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## THE WATER CASTLE

By Linda Frazee Baker ©

*Affreuse condition de l'homme! il n'y a pas un de ses  
bonheurs qui ne vienne d'une ignorance quelconque.*

*O miserable condition of man! All our moments of happiness  
come from one kind of ignorance or another.*

--Balzac, *Eugénie Grandet*

I

HERMANN

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On Friday morning, Dr. Bartelsmann's assistant, with whom he had for some months now been having an affair, suddenly dropped a tray with a set of newly taken X-rays and ran down a narrow hallway to the kitchen. As the dentist stood in the kitchen door, she slashed repeatedly at her wrists with the ridged end of a small can opener—a seemingly harmless device apparently quite capable of drawing blood.

"Can you believe it?" said Fritz, who owned a watch-and-clock shop next door. It was late afternoon now, and he was telling the story to his friend Hermann Gluck. They had been friends since childhood and, as always on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, Hermann had stopped by on the way home from his engineering practice.

"They actually called an ambulance—not that the stretcher bearers knew what to do when they got here. And meanwhile poor old Frau Leimbach is sitting in the examining room, her mouth open for her last wisdom tooth to be extracted when suddenly this nonsense breaks out."

Outside on the Ringstrasse, horns beeped and brakes screeched as small, newly washed cars whirled by, somehow managing to miss one another despite an apparent absence of traffic rules. It was a late August afternoon, just that time of year when everyone in northern Europe is promenading through the streets to take in the last of the summer sun. Even here in Rudelsheim, a little town on the north German plain on which armies had swept back and forth for centuries, the human desire to enjoy life could not be contained. Young girls holding hands strolled over the cobblestones, their three-quarter length black skirts dotted with images of tiny yellow or pink flowers billowing out in the warm air. Shops that had sold fur coats in the winter were now dispensing an array of ice creams thoughtfully brought by Italians to their less fortunate neighbors in the North. All the usual ices and northern flavors were there along with others more exotic, like *Málaga* and *Rum Rosinen*, redolent with lemon zest, raisins, and unknown, almost cloyingly sweet liqueurs.

And all the while the two men continued to sit wordless in a half-darkened room inhabited by clocks and watches of all possible types and times.

With a silence he hoped Fritz would mistake for agreement, Hermann reached

across the table and poured himself some more Fachinger, the mineral water he liked to have with his bread and cheese. Trying to seem normal, he decided to ask a question. But to his horror a high squeaky voice came out that didn't sound at all like his own.

"The dentist is of course married?"

Fritz laughed, his portly frame shaking like the red currant jelly used in making *Linzertorten*.

"Very happily married from all appearances. No doubt the assistant wants him to divorce. They always do. Although I don't think he cares a rap about her, really. It's just propinquity—the mother of all evils."

Hermann raised the mineral water to his lips, sipped, choked, and dribbled water down the front of his perfectly pressed shirt.

For in truth he was in the dentist's plight twice over.

For almost a year now Hermann had kept a mistress in the Engelstrasse, Nikki, the Alsatian secretary at his engineering firm. Lately he had begun to think things might even come to marriage. This, of course, would necessitate divorcing Irene—an unthinkable thought. Some weeks earlier he had arranged an outing in which he and Nikki would some of his lifelong friends from school days. He had told Nikki the idea was to see the famous Water-Castle only a short ways down the river from the new development where his friends Käthe and Jürgen lived. But in truth, he wanted to how Nikki would get on in his social circle.

Oh what evil impulse had let him to stop off at Käthe and Jürgen's on his way home last Tuesday after seeing Fritz! If only it hadn't been Jürgen's afternoon to grade the exam in Modern European History at the Gymnasium where he and Käthe taught! If only their son Willi hadn't been out at his soccer practice! If only he hadn't acceded to Käthe's pleas for a little picnic down by the river! And really: why should it be his problem if Jürgen hadn't made love to Käthe for over a year? Whatever was wrong between them had nothing to do with him. He hadn't meant anything to happen, let alone taking a second mistress when one was clearly too many, and now—

*Perhaps they will murder each other*, he thought with a shiver. *Nikki and Käthe*.

