hurt your feelings day in and day out with the absolute truth? Can you imagine how life would be? How did you sleep, honey? Horribly. You snored like a *Schwein*; I could've killed you. Did you miss me? Not one bit, the time flew by, I reminisced the whole while about my first love. Why are you with me? Who else would see me as a giant? Who else would see me? I've no one left! Can you imagine how abominable it would be living among the razor-sharp blades of truth? If you could read each other's mind all of the time? How would you feel if you knew I'd lain with you thinking you were another man?'

My lies were all of a sudden petty next to hers. I'd even say that my lies, next to hers, were proof of love.

She continued. 'I'm sure you've done the same — of course you have. You can't tell me I was never Petra?'

'Yes, I can. I swear it on my mother's memory!'

'Oh, come on, Johannes. It's one of the cruel facts of life — the whole world knows it, generation after generation, but no one ever wants to admit it. It's a collective lie. Perhaps a better way of defining mankind, humanity, than "the maker of tools". That's right, "the maker of lies". Now come on, you can admit it to me, I won't be offended. Never have I been someone else? Never have my breasts been slightly modified? When you've closed your eyes, have I never had another face? Was I a nurse? A school teacher? I know. Madeleine. You can say it.'

'Never. You've always been you! Worn your own face, your own name and your own body parts!'

By then I was pale with fury, which seemed to please her no end. It was as if I'd been freed from a spell, a curse, for I was able to look down at her roaming hands having no effect whatsoever on me, not even as they made

their way up my legs to that part of me usually most willing to make up. I was about to walk away but some nagging curiosity tempted me to check if what she was dissimulating was true. I probed her genitalia like a gynaecologist for the truth — that was one narrow portion of her that could not lie. Her desire was authentic, which I hadn't expected. My cold medical attitude was, in fact, enhancing her lust for me. I found myself staring at her with utter hatred. 'So, tell me. *Who* am I now?'

She bit my lips, dug her nails into my torso as if she'd gone mad. Her inflictions of pain were increasingly sadistic but I did my best not to flinch. 'Finally, a man . . . a *Mensch*,' she said, squeezing my testicles with undue pressure.

If I let myself fall, it was only to test her, though pain must have played a part too. I observed her. Her eyes were closed as she inflicted her minor tortures.

'Open your eyes!' She did so with that gleaming, whorish face I disapproved of. 'Look at me, I said! Here! At me! Don't you dare!' I made her take a good look at my genitals from front view and then profile, and applied pressure to her temples so her eyes would open wider. My own were hard, menacing. 'Chase him away or I'll kill you with him! If I catch you transforming a fraction of me into someone else . . . A fraction!' I prodded her eye sockets with my penis.

It all ended up more like wrestling, fighting, hurting, than love. When this ugly act of domination or whatever it was drew to a close, Elsa twisted a lock of my hair around her finger. 'I know you love me, Johannes. At times I think I don't deserve you. I'm a bad person.'

I lifted an eyebrow for the apology I felt I deserved. 'Oh, really? And why's that?'

'Well, I wonder, oh, just sometimes, from time to time . . .'

'Yes? Sometimes, from time to time . . .'

'Well.' She paused and fingered the flooring, where a rough relief of a chessboard pattern was left from all the tiles having been dislodged. 'If, well

. . . with all you've sacrificed, risked, done and lost for me. And the way I've tortured you. You and I both know I've tortured you.'

'My body seems to have a fresh memory of it.'

'It's just, if the truth ever came out . . . All the truth. Who I am, inside and out. Who you are, inside and out. All about us and our real place in the world . . . The big beautiful truth, the big ugly truth. Remember what you once said to me when I lost all reason and will to live? Truth is a dangerous notion you don't need to live.' She seemed to relish the word 'truth' each time she spoke it, rolling the 'r' on her palate like fine wine.

How much did she really know? How much did she refuse to know? Was she telling me her gruesome lies so that I'd own up to mine? Or just the opposite: giving me permission not to? As her protector, I excited her. As an ordinary companion, I'd bore her. From heroic and powerful, I would shrink to a mere man who needed her. She needed to need me to want me. I needed to own up to the truth, for my sake, but had to test the terrain first.

I murmured, 'I was an idiot to have said that. Lies are like easy friends, there to help you out of troubled waters. Short term. But long term, they're traitors only there to make a wreckage out of your life . . .'

'Many creatures take refuge in wreckage, make a home out of it. You think without a few lies here and there I could live like this? I don't know that I could. Wouldn't I just fly away? I mean, make a go of it, like that little bird out the window, away, keep flying to the end of the world, no thank you, no nothing, no redeeming me, no redeeming you, no looking back, no, not once, just flappity flap flap.'

Her thumbs were hooked beneath her underarms in an effort to turn her arms into wings that she beat up and down, a glow in her cheeks, a sharp, wild light in her eyes. 'And then outside reality hits, fanged freedom. A mind heavy with thoughts, a soul heavy with guilt. No one to take it out on but me. No one to torture and drive mad but me. It's a long drop from the sky.' She whistled down the scale. 'To hit earth a fan of bones and feathers. No, Johannes, I warn you, keep the truth to yourself if you care to keep me.'

The trunk was ready. *No man would ever lay his dirty eyes on Elsa besides me. Nor would she lay her eyes on any man but me.* I'd suffocate her in love if that's what she needed to love, desire me. I held the lid open for her to step inside. I'd lined it with duvets, drilled holes in it for her to breathe through. From her furtive glances, I saw how insecure she was after what she'd admitted, perhaps sizing up whether or not I'd dump her in the Danube. She stalled for time. It wasn't easy for her to get comfortable, especially with the extra weight she'd put on. Her legs, short as they were, were too long for her to cuddle up on her side, and on her back, her knees had to bend to press down on her chest, her neck bend sharply. I adjusted the linings, told her not to worry, and turned the key.

The movers arrived punctually and by noon were off with all our possessions except the one I guarded possessively. Judging from the frequency with which they cast their gaze at it, they must have assumed it contained its weight in Goldkroner dating back from the monarchy. The taxi wasn't long following. Seeing me struggle, the driver hastened to help me hoist the trunk into the boot. It wouldn't fit in right way up. He shifted it around with his massive arms. The idea of being left stuck in the street with Elsa like a ton of lead at my feet made me offer a surplus of help that drained his patience. Cursing in dialect, he pushed it over on its side. We both heard the thump.

'Nothing fragile?'

A wave of dread went through me. I shook my head. I saw Madeleine close the front door, dragging the last belongings out with her. I'd half hoped to be gone before she came out again, but no such luck. The boot wouldn't shut. The driver cursed again and groped around for a rope that was trapped under the trunk. Under his breath he complained that there were specialised vehicles for such purposes, that what fee he'd get wouldn't cover any damage done.

'I guess that's about it.' Madeleine balled up her boots and the last damp towels I'd left behind and held them protectively against her chest.

'Yes, I guess so,' I agreed.

She waited for me to say something. I waited for her to go. Finally, I couldn't hold back any longer and led her just far enough away from the trunk to ask, 'Tell me. Did you ever tell her?'

'Tell her what?'

'That she was free?'

'Free? To go where? On the streets like me?'

'Don't play innocent.'

'I told her more than you'd like. But not in those words. No, no woman's ever free. You men always attach us somewhere. House. Room. Through wedlock if not lock and key.' She rubbed her nose. 'Now, you tell me. Is she really where I think she is?' Her eyes were scrutinising mine.

I saw it was pointless to lie. 'Yes.'

Her eyes darted to the trunk. Anguish showed on her face. As casually as she could, she said, 'You haven't told me your new address.'

I stalled. There was an intimidating glint in her eyes. Afraid she'd do something if I didn't, I told her. Before she could ask anything else, I gave her a dry peck on the cheek, met with a stiffening of her body, and said bluntly, 'Goodbye.'

'Really? Just like that?' She tilted her face, incrassated with beige-pigmented makeup and the deeper wrinkle of hard experience, towards the sun. Then she turned back to me and her mien of emotional mendicancy reminded me of a dog waiting for a titbit at a table. When I kept her at bay with small talk, she backed away and, with a lethargic strut, made her way down the driveway and out on to the road. She didn't look back — it was as if she'd done that couldn't-care-less exit one time too many in life and her hips weren't really in it any more.

My vision was blurring and I sat down in the weeds. In doing so I got what I had done all I could to avoid: a last look at our house — its paint flaky dry skin, its windows dusty cataracts under a sagging roof, the whole a somewhat lopsided face. What few trees remained towering above the

bumpy terrain of mossy stumps were stripped, arching their trunks in pain, stretching arthritic limbs towards the sky as their leaves, brownish yellow, rotted on the ground. I remembered what Pimmichen had said — it seemed only yesterday — that time reduces all to that pale old yellow: books, music, wedding veils, toenails; and now it seemed our whole house, garden, past. Rubbing my eyes, I thought I saw Elsa's face at her old dormer window waving goodbye, but it was gone as quickly. I heard a scratching inside the trunk, accompanied by a muffled meowing. I talked loudly about the weather. It didn't matter what platitude I came up with — the taxi driver ignored me. I got feebly into the cab, sitting in front next to him.

'Where to?'

'Please,' I breathed, 'Buchengasse 6, tenth district.'

Part V

xxvii

The taxi driver grated his handbrake up. I stepped out on a footpath littered with nutshells. An old man sitting on his doorstep was cracking them open. The cab was blocking his view of the children playing soccer across the street on a dusty terrain with dingy pines, as if the neighbourhood could have a depressing effect even on nature. I went to help lift the trunk out, but was probably more hindrance than help. I paid the driver his fare, including an honest tip, and he scowled at the scratches in his paintwork and left with squealing tyres, the complaint coming straight from the heart.

I pushed the trunk with my shoulder, bottom, whatever I could, until the pain in my heart forced me to pause. The new flat was on the fourth floor.

'Hee hee hee.' The old man's remaining tobacco-stained teeth reminded me of abandoned tombstones. He mimicked carrying the trunk up on his shoulder. I realised he didn't speak German and a closer look (and smell) told me he didn't live in this building — nor, in all probability, any other.

My movers came tramping down, one making my keys do acrobatics from finger to finger. I'd thought they would have gone by now, having left the keys in the mailbox as arranged. Barely had they picked up the trunk when the meowing recommenced — a thin, lamentable thread of a wail. The men gave each other the wryest of looks. The mystery was solved. I was sneaking a cat into a building in which the regulations didn't allow pets. A toddler standing on the stairs took his finger out of his nose to point at the trunk and, after a moment of mute excitement, cried, 'Cat!' His father, in his dressing-gown and slippers, was sitting on the landing below him.

'Friedrich, dear, come back to Vati. That case is heavy. You see those men? Their arms hurt them. Please . . .'

'Move it, kid,' barked one of the movers. The child waddled down to his father, his nappy like a goose's behind.

Alone with my trunk, I searched my pockets frenetically for the key. It wasn't there, it simply wasn't, no matter how I tore them inside out. The cat noises had stopped since the movers had dropped the trunk from a metre off the floor.

'Say something, Elsa! Answer me!'