Or did he mean Nikki and Irene? Or, worst of all and most likely, Irene and Käthe? Irene had always disliked Käthe. He could feel himself beginning to tremble all over. At once he ran his fingers through the soft, wavy brown curls of his hair, which he cut himself and of which he was inordinately proud.

Just then an old brown cuckoo clock flew open over the front door of the shop, and the wooden bird began its shrill mechanical crow. One by one, the gold carriage clocks on the shelf over the Rolexes and the cheap Japanese watches joined in.

"Good grief, Fritz," said Herman as a bead of sweat travelled slowly down the ridge of his nose, resting briefly at the end before dropping off. "What an awful noise that cuckoo clock makes. What do you keep it for? Surely you can afford something more up to date."

"Well sure, I can do something if you want to buy it."

Fritz grinned in that easy way that had won him so many mistresses when he was young and of which Hermann had not a little envy. Then an expression of concern passed over Fritz's smooth, round face.

"Hermann, is everything OK with you? You seem a bit out of sorts."

Hermann looked down into the slow, regular bubbles of his Fachinger as if there the answer was to be found. He could see no way out of the meeting between Nikki and Käthe without arousing the suspicion of everyone, by everyone. Only 21 hours remained before they would be together.

He brushed together the trail of bread crumbs, cheese bits, and caraway seeds now scattered willy-nilly across the old wooden bread board. Above his rimless glasses, he felt a bit of moisture—a fever? some unknown, obscure, perhaps fatal disease? Little drops of perspiration clustered, then multiplied in the high furrows of his forehead. His heart began a series of brisk, erratic thumps like a rabbit in a wire cage. How could it be that here he was sitting with Fritz in the watch-and-clock shop as if nothing had happened? Everything looked as it always did: the absurd cuckoo clock, the Rolexes silent below the glass, the Japanese watches, the little midafternoon meal. But inside himself, inside—ah, there everything had changed.

The clocks ticked, loudly and not all at the same instant. Should he say something? The silence felt odd, or at least odd to him. Surely it was important to keep up appearances, especially now.

"Ah--you go to him--for your teeth? The dentist, I mean."

To his relief, Hermann's voice came out at its usual pitch.

Fritz frowned.

"Oh goodness no. I go to Kramer--you know, over on the *Schlautstrasse*. But really, Hermann, what difference does it make?"

Hermann took a large white handkerchief from his pocket, wiped his forehead, and sighed a slow, small sigh.

"I just meant, it would be awkward for you if you did. I mean, whatever would you say when you saw him?"

"What would I say?"

Fritz laughed again, and his laugh had an unpleasant quality that Hermann had never noticed before.

"Why, the same thing I say when I see him now--'Good day, Dr. Bartelsmann.' Or 'Good evening' depending. Good grief man, what else would I say?"

Fritz took cut himself a piece of the cheese, put it on a slice of bread, and began to eat, leaving a trail of crumbs all the way from the breadboard to the table's edge. With some difficulty, Hermann resisted the desire to sweep them up. His obsessive neatness, while useful in his engineering practice, was one of the parts of his personality he would change if he could.

"I say, Fritz, you don't think she'll really--I mean, the dentist's assistant--do you--?"

"Oh, for heaven's sakes, man. Women aren't half such fools as they make themselves out to be. These things have a way of arranging themselves."

And Fritz sniffed as if to remind Hermann that of the two of them, it was Fritz who had been the ladies' man when they were young.

"Oh is that so?" said Hermann. "You are quite sure?"

His voice was completely normal now. Even his heartbeat was once more as slow and predictable as the bubbles rising endlessly in the bottle of Fachinger before him.

Yet he was sorry he had spoken, for his response, or at least the fervor of it, made no sense. Perhaps after all he should tell Fritz the truth—Fritz, who knew so much more about these things than he. Perhaps Fritz would have an idea of what Hermann should do. But his fear of what his friend might say stopped him. And then, too, there was the unfortunate business of Fritz's marriage which was, if anything, even more unhappy than his own.

"Don't worry, old man," Fritz said. "Women are not at all as stupid as they appear."

"Not at all," said Hermann politely, as if they had been discussing the weather.

And for the first time in all the years he had known his friend, he wondered just what Fritz had meant exactly.

The next day, alas, dawned hot and sunny. So there was no reason Hermann could think of not to go out to Käthe and Jürgen's. Sooner than he would have believed possible, he and Nikki were in the old white Ford station wagon for the drive out on the A 54. The new five-story apartment houses at the outskirts of the city, then the grassy horse farms, the countryside empty of everything saved jeweled grass—all passed quickly before his eyes as in a dream.

His heart gave an occasional skip followed by a thud as he heard himself talking nonsense. How he had been up late again with insomnia, how he had gone out in the morning to get the fresh breakfast rolls before his wife had woken up; how he had scrubbed all the stairs in their apartment building that morning since it was their turn. Which he had forgotten all about, until Irene, wrapped in her bathrobe and bad temper, had suddenly reminded him. Scrubbing, he had thought, "So! That is all she has to say

to me now. As if I was the maid, or the errand boy!"

Nikki hunched forward to look in the glove compartment for the tape she had put there, a tape by the Alsatian songstress Patricia Kaas. Nikki's dark hair, cut in short wispy strips, half-hid her pale, thin face. She had come from the same part of world as Patricia Kaas, her father too had been a miner, and it was her favorite tape. But alas, at the moment it was nowhere to be found.

"Oh don't worry," said Hermann. "It'll turn up."

As he chattered on in his new high-pitched voice, hardly knowing what he was saying, he could see how Nikki was watching the placid, sunlit countryside unfold before them. She was watching, he thought, as if it was merely one more gift, like the flat in the *Engelstrasse* he had found for her, or the long, flame-shaped earrings made of peacock's tails. And as he stole an occasional, fleeting glance out of the corner of his eye, he felt a familiar thrill. His happiness. What was anything worth next to that?

"So Hermann, tell me again who these people you are taking me to visit on the way to the Water-Castle?"

Nikki spoke in her German almost without accent yet not quite right either.

"Oh, old friends."

Hermann congratulated himself on his heartiness, which did not sound false or if so, not very much.

"We were all at the gymnasium and then university together--Käthe and Jürgen her husband and my friend Fritz and his wife." He tried to smile, but it came out as a grimace. " Käthe and Jürgen teach in the Gymnasium on *Dietrich-von-Bonhoeffer Street*. Jürgen teaches history and Käthe French--so, you see, you can have something to talk about with Käthe. She reads Anais Nin, you know. Their son, Willi, is thirteen, just at the awkward age, very shy. While we're there, I'll take him out on the river for the kayak lesson I promised. They are always busy, Käthe and Jürgen, always finding out the latest thing, always totally planned out."

And then he stopped, remembering that Käthe was not--at least, not at the moment--totally planned out for Tuesdays and Fridays between 3 and 5, when Jürgen



was at the university library doing research on his long-unfinished doctorate. No, Käthe was not at all planned out for that time for the next fifteen years or so, as she had made quite clear to him last week after their moment of spontaneity down by the river.

"Oh Hermann, do I have to come out all this way out here and meet all these people? Do I really have to? Can't we see the Water-Castle some other time?"

He blinked with surprise. Dare he suggest that they go back? Was there a way to do it without seeming too easily intimidated--or worse yet, downright unpredictable?

"Have to'? Why is it a 'have to,' Nikki?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said vaguely, looking away.