She gave no sign of life. My God, maybe I'd left the key at the house? I'd never have time to go and come back! Had I packed it in one of the boxes? Oh God! Which one? I began to open them haphazardly, without thinking, without seeing. Impossible, I'd packed before the trunk was closed and locked. It must've fallen out of my pocket in the taxi. Or sitting in the grass! Did I have a hammer, a screwdriver? Yes, but in which verdammt box had I packed the tools? There were too many! What was I to do? Did I have enough money for a taxi there and back? I tore open my wallet to look and heard a coin fall. It was the key. I'd slid it in my wallet so I wouldn't lose it.

My hand was trembling as I stuck the key in the lock. I raised the lid with foreboding. At first, I couldn't feel her under the cover: it seemed empty wherever I pushed. I tore it away and my first thought was that she had no head left, for she wasn't in the position I'd left her in. Somehow, she'd turned over on to her stomach. Her short legs were bent behind her ordinarily enough but her head curved down unnaturally. Her arms shot off in different directions, one crushed beneath her chest, one stiff behind her. She looked like a doll whose porcelain arm had come free of its socket.

Each way I moved her caused her pain, but within minutes she was giggling wherever I pressed my fingers into her and I wondered if she hadn't been putting on an act all the while.

'Cut it out! You'd better be quiet — someone could hear you!'

'Quiet. Tiny. Invisible. Like a little mouse . . .' Her whispering had a melody to it. 'Careful little mousy or someone will twist your head off.'

Her talk of the mouse triggered my memory. 'Those sounds you were making, what in the devil did you think you were doing?'

'Don't get so tetchy and uptight. It's not good for your health, Johannes. My God, it was just a code to let you know I wasn't kibosh! In rigor mortis! Weren't you dying of fear? I mean, for me?'

There was something sly about her question, something I didn't appreciate. 'What do you think, I was jumping with joy?'

'I think . . .' She bit her thumbnail to gain time. 'I think just like you.'

With exaggerated caution, she took a tour of her new flat. Her every precaution came off as sardonic, mean, perverted. She went along as lightly as she could on her tiptoes, holding her index finger to her lips. Every squeak of the wood made her cover her ears, shut her eyes as if she had just stepped on a mine. She ducked under the skylight windows, covering her head with her arms as if someone outside were firing at her. The view consisted mostly of the sky, for this kind of window slanted with the roof rather than stood up vertically out of it like the dormer of her old room. I could only cross my arms and glower at her.

There were only two rooms in the flat, but good-sized, all the more because the ceiling was incomparably higher than the one she'd had before, where bumping your head was inevitable until you'd done it at least three times and good enough to remember. The walls, freshly painted white, gave the place a vacant, uninhabited smell. The kitchenette was in the corner of the west room, the bathroom in the corner of the east. Neither the kitchenette nor the bathroom had windows. Elsa stared miserably at the shower and I couldn't help but gloat. The bath had been a sour point between us, a problem I'd thus eliminated. There was a wardrobe. She peered inside, expecting to find something other than a wire-hanger rattling on the rod. She took off her cardigan and hung it there. Its shoulders sagged dolefully, indicating the way she herself probably felt.

There was a settling-in phase, during which Elsa sent me to the hardware store three times a day while she did nothing but sit back, relax and drink, or so I inferred from the glasses and coffee cups I found in the sink when I came back. I ventured to install light fixtures only to discover that the

screws I'd chosen were too short. Another trip to and back from the store, then it occurred to me I needed bolts. Without the screw, I couldn't select the right bolt. The salesman asked if I knew the diameter. If I had, I'd not have needed his help. My first accomplishments didn't remain in place for long. How could you expect screws to stay in the walls without Rawlplugs? I gritted my teeth.

Part of my lack of concentration could be blamed on the unreserved manners of people living in a working-class area. More than once I came back to have Elsa tell me someone had come by in my absence. This turned out to be Frau Beyer, who lived with her husband on the ground floor. If it wasn't an egg she needed for her cake, it was a can opener because hers had just broken, or a thermometer to be sure hers wasn't broken, her husband's temperature reading so high. She came to need things, I observed, just after I'd left.

Herr and Frau Campen, who lived with their two young daughters one floor down from us, never bothered us, at least not directly. They fought between themselves like cats and dogs, though — we could hear their arguments as if we were in the same room. They put on loud music when the insults became too cutting, and I knocked the floor with a broom. I was already beginning to behave like the others in the building.

Elsa strained her neck to see out the window, where she could just catch the edge of a building and its first vertical line of windows. She asked me what that old lady in one window sat looking at for long intervals day after day. I had to come up with a diversion — for the last thing I wanted was for her to want this contrivance I'd heard Godmum talk about: a television set. Not only did it rob the world of colours, she said, but it also cost an arm and a leg, so a few imbeciles with nothing better to do with their money could station one in the middle of their sitting rooms. To me, it represented a dangerous window on the outside world Elsa must not find out about or she'd pester me no end. It was pure luck the old lady knitted while she viewed it, allowing me to tell Elsa she was keeping her eye on a pattern propped up in front of her. Elsa soon lost interest in the old woman.

Every day, modern technology was coming up with electronic contraptions. One couldn't walk down Mariahilfer Straße without going by demonstration stands that attracted crowds as big as marionettes used to attract. Since antiquity, air had dried women's hair. Nowadays, a noisy apparatus like a bloated hood could dry it in half the time. Women had once been happy to put their hair into braids, locks or knots. Now common sense was gone. The time they saved drying their hair, they doubled to get it up so it resembled the pompous feather ornament of a royal guard of some distant land, or, more truthfully, a hairy coconut! They applied a foul-scented glue so the stiff immobility made it appear as if hair didn't grow naturally from the body, but had been purchased in a store along with their outrageous outfits. Everything was moving up — their hair, their skirts. Gravity, gone from this earth.

People couldn't mix a batter any more with their own hand. There was even, believe it or not, a contraption for beating an egg! Who on earth ever sprained their wrist beating an egg? And this, I guarantee you, had nothing to do with the maimed generation of the war — they weren't the ones buying these things. Our neighbours were no exception, and because of them, Elsa didn't miss out on all this electronic nonsense — audibly, I mean. With a sarcastic smile, she provided her own explanation: the loud blowing, crushing hums were sounds of war reconstruction.

The modest entrance to our building had beige walls through which one could discern traces of an older navy blue. The low ceiling had a flickering fluorescent light that drove moths crazy till they fell dead. Off to one side were four metal mailboxes, one per floor. The stairs themselves were in tiptop shape because they were waxed each week by Frau Beyer. At best this entrance could be described as plain and functional.

Coming home one day from a series of errands I was stunned as I stepped into the building to note what a change had taken place. Green plants stood around, nearly as tall as me. I touched their leaves, which were too perfectly green and shiny — they weren't artificial. Half the species I didn't recognise. Moving an elephant ear leaf aside, I saw a large mirror, newly secured to the wall.

It had been some time since I'd seen myself close up. I was shocked, and my shocked expression made me look more shocking, which shocked me more. My hairline had taken its first tiny step back in the losing battle. My face — stubbly, drawn — had matured prematurely. Youth had shed its mask and what had been behind it had hardened into another human being. For a second I thought my scar had healed, but then I realised it simply stood out less because I had a permanent redness to me, like a homeless alcoholic.

Frau Beyer came up to me with a mop. 'Oh, don't worry, Herr Betzler, you won't be charged. We voted for these changes before you became an owner. You must admit, though, that this mirror makes the entrée look bigger? My husband says mirrors make walls step back for the queen to pass through.'

'The walls . . .'

'The walls — we haven't voted on their new colour yet. We'll do that at the next meeting of our Owners' Association, on Monday. You'll be there, won't you?'

I scratched up some excuse.

'Oh, I see you've never been an owner before. You have to attend all our meetings, that's where all matters concerning common ownership are decided — the roof, the exterior, all you see down here.'

'I thought my exterior was mine, my windows, walls and roof mine. I'm on the top floor, as you know. I assumed everyone had their own walls to take care of, their own windows.'

'No, no, no,' she laughed. 'It doesn't work like that. The interior's yours, yes, but not the exterior. When renters like you become owners, it's always new to them. The outside of your two windows belong to us all, just like a part of our windows belongs to you. If you owned a house, it would be different; everything would be yours — the roof, windows . . . but of course, that's not the case. Didn't the real estate agent explain this to you?'

I shook my head.

'Well, there's nothing to it. You do get a vote, after all. Only, it's not a democracy. We all vote, but our votes don't count equally. It goes by the size of the place you own. The bigger it is, the more your vote counts. You have the smallest place, so you have the smallest vote. But you needn't work yourself up — it also means that when improvements are voted upon, you have the least to pay.' She stepped back to admire the plants. 'I can tell you, there's going to be a lot of argument about these walls . . .'

For every slow step up I took, a multitude of thoughts raced through my mind. I'd assumed that once the flat was bought, I had nothing else to pay. Discovering that other people could decide what I had to pay for, especially for something I didn't even want, set my teeth on edge. If I'd known, I wouldn't have bought those two rooms in the first place. What if they voted for something too expensive for me? Where would I get the money? I'd be forced to go to these meetings and get along with these people.

'Oh, Herr Betzler?' Frau Beyer was smiling up at me. 'I've been meaning to ask you.' With the mop handle she pointed at the card I'd fixed to my mailbox, my fifth attempt to get something I reckoned looked suitable. 'I'll type you one so it's the same as ours. Regulation. Uniformity, essential to the standing of the building. Is "Herr Betzler" all I should type?'

I scrutinised her smile, her rotund belly, the golden buckles on her slip-on shoes, more gold on her fingers, manicured hands wielding the mop, her self-confident manner. What was she getting at? Simply that it would sound better if she put Herr Johannes Betzler? Or used my initials? Her stress had been on my last name, hadn't it? I repeated her question in my mind. No, what she meant was, 'Is your name all I should type?' 'Shouldn't I type the name, too, of that woman living up there with you?' 'Aren't you going to own up to her?' 'Do you think you're hiding from anyone the fact that you and she are unwed?' She wanted me to deny Elsa's existence to her face. I was curt. 'Herr Betzler will do for now.'

The meeting took place in the apartment belonging to Friedrich's parents, in their kitchen, where Friedrich, the toddler known in the building for blocking the stairway either single handedly or with the help of his toys, sat beside the table with spoon and pot. His father, Herr Hoefle, explained that

the nice people discussing business would get a headache if he didn't stop banging. It was only after Friedrich hit his eye on the table corner that the meeting could begin. This was because his mother, turning her head to catch him rubbing his eye without actually having seen the reason why he was crying, deduced that he was tired and put him to bed, to the great satisfaction of the rest of us who had seen.

A committee was elected to come up with a list of proposed communal improvements. I was to raise my hand if I approved each name as called out by Herr Beyer, Owners' Association president. I wondered who on earth would have the cheek to refuse someone to his face. The men called each other comrade and shook hands as if just elected head of a political party. I couldn't have felt more out of place.

Frau Beyer was right about the walls. Herr Campen wanted them green, but Frau Campen said we needed the walls to move out, not in, so we needed white. Frau Hoefle said Friedrich would dirty the white, as he liked to play in the stairwell. Frau Campen said hands could be washed and Friedrich more closely attended to. Frau Hoefle believed that some things, such as the language one could hear in the stairwell, were dirtier than innocent little fingers. Frau Beyer had dreamt of red stripes, but others said they would make the walls bend and stretch in all sorts of queer ways, depending on whether they were going up and down or sideways, and whether they had been put on straight in the first place. If they weren't, they could apparently even belly-dance. In the end, the Campens voted for white, the Beyers for red stripes, and the Hoefles to keep the walls beige. The whole table looked to me for the deciding vote. I chose the cheapest option: to keep them as they were. It was the first moment I hadn't regretted coming.