And despite himself, he was irritated, although his voice had softened, and he could feel himself reaching out to her almost against his will. Never had she looked more adorable. This was what she did to him, it was her very shyness that did it. He remembered the first time it had happened. It was the day he noticed that his colleague Herr Pfifferling was speaking to her in a loud, unpleasant tone perhaps—he thought—because Nikki was a foreigner. He had reassigned her to work exclusively for him then. Yet always there was something in her that escaped him, something that held back. Or was it something in him?

"Nikki, is it--"

He hesitated.

"Are you afraid of what they will think—of you, I mean? Because if it's that—"

But before he could finish, she shook her head so vigorously that the peacock feathers flapped back and forth under the wisps of her short dark hair.

"I could care less what they think" she said in that funny way he never knew how to interpret. "It's just that there's so little time and I don't suppose they're the kind of people who like Patricia Kaas--oh, Hermann."

She reached out her hand and began to stroke, ever so gently, the soft brown pompadour.

"We could have been alone, you know."

As her fingers caressed the back of his neck, he could feel himself go faint. It

humbled him, that she could love a pompous, awkward engineer such as himself. How had such luck befallen him?

He would concede now. He would call Käthe from a phone booth and say that the car had broken down. But all at once he remembered that he had taken the Patricia Kaas tape out of the glove compartment because he really did not like any music that loud. His hands on the wheel began to tremble slightly out of fear that Nikki would divine this minor piece of treachery and cease to love him.

Nikki pulled her hand back and rested it gently on his arm.

"Well, I suppose it's for the best if I meet these people you talk so much about. I am curious sometimes. About the other parts of your life, I mean."

His heart had begun its erratic leaps again, this time from dismay. How had this happened? She had shown him the way out and now the moment had passed to take it.

"Really, Nikki. It's OK. We can go back if you want to."

Nikki shook her head, and the feather earrings shook with it.

"No, I want to meet them. It is what you Germans call an opportunity, no? Besides, we are here already."

And so they were, in front of Käthe and Jürgen's house in a new subdivision, on the *Pfortengasse*.

The freshly whitewashed house, made of the latest materials and designs, was so new it still smelled of plastic and finishing. It was surrounded by identical houses at a discreet distance from one another, all positively gleaming under the August sun. Indeed, their brightness hurt Hermann's eyes as he peered out at the world from behind the rimless glasses. They were far outside Rudelsheim now, in the region beloved made famous by its river, blue and small, with gently cresting waves--and even more beloved for its many Water-Castles, each a unique shape and size and all from a time in history so long ago no one feared to remember it.

The damp emerald grass rubbed softly against Hermann's feet as, sandals in hand, he and Nikki approached the patio. Käthe and Jürgen were just finishing their

morning coffee and newspaper. How everything sparkled, from the spotless tiled floor to the white umbrella over the circular table! Käthe, in a pair of unbecoming shorts and a halter, rose from her white lawn chair to greet them. Her newly washed chestnut hair had been brushed carefully over one shoulder.

Why, she looks like a horse, thought Hermann with surprise. She has the long face and the long neck of a horse. As for Jürgen, he continued to snip an article from the newspaper without looking up, using a small scissors with bright pink handles.

Hermann's heart began to thump wildly. He knows, Hermann thought. Perhaps he will kill me. Then he reminded himself that Jürgen had been unsociable since childhood, and his glum look no doubt meant nothing.

As Hermann and Nikki took their places at the outdoor table, Jürgen kept on trimming the edges of the newspaper article while Käthe handed around coffee all the while asking Nikki questions in a manner that, amazingly, was quite ordinary. In fact, Käthe was doing a masterful job of extracting information from Nikki—how she had been born in a small mining town in northern Alsace, far from the more touristic and prosperous southern “Wine Route”; how she had travelled around Europe as soon as she had finished middle school; how she had lived in Frankfurt and Duesseldorf and now here in the little town of Rudelsheim as Hermann’s secretary. And it had all been to perfect her German, which was now rather good, and how she hoped someday to learn Italian too, in Switzerland perhaps, or else in Tuscany.

And all the while that Nikki was talking in her soft, not-quite-right German, Hermann could not suppress his joy at seeing the little iridescent earrings swing gaily about the young, close-cropped head; the soft, delicate hands embrace the white ceramic coffee cup; the small fragile body lean forward over the pristine enamel table. Before them the neatly clipped emerald grass stretched gently down to the river, which here was only a small stream in which an orange inflatable kayak tossed fitfully in the little waves.

So, she is not so shy after all, thought Hermann with an immense surge of hope. And for a moment it seemed to him that everything would somehow come out all right,

that he would be allowed to continue forever in his happiness.

He turned to Jürgen and tried to think of something polite, something that he would have said had this been a normal situation.

"So, Jürgen. What is it in that article you have clipped out--something for your classes?"

Jürgen produced a sound somewhere between a laugh and a snarl. He pushed the article, upside-down, over the table.

"TEST TUBE BABIES IN LOCKENHEIM," read the headline. "WOMEN GIVES BIRTH TO TWINS FOR MONEY."

"Ah," said Hermann without interest. "Some fairy-tale from the *Bild Zeitung*, no doubt?"

Käthe leaned over the table and handed the article to Nikki.

"Jürgen says it is a new stage in human development," said Käthe. "A new disvaluation of nature, a new stage in the total breakdown of human society and in the deformation of relations between women and men."

Jürgen snorted again.

"Progress, more progress. Soon we will grow babies in factories like this grass, which we started from nursery plants--remember, Käthe, how we had to set them in, square by square, when we bought the house? But this, this--"

He snapped his little cerise scissors shut and shook his head.

"Nothing will ever be the same again--nothing."

Nikki set her coffee cup down and leaned back in the white lawn chair.

"But surely it would be easier for women if babies were grown in test tubes and factories. In any case, you can't be serious. This is a freak in nature, like traveling to space. It will never be a routine occurrence for ordinary people."

"Ah, that we cannot say," said Jürgen darkly. "This one--" he jabbed at the air with one end of the open scissors as he gestured at the photo--"is an ordinary person, recruited by the fatal marriage of technology with money."

A grainy photograph of a fat woman with straight blonde hair looked up at them

accusingly from the table.

Jürgen stared at Nikki exactly as he had stared at the woman in the photograph.

"It will be the final separation between pleasure and the continuation of the human race, which in the future will be handled separately. Of course," he nodded almost imperceptibly in the direction of his wife, who took no apparent notice, "it merely continues the trend in the relations between men and women over the last century. Still, it takes things to a new level."

Arms folded, Jürgen sat back in his chair with an air of satisfied yet fearful anticipation, as if he had just thrown a white glove down on the dewy grass and was waiting to see who would pick up the challenge.

Hermann began to whistle a soft and unrecognizable tune. Then he took off the rimless glasses and began to clean them very slowly with a paper napkin.

"It's really unusually warm for this time of year, isn't it?" he said in what he hoped was an easy conversational tone. "My glasses are quite thoroughly fogged."

Jürgen folded the newspaper clippings with a definitive crease and put a thumb through the scissor handle. Lower lip trembling, he pushed back his chair and stood, large and threatening, next to his former friend.

"Do give my regards to your wife, Hermann. I saw her just the other day in the *Schlautstrasse* and she was looking not at all well. I hope you will excuse me now, I have some work to do to prepare my class on the rise and fall of the Third Reich."

And without a backward glance, Jürgen loped off toward the house, leaving the rest of them speechless under the now brighter, now hotter August sun.

Nikki looked Käthe, then at Hermann.

"But they've been growing babies in test tubes for years now. Did he just find out? And goodness—does he really believe all those things he said?"

The feather earrings danced below Nikki's ears and danced again as if in response to the little sunlit waves below.

Käthe smiled. Carefully she smoothed her long hair around the folds of her halter.

"You must excuse Jürgen. He is always prone to take the dark view of things. It comes from all the history he has studied. He's always like that. And sometimes he likes making a provocation."