Beer and schnapps were served and the general mood became more convivial. I would have liked to leave, but didn't want to be the first to do so. I should have, before I became a conversation piece. What did I do for a job? Did I have children? Had I ever been married? My response was rehearsed: I was unemployed, and for the time being single. Now the questions were directed towards Herr Beyer. Had his son married that

divorced American woman? Was he living with her in Cincinnati? When would they come back to Austria?

We were all putting our glasses in the sink, Frau Hoefle unconvincingly insisting we just leave it all, when Herr Hoefle threw me with one question I hadn't been prepared for. 'Do you have a cat or a dog?' Six curious faces turned to examine me.

He had heard I'd sneaked a cat up in my trunk, that's why he was asking. How could I deny it? Maybe it wasn't allowed? What should I say? My heart pounded. 'Yes, I have a cat.'

'Good. As long as you have no dog. We're bringing in new regulations concerning dogs. They can't be in the communal areas without a leash and muzzle.'

This led to a heated debate about whose dog had never bothered whom; yes, but they weren't the ones cleaning the staircase every week; sure, but some people's shoes brought in more grit than little paws; no more than some people's tongues, speaking of which, don't we need a new mat? The old one is looking shabby.

As we left, the men were shaking hands, calling each other comrade again, this time including me. Winking at one another, they said one of these nights the lot of them would come up for a drink. It was a tradition when someone new moved in. I returned upstairs with a heavy heart and new worries to contend with.

xxviii

The very next morning, while Elsa was entertaining herself, or so I guessed from the shot glasses, I bought a cat. It was the biggest one I could find — an orange and white striped tom. I got it at the pound, where it would have been gassed in three days if I hadn't taken it. This would be the reason for any noise anyone heard from my flat while I was out. I should have thought of it before. I passed Frau Hoefle, who'd never seen a cat in a basket before, guessing from the look on her face, perhaps because its meow was halfway between a hungry baby and a wailing woman. In our small-talk, I slipped in a line about having just brought my cat back from the vet, so she wouldn't suspect it was a new acquisition.

Elsa named the cat Karl but more often called him *darling, love, my dearest, my everything*. She spent hours indulging him in head-to-tail strokes, admiring his symmetrical face until I caught myself thinking ill of the pet. She got up early to tend to his breakfast, hurried through ours with her leg bobbing up and down, impatient to knot socks into snakes, turn her slipper into a mouse with the help of buttons and broom twigs. She changed the bowl of water on the hour; kept the litter box cleaner than our own bathroom, where I often found her hairs in the basin; scrubbed his dish squeaky clean before she filled it anew — while I had to remind her to keep our soap-dish free of soapy water!

Her arms were scratched from pulling socks on them, making them bark, then chomping on Karl's hind legs. She said the socks protected her from his claws. My foot, they did! And, to add insult to injury, they were my socks she was letting him damage! If ever I teased or tickled her, God forbid. 'Ow! You know I bruise easily!' If I was the one to try to rest my head upon her breasts: 'Johannes, no! You weigh a ton! Get *off*; I can't breathe.'

She would stand with her ankles together and Karl passed between them, getting a rub on both sides. He produced enraptured noises from deep

inside, curved his back up high, whereupon his fur rose and his tail became stiff, erect, quite as if he were getting some kind of sexual pleasure out of it. I mentioned this once in complaining about her rejections of my advances, and she said who knew, maybe it was true. Still, she let him do it. At one point I thought the only way to preserve the peace would be for me to befriend Karl myself, but every time I got near him, he slunk off. After a month my patience ran out and I cornered him, lifted him up by the scruff of his neck and made him sit on my lap. The instant I let go to pet him, he scrambled off, getting me good with his hind claws.

After that episode we couldn't find him. Elsa accused me of letting him out. It wasn't until nightfall that she found him in the narrow space behind the kitchen sink. He hissed and spat at her every attempt to reach him. Even shaking the catfood box failed to entice him out. His bowl of water was more persuasive (flung), but she wouldn't thank me. Instead of being cross with him, she didn't speak to me for days — outside of monosyllables, yes, oh, hm, no.

I wanted to get rid of Karl. He tore feathers out of our mattress, played with pencils in the middle of the night, urinated on clothes I hadn't got around to hanging up. No amount of washing removed the stink — that sharp muskiness particular to tomcat urine.

'Listen,' Elsa promised, 'I'll keep an eye on him, punish him if it happens again.'

'I see no reason to wait.' I approached him cautiously. His body tensed.

'Stop! He won't understand why you're punishing him if you do it now. You have to catch him in the act. Besides, I should be the one to do it. He'll understand better if it's me.'

I left my jacket in one of his napping corners and didn't take my eyes off of him. This time my patience was rewarded. I watched him slink over, take position. Elsa was re-attaching a button he'd gnawed off his mouse.

'You'd better move it if you want to catch him in the act,' I advised coldly.

She didn't bother to look up until she'd finished sewing and bitten the thread off. Then, at her leisure, she strolled over to my desk (I call it that by habit; it was no more than a board on trestles), swaying her plump buttocks proudly. She picked up my owner's certificate and rolled it up so it was pointed at the tip. 'Karl, that's a no-no,' she said mildly, and tapped him twice on the hip. She dropped it back on my desk and, with no attempt to flatten it, returned to her mending.

'He pissed on my clothing and he gets two encouraging taps on the back? You ruin as much stuff as he does! I think you're both playing games with me!' All I did was seize a ruler, rendering null (by the simplest form of deduction she was so talented at) my threats to 'tear out his limbs one by one'.

She jerked it away and broke it in two over her knee. 'You're so primitive! It's the noise that punishes him, not the pain.'

'You'd be surprised how educational pain can be!' I yelled, but the cat was faster than me. Nevertheless, the bang my shoe made against the wall was, in my opinion, more effective than the swishes Elsa had made.

'You brute!' She beat her fists on my chest — she, who for the life of her wouldn't have harmed a hair on the cat's head. Our shouts of rage brought about bangs from below, which stopped us both. We faced each other as if frozen in time, neither of us able to move. After minutes, or so it seemed, I shifted my eyes to the dent in the wall and said to her through my teeth, 'Look what you made me do.'

By speaking first, I broke the spell. Elsa dropped back in her chair, her short legs spread. Karl hopped up on her fat lap, upon which she voluptuously stroked his underside. He lifted his hind leg and holding it out straight and stiff, licked it. It was a mean provocation, exposing his proud testicles, just when I'd been nurturing feelings of having been castrated by her.

Before dawn, I showed him the way. He slipped out, a sneaky bush of a shadow. I pursued him with his basket and cornered him downstairs under the mailboxes.

It was late morning when I came back. Elsa was pining in the kitchenette, her back to the stove. Her face regained confidence when she saw what I was carrying; her smile was one of victory as she reached out her hands. I handed it over. She drew the cat out, brought it against her shoulder, giving its drowsy face little kisses. She looked at me again; this time she'd seen the shaved patch and understood I'd had him neutered. The girlishness left her expression: the face that remained was true to its age.

The cat grew as fat as her, left its mouse in the middle of the room without a sniff of attention. If Elsa animated the toy by the shoestring tail, the cat lifted its paw once or twice before blinking cynically. It observed birds out the window with a passivity to discredit its species. At night it watched the shadows on the walls with no emotion. Elsa pulled my socks over her hands, made them jump, growl, sniff. The cat was insulted by her diversions. If she persisted, it got up to nap elsewhere. Her outbursts of kisses were now received with half-closed eyes; tolerated, but no longer appreciated.

In due time, though, there was less friction between Elsa and me and our mode of life fossilised into a routine. Perhaps in adopting the practical modes of existence one needs once youth is past and buried, we eliminated the inconvenient, and, with it, the spontaneous, the surprises. We got up from bed to go to our kitchenette some steps away. Elsa sliced the previous day's bread, I made the coffee. We sat looking at our plates. We got up. She took care of the cat, I cleaned the kitchen. She took a few steps in the other direction to spend an hour in the bathroom. I made the bed, sat grumbling on it until she came out. She smoothed the bedspread. I bought the beans, she soaked them. In silence we ate them. The cat jumped up on the table. I pushed it off. She cracked the window open. I closed it, complaining that the draught made my neck sore. Seated, we took our afternoon nap. We walked back to the kitchenette, took our tea. We wondered how long until dinner. She took the pot of beans out of the refrigerator. I lifted the cover to look at them. She did some exercises. I watched her because there was nothing else to watch. She read. I went to buy the bread. I came back, played solitaire. She watched me cheat. She put the beans on the gas. We

sat. We ate. I cleaned. She helped. We yawned. How long until bedtime? These are my memories of those unchanging days.

Elsa and I found fewer subjects to talk about. We'd used up our stock of conversation. We continued to talk, of course, but it seemed we talked only of the same things we'd already talked about before. I heard the story of her audition for the Vienna Conservatory of Music at least a hundred times. The first round, she'd played as if some great artist's spirit were helping her along. The second, she was so nervous trying to match the preceding performance, her hand shifted a fingertip too far, which on an instrument as exacting as the violin was enough to reduce her to beginner status. By the same token, I'm sure she'd heard about the time Pimmichen and I were both dying until we shared the same bed as many times, if not more.

We'd grown bored with each other. Even the cat had grown bored with us, and dodged its ennui by sleeping. Surely, its life had been more exciting, too, the days it had feared me, feared for its future. Today, if Elsa fed it a titbit under the table and I lifted my arm in rage, it only looked up to see if there wasn't by any chance something edible in my hand. It never explored its environment any more. After all, it already knew every square metre by heart. I knew how it felt. Routine made our home shrink until at times it felt as if we were living in a box. I think the smells were what reduced the space. From the bed, one could smell the beans as strongly as hours ago in the kitchen. From the kitchen, one could smell the shaving cream as if one were in the bathroom. The cat's punctual doings were instantly known to us anywhere in the home, as ours probably were to it. One couldn't do much of anything without all of us knowing about it.

Elsa and I hardly bothered each other by then with physical desire. We were, I truly believe, too physically close ninety-nine per cent of the time to want to get any nearer. In bed, we turned our backs to each other, clinging to our own edges. Rarely, I reached out a hand, and if I did, it was after some off-the-wall dream of a woman I'd never seen before in my life. Elsa couldn't have been more scandalised had I been her own brother. My hand was slapped and thrown back at me like a soiled garden glove.

Elsa could go without me a month at a time, more: maybe this was the way women functioned. Then she would desire me for a day, but with restrictions. She might warm her feet against my legs, but I have an inkling she would've done the same with a fluffy toy animal. As I said, if I was foolish enough to make the first move, I was sure to be rejected. All I could do was wait for however long it took for her to come around, at which time I put myself at her disposal. I swore I'd make her wait next time she started up with her hanky-panky. But when she blew her whistle I came running like a dog. Maybe that was the way men functioned.

I forgot to mention that she was rarely more than partially undressed, and I must say as the months went by, she bothered with such matters even less. If she could move a garment aside, no need to take it off. More often than not she didn't even want to make love, she only wanted to 'borrow my leg', as she put it. To do her justice, she asked me first. This would put me in a state of excitement, but I wasn't allowed to do anything or she gave me a verbal lashing. My role was just to lie there with my arms out to the side. All I could expect from her afterwards was the equally generous possibility of using her leg.

The drip in the kitchen sink was our only indication of days going by. Then again, one drop might have been another drop, just as yesterday could have swapped places with tomorrow or today. Then one morning, a tiny change took place. Without saying a word, I began to slice the bread. With a shrug of her shoulders, Elsa decided she'd make the coffee. I left everything on the table and went into the bathroom first. Coming out, I saw that the bed had been made. We actually smiled at each other. I tended to the cat, she cleaned the kitchen. While she was in the bathroom, I put the beans in the water to soak. I knew she knew I would. When she came out and saw I had, we smiled at each other a second time — twice before noon, a record.

Keeping with the rules of our new game, I was the one to boil the beans for lunch. The cat, seeing something new going on, was naturally curious. It jumped up on the bench and, in dipping its head to sniff around, its whiskers came into contact with the flame, making a horrendous stink. Elsa came to see what it was. As she wiped the black off, she found whiskers

like grains of sand in her hand. This led to another surprise. She didn't blame me for it.

That lunch, instead of looking down at our plates, we actually talked. I told Elsa not to worry: Karl's whiskers were as unnecessary to him as mine were to me. Elsa said my analogy fell down: a cat's whiskers were as vital as a pole to a tightrope walker. I found that hilarious, but she said it was exactly like we humans using our ears, not our feet, for balance. I answered that if what she said was true, Karl should be currently leaning to one side or walking around in circles. I don't know why, but we were soon laughing ourselves out of breath like children. Every time we looked at Karl waiting for his titbit, with long proud whiskers on one side, and on the other the atrophied ones resembling the bristles on an overused toothbrush, we exploded into a fresh gust, especially when our behaviour prompted him to seesaw his head over to the long-whiskered side. Vexed, Karl removed himself from view. Elsa opened the windows and, instead of shutting them, I for once let them be.

That afternoon nap, it was as if we knew each other for the first time. It was wondrous because she and I were our same old selves, yet because we'd kept away from each other for so long, in coming together we forgot to hate what long ago we used to love. It was a rare fruit to cherish novelty while sharing the ease that only familiarity can beget. I held Elsa to me and the warming wind blew away old grudges, breathed revitalisation into our souls. A bird was chirping and I fell asleep swooping into pastel skies and sweet melodies.

On waking, I didn't notice the water until getting out of bed, I stepped into it; a shallow expanse resembling the thinnest lip of the sea that steals its way up the shore before being drawn away. This water didn't recede, though; contrarily, it only edged itself forward in wee spasms, millimetre by millimetre. Against all reason, Elsa had tried to lie down in a plastic basin I normally used to keep my belts, socks and the like. She'd merely succeeded in wedging her torso and head in, while her legs and one arm stuck out ludicrously, the other arm bending to pinch her nose. The showerhead was trapped somewhere under her, which had caused the hose to crack; jets of water were spurting out its length in grand arcs. The water level rose and

fell over the edge, making her hair undulate back and forth and her features distort.

The water was ankle deep in our bathroom; in our bedroom it had just started climbing up the wall.

'People will be coming up any minute now! Get up!' I tore her out and pushed her naked and dripping to the wardrobe. 'Get in.'

She stood still, searching my eyes, pleading for reality with that knowing look of hers. It was this moment, I believe, I lost my chance.

'No time for monkey business. I'll try to sort this out. If you hear voices, not a squeak!' I had to push her to get her in and rammed the metal doors into her backside.

I ran down the stairwell and found the Campens' door ajar. Frau Hoefle was addressing Frau Campen with that stance of assumed infallibility. 'It must be you. Or one of your daughters. Your bathroom's directly above ours.'

Herr Hoefle was carrying Friedrich on his back. 'Like my wife says, our bathroom's under yours. His is situated somewhere over there. I don't see how the leak could get from his to ours. It must be you.'

Herr Campen turned his attention to Herr Hoefle in a manner that excluded the latter's wife. 'I tell you, my good man, it's not us. It's coming from Betzler's, above us. Maybe he's drowning himself. Finally. Come.'

Herr Hoefle shuffled through the puddle, his son jabbing his heels into him to make him go faster, his wife tagging along. Furniture legs stood like stilts in it; flowerpots sat in it, muddying the water with their soil.

'As I said —' Herr Campen began.

'Look! It is coming from above. God, what a mess!' exclaimed Herr Hoefle.

Frau Hoefle tugged at his sleeve. 'We're wasting time arguing; the ceiling could collapse!'

Frau Campen smirked. 'He might not be home.'

'We'll force the blasted door down,' replied her husband.

'Hello?' They acknowledged me in embarrassment. A stain darkened the Campens' ceiling, from which drops swelled before falling like anonymous teardrops. The wallpaper was rippling, the small pale roses swelling, their red dye trailing down the wall. I couldn't help note that the Campens, who had voted against red stripes, were now getting them in their own home. Herr Campen pointed to where some tiles were coming loose.

'Have you mopped it all up?' Frau Campen asked sharply.

'I . . . didn't have enough to dry it with —'

I hadn't finished my sentence before they began gathering rags and buckets. Frau Hoefle ran down for more, while the others charged upstairs and barged into my flat, with me following. I thought I must be dreaming. Elsa had positioned a chair in the centre of the west room. Her straight, stiff posture spoke for her: she had every right to be sitting there, life-size and fully naked, her hair dripping, her bounteous breasts resting on her bloated belly, her bloated belly on her podgy lap (podgy enough to be concealing the most scandalous), her hands crossed on her dimpled knees like an obedient schoolgirl, though her toes, pink, plump, wriggled like ten little piggies. There was another contradiction in her pose, for her head hung down sharply as if her neck had given out, or perhaps she was a trifle ashamed for having disobeyed.

I was behind my neighbours so I didn't see their faces, but I could see Elsa's well. Her eyes rose briefly to take them in, then she actually nodded before resuming her pose. I saw them look sharply away and either raise their hands to their heads or cover their mouths as they gasped. But by looking away, they all looked in the direction of the flooded room, so that one could almost have thought it was this that had shocked them. My mouth went dry; I could feel my throat responding to every pulse. Without wasting a second more they were on their knees, slopping rags around, wringing them into buckets, and avoiding looking in Elsa's direction. The Beyers, hearing the commotion, made their entry as if they were joining a party,

until they saw what was to be seen. Herr Beyer casually removed his jacket and tossed it over to her. It landed awkwardly, like a headless lover taking to her breasts, before sliding compliantly to her feet.

I was aware of receiving dirty looks from the women. Did they judge me for having a woman in my home? Were they furious that I, cause of the calamity, wasn't pitching in? I told myself I'd better go over and help — told myself over and over: go and help — yet by then Elsa had raised just her eyes and I couldn't move out of her line of vision. A numb sensation had taken over one side of my body. The men, though visibly embarrassed, reacted more sympathetically, drying up as if it were no fault of mine but a natural disaster that they, unified, were combating. Herr Beyer assured everyone that life would go on, no one would die, the insurance company would send its experts. I could tell he was getting on everyone's nerves and wished he'd shut up.

I thought to myself, if only Elsa would pretend she was just visiting me, it wouldn't look so bad. With my eyes I ordered her to move, cover herself up, but outside of one stately blink, she ignored me. The way she just sat there, protesting against some invisible, unstated nothing, it all looked much worse than the truth. Of course the women took her for a victim. At the same time, it had been so long since Elsa had seen people, maybe she didn't know how to act? How could I expect any different?

'My wife didn't mean to . . .' I stammered. My voice, thick and forced, didn't sound like mine. I swallowed hard before going on, but it did no good. 'She's not always in control of her acts. You must understand. She's not normal.'

They all stopped what they were doing to look at me, dazed. Frau Campen had stopped wringing her rag, only its drops hitting the water could be heard.

How loud my lie sounded in the silence. They were looking at each other, completely puzzled. Maybe Elsa looked normal enough to them. Maybe they didn't believe she was my wife. What did it matter? Wed or not wed, it was my business if I chose to live with a madwoman.

'She can't help it. She isn't master of herself.'

I looked at her seated in her chair. So did they, but so incredulously, one would have thought from their gaping mouths that the chair was empty. I thought by now surely Elsa would accept the stick I was holding out to her and pull herself out of the quicksand. But instead of twisting her features, babbling nonsense, hitting herself on her head to confirm what I'd just said, she contemplated me placidly. She was gainsaying me. How dare she! She not only looked perfectly aware of what she was doing, I'd even go so far as to say she struck them all as highly intelligent, lucid, even sympathetic to the fool I was making of myself. I was taken unawares by the merging of too many emotions. One last look at her and I dipped my own head down. In front of all present, my last defences broke. I hadn't planned on my doing so, but once I'd started, it was my only chance to save face.

I sobbed, 'You don't know what it's like having a wife like her! What it's like having to hide her. The embarrassment, the shame she causes me! I'm never free — free to go out, free to live. I have to live closed up as if I've done something wrong, am a criminal who must spend his life being tortured in prison!'

Herr Beyer was at my side, patting my back. The others joined him, lending me rags on which to blow my nose. Elsa shook her head at me. Her eyes were easy enough to read: I was a disgrace. Without anyone noticing, she got up and stepped into the wardrobe. The chair was empty from then on, had anyone looked.

xxix

From behind their curtains they watched me come up the street. Without picking up his toys, Friedrich ran inside as I checked my mail, called in by his mother. Herr Beyer was peeling potatoes on his doorstep. Unshaven, he reeked of schnapps.

'Comrade. My mother-in-law took the train back to Horn. God bless her, ninety-two years old, but God bless me more, she'll be back!' He winked at me and made some crude gestures to show what a nuisance she'd been. 'Why don't you come down with your wife for a drink?'

I declined, insisting that she was potentially dangerous — saw non-existent people, threw irrational fits, broke whatever she got her hands on, aimed for the eyes if she got out of control, and wouldn't stop there if she came across a knife.

'We've all been through that, haven't we? Just spend a week with my mother-in-law! Besides, it would do her good to get out. Even a genie has to get out of her bottle once in a while.'

'If she gets out, I don't know that I'll ever get her back in.'

'Then we'll keep her a few days. No harm done. You won't miss her as much as you think. If you do, you can always cork her up with your finger.' With that, he wiggled his little finger in his ear as if to suggest corking her up in my head and winked at me again.

'I'm not ready.'

'Give it some time. When you are, door's open.'

At home, I found cards dealt out on the table. I didn't think anything of it. Elsa shunned me when I asked if she'd discovered a new kind of solitaire. Though I whistled loudly as I approached the next time I came home, so she'd have time to clean up, I came home to the same. Still, she refused to give me an explanation of what she'd been playing. I had a suspicion she

was resorting to reading cards to divine her future. The hands were facing down and each had a damp ring above as if drinks set on the table had just been whisked away. That's when it dawned on me that she'd been playing with other people! I threw a tantrum until I felt pins in my heart. She straddled me until she cut off my breath, explaining that nobody knew anything about her, to them she was only Frau Betzler, what reason did I have to worry? She stooped down to mess up my hair before asking, teasingly, did I worry that our dear neighbours thought perhaps Herr *Betzler* wasn't master of *himself*?

The days to come she often went barefoot, and when I reminded her to put her slippers on, she claimed they hurt her feet. I didn't want to respond to her minor affront (I'd given her the slippers). Be that as it may, it made me angry, since I'd paid for the finest quality. Before winter fully gave way to spring, I insisted she show me where they chafed her. She got up to show me, then stooped down to pick up a button of her blouse that had fallen off and had to be sewn back on before she lost it. The moment was lost. Some hours later I brought the subject up again. This time on her way to get the slippers she stubbed her toe on the table leg and had to lie down. Her feet looked fine to me, outside the fact that they were ice cold. I became angry and demanded to see her slippers then and there. Cornered, she acknowledged that she couldn't find them.

I searched the entire flat and I couldn't find them either. I wasn't long in deducing that their disappearance, added to her reluctance to look for them, was a clue. She'd left them at his place. She'd used them to toss him a note out the window. She'd thrown them away, for they reminded her of me. There was no other answer.

In the middle of the night I remembered one last place I hadn't looked — behind the kitchen sink. There was something stuffed there: it looked like a towel. I pulled it out. Anger and excitement filled my veins when I saw it was her dressing-gown, damp and stained with grime from its long stay against the old pipes. I examined it inside and out, sniffed it over, convinced her infidelity was the reason for its concealment.

I found one of its pockets bulging. I prised out what had been forced in: her slippers, one inside the other, folded in half. The real surprise was to come. Something hard was hidden inside. I could feel its weight. Not in a thousand tries would I have guessed what I was about to find. A ceramic bird, small enough to nest in my palm: an ordinary-looking bird with brown speckles on its wing, a bulging white breast, two dark eyes. It was perching on a stick, integrated into a white lump that served as a base. Apart from a tiny chip out of the tip of the beak, it appeared to be brand new. I have to say, it wasn't exactly what I'd been looking for, but it was proof she'd fooled me and was stealing away outside, amusing herself, behind my back.

I'd always known she was a smart, conniving one, but had lacked the proof I needed. All those years, my hunches had been right. She was a good — no, a great — liar. She played the angel, but she was a real devil. And that sweet innocent expression of hers! *Hold on, I have to sew this button on first! Oh, my poor little toe! I'd better lie down in case it's broken . . .* I was peeling away her falsehoods, layer by layer. How many layers to get down to the truth? What an imbecile I had been believing her!

My newfound certainty raised more questions than it answered. With what money had she purchased the bird? Money stolen from my desk? I itched to go and check, though the more I thought about it, the more I realised it was pointless. The deed was done. Obviously, if she hadn't stolen the money from me, she'd taken advantage of my absence to steal the bird from someone else — or a shop. Unless . . . he had given it to her? For all I knew, she could have a lover, be visiting him whenever I'm out. Or perhaps he comes to her? She could have a system all worked out, some secret way to let him know the watchdog was gone — a stocking hanging out the window, three knocks on the floor. Maybe it was Beyer! He could see from his peephole if I were thoroughly and reliably gone or just clearing the mail.

How they must have laughed behind my back. He must have imitated me time and time again, and she too. Maybe he came up every time I was gone, had relations with her right in our bed! Put his dirty buttocks right here as he slipped off his socks! Laughed when he saw me coming up the street, loaded down with groceries, a basket of clean laundry, some special surprise for her. Or maybe he hadn't even bothered to keep an eye out for

me, with me stupid enough to always whistle out of courtesy for her! A last go at it and he was off! What a fool I'd been. A sucker. I, the underdog, who had to blind myself to all that went on in order to stay with her. And she, the strong heroic figure who probably told him that she only stayed out of pity, obligation.

All this had started since she'd flooded the building, since he saw her sitting naked in the chair. No wonder he kept inviting us both to dinner, making all those sympathetic comments. Now I understood why he'd been so nice to me, had kept on. He was getting his kicks out of it, chuckling at my aloofness. He probably knew all there was to know about me. In fact, I saw now that their affair had been going on long before that day! Yes, while the water was being sopped up, they'd acted as if they'd never seen each other before, fooling his wife, the others, me. She'd flooded the building on purpose so she could see him, for it had been some time since he'd come up to see her. He had wanted to end it. That was what her silent protest was all about! It was aimed at him, not me. She'd only had relations with me that day to get back at him. It was all so blindingly obvious. It had nothing at all to do with me, nothing whatsoever!

Elsa and I had breakfast together. My jealousy blackened. I saw how he'd used her, how she'd given her body to that low-down conniver because he had lent her an ear. What parts of her had he touched? These parts disgusted me. I let them dissolve before my eyes. I amused myself looking through her until I could see the wall on the other side.

The minute she isolated herself in her usual spot, the bathroom, I set her slippers down, ready to step into when she stepped out. I crammed her dressing gown back behind the kitchen sink, leaving just the sleeves hanging out as if they were begging for help. I awaited her reaction, hardly able to sit still. As I heard her snap her vanity case shut, a wave of anticipation swept through me.

The door-handle turned and she gave a last-second jump to the side; after which she fell to her knees and slid her hands into the slippers. Finding them empty, she ran over to the sink and pulled out the dressing gown.

Finding the pockets empty, and herself cornered, her eyes turned hostile. 'Where is it?'

'What?' I feigned the big-eyed, innocent expression she herself was so good at.

She huffed, rifled through the kitchen drawers, felt under the mattress, pulled the sheets to one side, patted the shelves of the wardrobe until our jerseys tumbled down. Between her and me, our place was falling into foul disorder. In the end, she found the bird on my desk. I could tell she was annoyed that it had been in open view all along. She grabbed it back, the poor loser, rubbed its cold head down to its rigid tail. She, who had let a real bird go, had the nerve to make a fuss over a fake one right to my face! Of course, it was a gift from him, the real bird was a gift from me. Just as I was at the peak of my aversion, she tried to hand it to me. I stepped back, swatting the air lest she approach me again.

She tried a hurt look and some disingenuous blinks. 'I didn't want you to find it; not yet.'

'I have no time for your foolishness. Just tell me where you bought it.'

'Found it.'

'Where?'

'I won't lie. It's true, I went out. To those trees just behind the square.'

'To those trees *just behind the square*? A good twenty-minute walk?'

'Mm, that's all.'

'Poor birdie, fell out of its nest?'

'What were the chances of me finding it that day? Of all the trees I could have lain by, of all the days there are in a life, what were the chances of me coming upon it under *that* tree, on that particular day?'

'I'd say *zero*.'

'I was led to it.'

'Elsa, I'd like you to abbreviate your charming anecdote and tell me the truth.'

'I am. It came from above.'

'God let a ceramic knick-knack fall down from the sky? I didn't know He had a liking for such things. Maybe an archangel didn't, and gave it a knock when he was dusting around with his feathered wing?'

'You're being a block-headed pragmatist. Who knows. It might've belonged to a child who dropped it. You know, a plaything. Angels carry out spiritual works, not physical. They must resort to mortal help for that.'

'You didn't want me to find it. You had no intention whatsoever of me finding it. Make a clean breast.'

'It was a surprise. You noticed the days have been getting longer? Well, I was waiting for the longest day. I feel something is in the air — a change for the better. It's a sign.'

'God went to a lot of trouble for you, used a lot of mortal assistance for you, and you hide it so your gift . . . from whom? *From God*, that's right, from the Almighty Himself, via His ambassador angels, will eventually be a surprise for *me* on the midsummer solstice? Your story stinks.'

'Oh, Johannes, I've never given you anything. I have no money. You've given me so much. Put walls up around me and a roof over my head. It was a way for me to give you a little something back, however small and insignificant. It meant a lot to me.'

The only thing I believed was she was starting to believe herself.

On the verge of tears, she made another attempt to get me to take it. 'Here, I give it to you. Please accept it.' I felt as if she were trying to get me to literally hold her lie. I pushed her hands away. 'Why did you hide the slippers I gave you? Why did you get rid of your dressing gown?'

'I was just protecting the bird. It's so pretty, I didn't want it to break. It's so fragile — look, its beak has already been damaged. Right here, did you see?'

'I don't trust you. Plenty of people are seeing you, speaking to you, enjoying you, aren't they? You pulled your own button off, didn't you? You're ready to damage anything to cover up your lies. You lied to me about your toe, too. You are nothing, Elsa, I'm sorry to say, but one great liar.'

'I had to lie, you gave me no choice! You kept insisting on my feet being cold — if you had just let it go! You force me to lie! You never can handle the truth! You're like a dog that bites a branch and can't let go, even if it means hanging itself!'

I carried her to the bed, where I demanded to know who she'd seen.

She pursed her lips, feigning incomprehension. 'I didn't speak to anyone. I walked till I reached those trees, looked through the leaves, saw the sky, walked back.'

'The truth!'

'The cars; I noticed the cars had changed.'

'Elsa,' I begged. 'Tell me!'

'I didn't look.'

'You don't have to look to see. What did your peripheral vision tell you?'

'I saw all those who should have been and weren't. I saw gaps and spaces until I couldn't see.'

'You weren't blind. You were able to walk.'

'I didn't look. If I looked, I would have seen that I was seen.'

'In whose bed did you lie?'

'A bed of leaves.'

'It was Beyer, wasn't it? You and he went for a roll in the hay? Behind his wife's back? Sad, aren't you, because he never came back?'

'Herr Beyer?'

'Don't play the innocent. I think you know the dirty old man I mean.'

'Who are you talking about?'

'Who? Hoefle? Campen? A total stranger?'

She put up no resistance to my shakes and, yes, I confess, slaps. 'You think you can go and get yourself poked and then come back like it was nothing? Just go off like that, open your legs, come back, mouth sealed? Tell me, was it good? Was it sensual with those leaves crunching under your back? The twigs scratching your fat arse? So fat, he's never been back to claim you? Where's his love now?'

Elsa's eyes, puffy and tired as they had been of late, were wide open in what I could have sworn was her former ignorance of the world. Cautiously, as if to test the truth — but also as if to stay on the safe side by making it sound as if she was only telling me what I wanted to hear so I'd stop hurting her — she replied, 'I might have met with Harold before. If I did, it was a while back. We never talked. We didn't have to. He felt everything. It didn't last. Not long. I wish it had never happened. Anyway, it's gone and past.' Her words gained weight. 'But this once, I met with God.'

Harold was Beyer's first name. I had her confession! He whom I'd half suspected I now fully hated.

That night I dreamt that Elsa ran towards me with the ceramic bird cupped in her hands, screaming that it was pecking her — please, help her! She dropped it in mine, and, looking at it more closely, I noticed the beak was broken off at the base, leaving behind it a smooth, white spot that gave it a harmless, open-mouthed expression. Without a beak, the creature didn't look like a bird any more but a fish. Just as I was thinking that, having no beak, it could not possibly have been pecking her, so I'd caught her red-handed lying again, a stabbing pain went straight through my heart. I realised that the bird had pecked me there, leaving its beak behind like a thorn, and I would die within the hour.

I changed the lock so she couldn't open the door on her own. This right would be reserved to the keeper of the key. She watched me with that cursed borderline smile of hers, particularly when the key got stuck so I

feared it would break if I forced it. I went downtown for some grease and had just walked out of the hardware store when someone tapped me on my shoulder. It took some effort for me to place the face. It was the architect, looking haggard. For a second, I expected a blow.

'Where'd you disappear to? I searched every hotel on the Ring! The new, the old! No one's ever heard of you.'

I babbled that my project hadn't worked out.

'Where do you live, then?'

I was cautious saying only, 'Buchengasse.'

'What did you mean leaving all your junk behind? I'm not responsible for your artwork! If you need storage, you have to pay for it!'

'I thought if you liked it you'd keep it, and if you didn't you'd toss it out.'

'Toss it out? A hundred cubic metres of it? You know how much that would cost? It's not for me to pay! You know how long it would take just carrying that junk up and outside?'

'I'm sorry; I didn't realise it would be such an inconvenience. If you like, I'll come and get it all by the end of the week.'

'By the end of the week? You're coming with me right now!' He caught me by the sleeve.

'Impossible! A member of my family is unwell.'

'That's not my goddamn problem.'

'What do you expect me to do on my own? I have to arrange some friends to help me.' As I wriggled to extract my arm from his grip, he felt something that made him let go instantly. He'd forgotten about this handicap of mine. He calmed down.

'How do I know you're not going to sneak away like last time? No telephone, no way to reach you?'

'It wasn't my fault the hotel never went up.'

'I need to know what day. And don't trifle with me.'

'Friday. Friday afternoon.'

'I expect more than thanks for having stored them so many months.'

'You'll get it.'

'And I don't mean some tip. I could've rented that space out. I could've turned it into a photographer's darkroom. You're going to have to do some multiplying on your fingers before you have any idea what I've lost.'

'You'll get it. You have my word. Friday. Please, Herr . . .'

'Hampel.'

'Excuse me, Herr Hampel. Let us please not discuss figures in the streets.'

He scrutinised me, trying to decide whether he could trust me, before backing off.

I called after him, 'By the way, how's the house?'

I walked around town, not remembering why I'd come. I was oblivious to the bag in my hand and the hint it contained. I felt eyes on me and recognised Petra and Astrid, the yellow raincoats they were wearing. Were they behind the architect finding me? Were they behind the card games? I ducked behind some shoppers, but didn't throw them off. The chase crossed several quarters. They changed their coats to fool me — that's what they'd been hiding in those big shopping bags. I came up behind them and poked their backs. It wasn't Petra and Astrid, not at all: it was an adolescent girl holding hands with her mother.

By then I realised I'd lost my bearings. My surroundings looked familiar yet alien, as if they didn't belong to that time or place on earth any more. Shiny, metallic structures towered over the city's older houses. It looked as if the banks were made out of the coins they'd collected, melted down, the highest belonging to the banks that had collected the most. Cars were driving about the city with queer pastel wings growing out of them. A dozen vehicles were stopped at every red light, blocking a good forty metres of many streets. The exhaust fumes made me light-headed, the noise

of their engines killed the sweeter sounds of pigeons murmuring, autumn leaves whispering, the Danube moving silently along; silence being a sound, just as pauses are part of music.

The police drove me back to my block, talking between themselves about how it would be the end of the world if the two superpowers, the Soviet Union and the United States, took to dropping atom bombs on each other. One alone, and a giant mushroom would swell in the sky and an overwhelming light would sear people's shadows into walls and footpaths. The radiation would spread to us, leave our innards smouldering and warp offspring in women's wombs. It was a terrifying thought. I wanted to go home! Home! Home!

On my recognising the shoe-repair shop on the corner, they let me out and told me to go home and rest. The aspects of the area that used to displease me now comforted me: nutshells on the footpath, pipes like veins coming out of the various buildings, cooking smells exhaling from windows like warm, familiar breath.

That was until I saw the circle of people in front of our building, adults and children, all looking down in stances of gloom. I didn't even look to see whether Beyer was or wasn't there. I looked up for the mushroom, then I saw it, the window to our flat open horizontally. Friedrich was crying; his mother was telling him that everyone dies one day. I remembered I'd locked the door. I'd locked the door! It was my fault. She'd done it, my God — she'd got even with me in the worst way she could have, the very worst.

Crying out, 'Elsa!' I broke into the core of the circle.

It wasn't Elsa. It was the cat.

XXX

With her thumbs tucked into her fists like birds' heads under their wings for the night, Elsa watched the sky. She watched the first light dissolve the black to grey, then the grey to pale blue. She awaited the splotches of pink, red, orange, then took in the blues, the incoming white and grey strokes. The end of the day drew the palette away and left a blanched sketch of her own face reflected in the glass.

She explained to me what was going through her mind when I asked her, but I found that for all the thought she'd given to what she said, it lacked sense. 'See, Johannes, as I watch the sky from this window, someone else on the other side of the world or right next door is also watching it, but they have a unique view of what's within their own frame. Other planets have skies, too, all across the universe. Every planet is a unique pearl twirling within its own bed of hues, but this piece of this sky is my life, my small part of heaven, that which was given to me. It is like God's painting to me, personally. Do you understand?'

No, I didn't.

From the lower section of the window, treetops could be seen. They, too, were integrated into her understanding of life. She watched them bud in different shades of green before God's paintbrush turned them red, orange and yellow, after which the leaves fell. She saw a relationship between the trees and the sky, both vividly coloured before dying, and the mysteries of life and death. God did not take life away; no, He simply reabsorbed His colours.

Gazing at the stars one night she woke me up to ask, 'Johannes? Do you think God evaluates a person's life divided by the number of days to come up with an average? Or does He make a graph of the person you start out as, and follow you along your life up to the person you end up being? If you went up more than you went down, would your soul have done well? Or perhaps it is only the last person you are that counts? You know, nothing at

all cumulative? You have to get to a certain high point by the end of the game. Would that be fair?'

I was at my wits' end.

Some hours later, in broad daylight, she called for me so wildly I came running out of the bathroom, my trousers around my knees, thinking she was dying, only to be asked, 'Why do you think people who don't want to die never suffer over the time that passed before they existed? Eternity goes two ways, into the past and the future. Why do you think they only want to go forward, but they never crave to go back? In this sense we were all already dead. Eternally dead, going back the other way!'

Outside, I could hear cars and motorcycles going by at high speeds; downstairs, the Campens fighting over the length — or rather the shortness — of their daughters' skirts, which indecently exposed their knees when they sat. Overhead, jets flew by on the hour. But Elsa didn't live in this modern world. To her, sky led to sky, thought to thought. To her way of thinking, she wasn't immobile. She was moving as fast as the world rotated, doing gigantic somersaults through space. But ordinary people like me never felt the great ride they were taking.

I had no leisure for such idiocy. My days were occupied with paperwork, worry, housework. I had received a note in my mailbox informing me of the next owners' meeting. The thought of sitting with them all around the Hoefles' kitchen table was so distasteful I had decided not to attend. Some days later I opened a letter that knocked my socks off. The owners had voted to whitewash the sooty black that car exhausts had progressively left on our façade. This was futile, since the neighbouring building had done the same, only to have it turn black again. They had also voted to take advantage of the scaffolding to redo the roof. It was a plot to get rid of me by presenting me with a bill I couldn't pay.

If that wasn't enough, I opened a letter from the architect's lawyer, billing me for eleven months of storage since November 1955. Stapled to this was an estimate of the municipal fees to do away with the 'waste'. The next page itemised the detective's fees for finding my address, since having no telephone, my name wasn't listed in the telephone book. The last page was a

detailed account of the lawyer's fees. The letter threatened court action if I didn't pay within thirty days. He'd included a letter that Herr Hampel was forwarding to me. Its postmark was a fortnight old and it bore the sticker I'd seen once before: E. Affelbaum, from New York. This time it was addressed to me rather than my parents. Having no desire for any more headaches, I dropped it in the collective bin.

I couldn't sleep in the same room as Elsa any longer. Her gentle, rhythmic breathing was like an instrument of torture, painfully stretching a night many times past its natural length. I told her it was because I had work to do, I didn't want the light to disturb her, I was coming down with the flu, didn't want her to catch it, it was too hot to sleep next to her, she made my legs sweat, and quite soon I didn't have to give her any excuse: it had become a habit, we were sleeping in two beds. (By habit I use the word 'bed' — in fact mine was a row of pillows.)

Those nights my life fluttered through my head in fragments like a thousand puzzle pieces. Disconnected memories came back to me, each one lodged irrationally in the next. The years that had passed since the family deaths weighed down on me. I would just be falling asleep when some girl I'd once known at primary school and long since forgotten popped into my mind. I would wake up with my heart pounding, wondering what had become of her. I could spend the next hours making plans as to how to get in touch with her again. It struck me as so urgent, I couldn't live a day longer without knowing. With the arrival of day, she was forgotten and the mental drama I had gone through seemed harebrained.

There was nothing rational to my insomnia. I turned from side to side, missing our old house as if it were a living part of me brutally amputated. I came up with infallible ways to catch whoever was in possession of Ute's violin, to re-establish my grandfather's factory with funding and apologies from the government.

I took a job in a pastry factory, partly to earn money, partly to gain breathing space from Elsa. That may seem like a peculiar notion: a factory for pastries. Machines mixed the batter, let it drip into the moulds that later received another drip, which would sink to become its filling. Then they

moved on to the massive ovens. Five metres after they had been cooled down by powerful fans, they were squirted with pink icing. I found it an insult to our traditional Viennese *Punschkrapfen* to give these mechanical products the same name. Each *Punschkrapfen* was exactly the same as the one before and the one after — no bigger, no smaller. Nothing like the pastries made by a caring baker's hand.

We workers supervised the machines. Sometimes the belt would get stuck or an avalanche of icing would come out. My function was to verify that six intact pastries were nested in each plastic container before closing the lid, and that none was missing its paper doily, to which it would soon be stuck. The worker after me would secure the lid with tape. The next would stick on the fancy label.

It was hellish. It felt as if I was working hard to stay poor. If I hadn't previously gone to the bank and mortgaged the flat to cover my debts, I would have quit ten times the first month. I found myself envying Elsa, who'd never known such toil, such grim people. From the three seated closest to me, I never received so much as a nod in response to my greetings. I thought it was because no one could hear me over the machinery, so one morning I initiated a handshake. My hand remained suspended in the air, receiving from one only the limpest contact I'd ever experienced. Considering the stickiness of the few fingers she'd used, that was reluctant indeed.

After having time away enough to miss her, I found Elsa a joy to come home to. My only joy. I gave her books, the boring kind she liked with all the footnotes, but since Karl had fallen off the roof she'd stopped reading. Contemplation got her to the same truths without tiring her eyes. Her chronic apathy drove me to pull newspapers out of the old stacks in the workers' lounge and leave them lying around at home. I was hoping they would do my job for me; expose my lies so there'd be no turning back. Reality would jolt her out of her depression and then I would deal with her myself. I still remember the sensation of nervousness in my limbs all day at the factory, and my heart sinking every time I thought about it. The first thing I did straight back from work was look to see if they were where I'd left them. They were. She didn't want the papers to do the job for me.

Wracking my brains for something to help her, I brought her home a calendar whose winter months had pictures of igloos no bigger than our bathroom. The men went hunting, the women stayed home, never knowing whether they'd be back, for the polar bears were merciless. I rubbed an ice cube along the back of her neck, asked her to imagine that was the floor of her home. She closed her eyes, actually made a snorting noise that could have been a chuckle. This encouraged me. I ran for a bowl of chilly water, dipped her hand in it, telling her to imagine it was the roof of her house if she fell asleep before putting the fire out. I told her about the aurora borealis, the sun rising and setting one hour later in winter, its shining all night in summer, darkness only a blink. She was listening to me! Her fists awakened, came back to life.

The next morning I left the refrigerator door open, substituted our table and chairs with leather coats thrown down on the tiles, offered her a bite of dry haddock. She bit, but took more time to swallow. She accepted the journey, grew familiar with an Eskimo family — the daughter who didn't want to marry the boy from the igloo next door, who bored her with his bragging about killing elephant seals. She knew of their son, who dreamt of leaving Eskimo ways, earning a salary on an ocean liner, the shame of his parents. My supervisor became the dishonest chief, selling baby seals to Canadian investors, letting his people starve; my co-workers became his greedy daughters and son-in-law. Elsa was soon an Eskimo woman and I her Eskimo man! We rubbed noses before I left for work.

When she'd had enough of vast, chilly white spaces, I turned the calendar pages and brought her down to Africa. She lived with me for a week in a hut with a dirt floor. We lived on the Equator and the open oven let her know how hot that was. I could do little to relieve her thirst outside of the few drops of warm water I provided her from our leaky tap. We lived under constant threat from wild elephants, fire ants, disease; but most of all, the warriors of rival tribes. I brought home a tomtom I tapped to give a heartbeat to my tale, which took us deeper and deeper into the successive nights.

Elsa grew confused. I was telling her about a whirlpool we had to circumnavigate before reaching the Basin of Sichuan when she interrupted

to ask, 'How long ago was it that we moved from the house to this apartment?'

A week later I was ironing my shirts next to her, telling her that our boat was stuck in the muddy rice paddies of the Guangzhou Delta and we were pushing it out with leeches on our legs.

'How old am I?' she suddenly asked. She was looking at her reflection in the window, transparent, spectral.

Wanting to weasel my way out of the question with humour, I replied, 'A hundred years.'

'Where do I live?' I gave her our address. I had to repeat it, spell the street name to her twice. 'Why do I live here?' She needed to hear it all again, the same old story that was getting impossible to tell.

We flowed out of the Xi into the South China Sea, but she jeopardised our escape to ask, 'What's going on?'

Her inattention was making me cranky. 'I said, we've just reached the South China Sea. Pay attention! Above us are whirlwinds of seagulls, beyond us a storm is gathering. Behind us, bloodshed and plague.'

'I mean where we are.'

'Open water, deeper than the highest mountain is high.'

'What's going on here, Johannes, in our land?'

I chose a newspaper at random from the stacks and, after monkeying around with the pages and making faces at the titles, adopted a mock voice. "'The Cage. A barbed-wire fence is splitting a great German city in two. In places, the fence was put right in front of buildings overnight, so that when the people living there looked out in the morning to see if it was sunny or raining, they bumped their noses on their cage. The cage cut homes up into funny shapes. More than once a father and son were on one side, asking what was for breakfast, while mother and daughter on the other were busy frying them eggs. Psychologists say it's the fence itself pushing hundreds of thousands to climb over it, many of whom would stay if there were only a

chalk line on the ground. However, a border patrolman rejects this, saying, "What this country needs is a great wall like China's . . ."

Elsa waved me away with her hand.

'Fine, fine. Here's another story. Hm-hm. "*Wernher von Braun: From V-2 to Space Rocket.*"'

I hammed it up, reading the text verbatim, though I skipped lines and whole paragraphs. "'As the Soviet Army was approaching in the spring of 1945, Wernher von Braun and his team of scientists fled to surrender to the American Army. Braun's brother, a fellow rocket engineer, cried out to an American private, 'Hello! My name is Magnus von Braun! My brother invented the V-2!' On 20 June 1945 the U.S. Secretary of State approved the relocation of Braun and his specialists to America as part of Operation Paperclip, which resulted in the employment of German scientists who were formerly considered war criminals or security threats. Walt Disney's first of three TV programmes, *Man in Space*, with Wernher von Braun as technical adviser, drew an audience of over forty million. Can man survive in outer space? Is a mission to the moon far-fetched or feasible?'"

I got up and made a charade of hopping about lightly. 'You know, they say there's no gravity up there.'

She laughed and threw one of her slippers at me to make me stop.

'Can you imagine you and me dancing? For once you wouldn't have me stepping on your toes.' I danced on her mattress and made my movements more effeminate, which made her laughter redouble. 'If you think our living conditions are bad, get a load of this . . . If they send men up there, like they're planning to, all they will get to eat is dried, concentrated food. Green powder for peas, brown for meat, white for milk. You think you don't have enough space? How would you like living in a cylinder as wide as your shoulders? Every object nailed down, including your soap? You'd have to get down and rub your backside against it to get clean. The water drops from the shower would rise, so you'd have to be ready, hovering above them. If you lost hair each time you combed it, you'd look up and find a

nest on your ceiling — which would look like the underneath of an umbrella!

By then Elsa was holding her side, asking me what she would do without my crazy stories. Thus encouraged, I pointed to a third headline at random. I pretended to read: *'Man Hides Woman*. Once upon a time, there was an Austrian man who loved an Austrian woman so much, he hid her from the world, or hid the world from her, for a decade. He risked his life doing so . . . !

Elsa aimed her second slipper and behind her good play a threat glinted in her eyes.

' . . . but not the way she thought. Really, Austria had been in the hands of the victors for ten years. The city that was split in two was Berlin.'

I dared not take a breath. My heart was doing its familiar little three-step dance, faster and faster, round and round. I lifted my eyebrows high, twisted my lips to one side, pointed down and said, as comically as I could, 'Says so here.' I didn't sound funny, I sounded strenuous, nasal, like some clown trying to be funny but knowing he wasn't, and knowing the crowd knew he knew he wasn't.

Elsa, her arm still in the air, dropped her slipper. Her laughter carried a trace of bitter relief and maybe overripe deception; it was indeterminate, but for the most part it was much like her usual jittery laughter.

xxxii

The next day was a Monday. The pink pastries rattled down the belt past me, their synthetically sweet scent hitting me in the face at intervals of ten seconds. I was too habituated to seeing thousands of identical pink goodies per day to discern one from the next without giving it my utmost concentration. Whole batches could go by without my really having looked at them if I did so much as think. That day I was doing a lot of thinking. The pastries were mesmerising, pink blurry spots, followed by a clump, bump, thump, and more pink blurry spots. Then, just like that, my decision was made. I hung up my white coat and cap on the hook. I had had no nods of greeting, I would have no nods of farewell.

I was overjoyed. After so many false solutions, I had arrived at the true one. I would take Elsa thousands of kilometres away to an exotic island, but not on the flying carpet of a story this time; no, the real thing. Reality was the solution. I would sell the flat, take the money — it would be worth ten times as much in an underdeveloped land. The life we would have! I'd never have to work again. The sun would shine on us, the sea sparkle around us, the palm trees toss their cool, shaggy heads above us. Elsa would be ecstatic when I told her, just as she would when she dug her feet deep in the warm, real sand. Our new lives would rejuvenate us. There were many places like that left in the world. What was I waiting for? What was I still doing in Austria? I had no family to keep me back, no roots binding me to my homeland. Why hadn't I thought of this possibility before?

I thumbed through catalogues at a travel agency. If anything, the choice was too big, the world too wide. There were the Polynesian islands — just their names made me dream: Rurutu, Apataki, Takapoto; Makemo, the Caribbeans, Barbados, Grenada . . . Over a thousand islands were waiting for us in the Maldives alone. There were turquoises to make one not care less where the sea stopped and the sky began, in the same way one wouldn't care any more about where his past stopped or future began: both suddenly seemed flimsy as cardboard.

The idyllic imagery, however, only buffered reality. I discovered that each island or cluster of islands was its own country. Which one would allow us to immigrate? In which would my resources have the most value?

The travel agent provided me with flight schedules, fares information, was keen to sell me tickets but couldn't answer my questions. He copied down a list of embassies and consulates. My dreams were dashed by an officer from the Dominican Republic Consulate, who told me that to travel to his country I would need two valid passports, mine and my companion's. I was told the same at the other consulates. Elsa's passport, if I could find it, was old, would long since have expired. She was only a girl in the photo. Besides, the passport had a yellow star on it. Would that attract attention if I went to renew it? How could I find out whether presenting her passport anywhere was risky or not? Was she registered on some list?

The fresh air on my face did me good as I walked home, offering new solutions. Rather than get a new passport, I could just change Elsa's photo. I could alter the expiry date with a black pen. If that got us out of the country — she could hold her fingers over the star — would anyone on far-flung Takapoto Island know what the star meant? I doubted it. They might even take it as some diplomatic honour.

My sense of victory was short-lived. What if they checked our passports here at Schwechat Airport before we left? I had to get home to think more clearly. There was no turning back. If worst came to worst, I could hide her in a suitcase. But this time we were going far away — she could die. As I climbed up the stairs I thought of all sorts of other risks. I was taken aback when my key met a gap in the door. The wood had been gnawed out. My first thought was that we'd been robbed, and that the robbers now knew of Elsa. Before it dawned on me that they wouldn't have thought a thing of finding a woman in an apartment, I realised Elsa was gone.

At that moment I knew I'd be put behind bars, condemned to live without her. Would she come with the police so I could at least give her my version? That was the worst I could imagine: not being able to have one last talk with her. I wouldn't know where she lived, what she was doing, what she thought or felt. If only I'd spilled it all out before, maybe with it in the back

of her head, wherever she went, whoever she met, however life treated her, she would have my arguments with her.

I told myself it wasn't fair. She was as guilty as I! I had no proof, but I knew she knew! Every time it was on my lips to tell her, she'd thrown herself at me, warned me off, physically suppressed my words. And in doing so, kept all the blame on me! It couldn't have always been coincidence. It wasn't all in my mind. She'd been outside. She had to know. Lord, it would be her word against mine! I condemned my youthful errors, my cowardice, until soon I found myself hoping the police would hurry up and take me away. Being in our home without her made no sense. I'd at least have a room in prison, and be fed.

Then a ferocious will to survive overtook me. I had a chance of escaping before they came. Hitch-hiking, I could reach Italy in a day, and take the next boat to South America, Timbuktu, who cared where? Anything would be better than what was in store for me here. I rammed my belongings into a sack, looked to my desk for a picture of Elsa to take. There were my grandparents, parents, sister, but not Elsa. I'd never needed a picture of her, for she'd always been there.

Two flights down, I rushed back up to scribble a note for the police to pass on to her. Looking for the right words, I had a troubling thought. What if she came back? What if she needed me? She had no money, no one else to care for her. Would anyone even believe her story? Would she go on living here without me, waiting for me? Would that be allowed? What if she were kicked out? What if she had only gone to play cards downstairs? Or talk to that scamp Beyer? What if she had meant no harm wherever she had gone?

I was torn, each version offering its own hopes and perils. If I were caught because of this far-fetched hope, I'd consider myself an ass. Yet however small the possibility that *just maybe* she might come back, if she did and I missed out on it because I'd escaped to another continent, it would be my life's regret. Then again, I'd never know what happened. But I'd wonder about it until it drove me crazy. I had to know the end of the story. I undid my sack and, after tarrying, returned the contents to their places.

Daylight was waning. I didn't have the heart to turn on a light. I lay under the window and stared at the sky. What great truths did she see? I imagined her walking freely, hands swinging, buttocks seesawing, knowing she risked absolutely nothing, chuckling at the scare she'd give me. I saw her with her bust leaning heavily forward in her resolute manner, eyebrows creased, crossing the park, stopping the first person she met to ask for explanations to her unsettled notions.

I saw a widower on a park bench, throwing crumbs to the pigeons as she sat down, her hands folded like a good little girl on her lap. He and she would grant each other the easy confidences one does strangers. Any lies she could come up with would be more believable than what had really happened. She'd just left her husband who was drinking, cheating on her. He would take her into his home, talk to her about his deceased wife. Months would pass before she trusted him enough to tell him about me.

I saw the young people she would feverishly question. Was Adolf Hitler still alive? They would edge away from her, thinking she was deranged. She would misinterpret this fear for fear of the totalitarian regime. These young people were my only chance. But I also saw the police officer she'd open her heart to.

The night was interminable. There were as many stories as the millions of stars I gazed upon. How could I choose the right one? Maybe she felt prison was too easy a punishment. Perhaps that was why she needed time to think, to come up with a plan, her and her accomplice. I saw her sneaking back in to pour petrol over our property, throw a match on her way out. I saw a man come in her defence, take vengeance into his own hands. I saw her appearing at the door, shy, artless: she'd just gone for a walk, please would I forgive her, beckoning me for a kiss with my old pocket-knife opened behind her back.

Morning came, ripened into noon, and still she didn't come. What was harder to believe was that neither did the police. For the first time it occurred to me that I might have reason to worry. Someone might have kidnapped her: Beyer, the architect, his detective, Petra and Astrid, Madeleine, Max Schulz, whoever the deuce E. Affelbaum was, far-off

relatives of hers, Nathan's ghost . . . No, it was the Owners' Association! Knowing I wasn't home, they'd carved out the lock. Maybe she had banged on the door for help. Then the worst hypothesis grew out of my imagination. I saw the first man she'd come across. Finding her to his liking, he'd confirm everything she said I had said, everything she wanted to hear, assure her it was perfectly true. He'd take her to his place in order to keep her for himself. Didn't everyone need their secret Elsa?

I didn't know how Elsa could have stood it so long under that window; time slowed to such an extent it stopped. I twiddled my thumbs, my real one with the one I still imagined. Did I really believe she'd come back? Each pointed to one possibility, this one or that, right or left, take your pick, wrong or right, truth or lie, real or imagined. Twiddle, twaddle, twiddle, twaddle, until I was dizzy guessing between perfectly equal possibilities.

I had nothing more to sell. Ready cash became a forgotten memory. I had nothing in my pockets, nothing in any account, not even for a badly needed bottle of beer. I applied for some odd jobs but that actually cost me. Paper, envelopes, carbon paper, postage all added up. I descended to the streets and offered to wash two businessmen's cars for a coin. They accepted my offer. I washed their cars for a coin. Fair enough, a deal was a deal. Old ladies were less willing to accept my services, even for a coin, although I maintained that carrying their groceries or walking their dogs for them could have been mutually beneficial. Their refusals, clutching their handbags so their knuckles turned white, were more humiliating than the two businessmen's combined effort to produce a single coin.

I was left with one solution, the brainchild of panic and petty vengeance, and that was to sell one of the two rooms. It took some careful weighing to decide which one I would part with, hers or mine. Hers had the bathroom, mine the kitchenette, which meant that thereafter I'd be obliged to either wash in my kitchenette or cook in her bathroom. Both were impractical but I found the latter less downgrading. I didn't have the funds to hire a mason, nor did I have the trust of the bank to lend me this last vital amount. So with bricks and mortar I obtained thanks to a private American company's 'credit

card', a foreign practice considered disreputable in conservative Austria, I built the wall that was to separate the two. It took four days to produce a straight, solid-looking wall.

The Hoefles' young maid bought the one-room flat, but, before signing, imposed a last-minute condition on me. I was to put up a wall and knock down part of another to create a hallway linking the bathroom to the landing, and, in doing so, block off access to it from my room, thus turning it into a community bathroom for both households. I had no choice and she knew it. I now had to go out of what was left of my only room to use my own bathroom. More often than not I lay in bed with a full bladder, lacking the will to get up.

What was more, I rapidly came to suspect that I was on display within that cube. Though no one knew of my existence, I was known on some universal level — a specimen of modern man, a human curiosity. I couldn't do anything any more without feeling I was being watched. My cube shrank. I was reduced to a tiny person. I had the corner I slept in, the corner I ate in, the corner I groomed myself in, complete with the small white sink I drank from and washed in. The cube turned into a cage, and someone immense was watching me. I sensed the presence of a great, unfailing eye peering into my sole skylight, night and day. Was it my idea of God?

I lost all feeling of home. I was in Elsa's cage. Yes, Elsa was the one who had taken me in. I was in her territory, having none left of my own. Her walls were too white, asking me for a story I didn't have any more, a stroke I could no longer master. White, too much white — I had to get away. I hid myself in the wardrobe until the truth could not get away any more. It slammed me in the face every way I turned. She'd kept me closed in, she'd been the one to hold me in, to torture me, to force me into the equivalent of her old nook. She'd taken pleasure in watching the truth ferment in me until my soul festered! Then the moment it burst out like a lifelong abscess just pricked, and I had a chance to heal, what did she do but find another instrument of torture. No 'go to the devil', no punch in the old pucker, just flappity flap flap! Fearing all the ifs, praying for all the maybes, until condemned to this nook to rot and decay.

I knocked the metal doors out of their oiled tracks and limped out into the street. Every lit window I passed I looked into. No, no, she'd only played along for my sake, out of gratitude. She'd never been closed in; she'd had a life of her own, got around, had her card games and lovers. And I, for her sake, hadn't wanted to see it. I'd looked the other way, whistling like a fool to help her live her double life.

Cursing, guzzling from a bottle, kicking garbage cans, I scrutinised each passerby. People crossed the road whenever I got near. So where was her old lover boy? I'd beat him to a pulp yet! She wasn't going to get out of it so easily. She was going to have to tell me a thing or two to my face! No more lying!

'You hear?' I grabbed a man who was walking my way.

'Paws off, you drunken bum!' He punched me in the guts and I staggered back.

Drink, I needed more. The potent spirits to rock my body like the seventh sea. What did it matter when she'd disappeared? Weeks ago because she was fed up with me. So many years ago, my knife meeting her throat. My mother suffocating her under the floorboards before sending her remains off to who knew where. That fatal hour she'd swallowed that oily rainbow of toxic paint. What if my mother had let her escape to New York and she'd stood at the prow, an escort of dolphins below like silver needles sewing the surface? What difference would it make to me if she'd died or just run away? She was as good as dead. No, worse than dead: she, her life, lived on without me.

I'd lived all those years with a ghost. Her spirit came to punish me before it somersaulted back into thin air. Thin air. Fat as she'd grown! Ha!

I dragged myself along the road. Elsa and I were still connected in some strange way. The thinner I became, the heavier her side grew. If we considered ourselves one, a unified whole, we never lost or gained matter, it just shifted from one side to another. It was an oddity, but it was true: we were welded together, compound, indivisible.

I stumbled back into the building, past the mailboxes, mine with all the envelopes sticking out of it like a mouthful of broken teeth. I didn't get far before my foot caught one of the plants and I lost my balance. The wall began to dance a drunken farandole around me. Out of breath, I caught sight of myself in the mirror. I stood there, entangled in leaves, my skin deadened with hard drink and cracking in contorted lines of sorrow so that it reminded me of bark. My spine stiffening like wood, pains in the soles of my feet as if roots were pushing their way out. All that was left of my eyes was two knots, both over a rotted hollow. My mouth was open in agony.

She'd asked for the truth. I'd given it to her. No! The truth itself was a lying notion! A man who dreams he's being hunted isn't safe and sound in his bed. A man is where his spirit is. If he lived a base life with one woman but had another woman locked up in his heart the whole while, she was the only one he loved. The only one he really shared his life with. The most secret, powerful gift given to a man isn't life, but the capacity to snip at it in his mind, trim it in his heart, cultivate all the branches that should have been and were given life within the nicks in his will, the cuts of his soul. This is where the tree of life is hidden, grafted in each and every man.

It was high time to empty this bottle — and not down my guzzle but down the toilet. Finish with drink! Get cleaned up! Pick up all the dirty clothes, empty bottles, sticky cans! Why didn't I check the mail? Whatever she might have written, however much it hurt, I deserved it. Bad news had to be taken by the horns if one ever expected to bring it to its knees. The answers were perhaps there if only I'd sober up.

Was the situation as hopeless as I made it out to be? Why was I waiting around like a lump on a log for her to make the first move? It was long overdue for me to act like a man! Why, I would win her back if I had to search every house and flat in Vienna to find her, then convince her to give me a second chance . . . I'd go to America if I had to, to that insane maze they call New York. Climb up that skyscraper, high as heaven on my knees, knock at that thousandth door. E. Affelbaum . . . Scoop her up. Carry her away. But not by force, or ever again by lies. By the force of my feelings! The truth of my resolutions! My new leaf! Leaves! Why didn't I put the truth in writing? She could read it and judge for herself. Surely, such an

effort would prove my love? I could scatter the leaves across Vienna and New York if I had to. Someone would happen upon her, someone would know who I meant. Even if that didn't find her, I'd still be left with some essence of her in my hand.

In confining reality, feelings and memory to words, I could at least capture the truth of her, of me, of us, house it forever in black and white. And maybe it would work to discover, to uncover her. It takes a good fight to unearth any drop of happiness in this life, doesn't it? Even trees have to force their roots through rock, don't they? Dig deep to get a poor drop of water? Bend with the winds of reality? Sink three-quarters of their structure into the grimy old truth? And there is no such thing as clean soil!

I'd wasted enough time already. There was a stack of paper and a typewriter to be bought. The whole truth to transcribe. Whatever the effort. What more was there to lose? My last room? No more roof, no more family, I'd only be that much closer to her as I roamed the streets of the world. No, I could get her back again if I fought the battle to the end. By God, I swear I could offer her a deeper relationship, a better life, a new home under the tangy citrus sun. I could fly her down to those islands wagging like a happy tail off the tip of Florida! Buy us a pink trailer so we could go bridge over bridge from island to island for the rest of our days. Like turtles — didn't she say that herself once? Our house right on our backs. A new true blue sky, blossoming sunrise and sunset like a great ever-renewing flower, interlocked for good, letting ourselves wander one blissfully slow step at a time under our thousand birds' songs, two-headed, four-armed, four-legged silhouettes of happiness . . .

I've written all and reread only for purposes of verification. The words sometimes seem to have taken a direction of their own, made me say more than I perhaps should have for the sake of propriety, but perhaps that is old-fashioned. There are scenes I left out, for they seemed outside some core I was trying to hold on to. I simply wrote, and this is what came, and it had a life of its own, as imperfect and dreamy and mutilated as our memories. I think the genuineness of my love, however, can be seen through the empty

white bars between the lines, like a sad primate at a zoo. Tired as I am with lack of sleep, I've never been so awake. I open my fist. May my hope, ever the same, take flight with the force of an autumn army of seeds.

CAGING

CHRISTINE LEUNENS



SKIES