And as Käthe smiled even more widely, Hermann remembered the circumstances under which they had last met. At once he looked down at the blindingly white table and the soft, damp grass, and began to blink.

Oh, why had he listened to her ridiculous farrago as they had walked under the elms by the river? Why had he agreed to carry her shawl and basket and go for a picnic? He had only meant to be friendly. Why did women always mistake his friendliness for something else? It wasn't his problem if Jürgen no longer made love to her and she was unhappy. His heart was too vulnerable to pity. Now it was all a mess. Jürgen knew and was angry and perhaps soon others would know, his wife among them, and he would be talked about, just like Dr. Bartelsmann and his suicide-incompetent assistant.

Soon Frau Leimbach and--yes--Fritz would be rolling their eyes at the humiliation he, Hermann, would sustain. They would stand outside the watch shop on the *Ringstrasse* gossiping about him, Frau Leimbach with her string bag full of soup vegetables over one arm and the sun streaming over her withered skin, and Fritz with his gay, easy laugh and the little bit of white in his hair mingling promiscuously with the blonde. And Hermann could feel the anger roiling around within him, like a river coming up against its banks. For he knew he had no one except himself to blame.

"Is Willi around this morning?" said Hermann. "Perhaps we could do the kayak lesson another time. I could come back--"

Then he stopped, certain that Käthe would suggest 3 o'clock on Tuesday or Friday for his return. Yet the thought of leaving the two women alone together terrified him even more.

"Oh, Hermann," said Käthe easily. "Don't be silly. Willi has been looking forward to it all week. Willi!"

She smiled once more and arched her neck, on which could be discerned the

first hollows of middle age.

A boy too tall for his face and hands appeared at the edge of the patio, his fair hair cropped in a horizontal line above his brow. He had Käthe's long neck and his father's shuffling walk. As he approached, the boy blinking under the noontime sun seemed to Hermann a measure of the distance between the present moment and his own youth. And with a start Hermann remembered that Jürgen, too, had been shy when he was very young.

Willi stood at the edge of the patio as if afraid to go farther.

"Yes, Mutti? What do you want?"

"Why don't you go down to the boat, dear? Uncle Hermann will be with you in just a minute."

"Nikki, you don't mind--?"

For the first time, Hermann wondered for the first time what Nikki really thought of him. Surely it had been a mistake to bring her here--but no. If she was to know him, then she would have to know the kinds of people he had grown up with, associated himself with, in some sense loved. But if she saw him as just another cranky middle-aged man like Jürgen, another faded middle-aged person long in the tooth like Käthe---!

"Of course I don't mind, Hermann," said Nikki with unexpected sweetness. Her face, thin and angular, was beginning to redden under the noontime sun. "After all, this was the reason why we came."

With a sense of foreboding, Hermann padded through the damp grass down to the river, wiping the perspiration from his forehead with the rest of the napkin and then shading his eyes from the sun. Already Willi was standing stiffly by the boat, holding it by its lead as still as he could.

Poor thing, thought Hermann. Well, we will make this quick.

But it wasn't.

First, Willi could not seem to learn the first principles of paddling, no matter how often or how clearly Hermann explained them. Worse yet, he had led both of them into the wrong channel. Instead of coming out after twenty minutes quite near to the house, they got hopelessly lost. Next they had found themselves by a big road Hermann did not recognize. In the end they had ported the boat back along the river, Hermann continuing to explain the theory of kayaking, wave motion, and colloids, but with the increasing sensation of one speaking to the deaf. As they approached the patio, Hermann saw to his alarm that Käthe was speaking with her usual confident manner while Nikki had a spot of pink in each cheek. At once he suggested that Nikki, too, should share in the delight of a boat ride down the little river.

As they pushed off in the kayak, Käthe waved at them with what Hermann feared was an entirely false enthusiasm. Willi had already disappeared.

Ahead of him, her back turned to him, Nikki let one hand drift in the river. She was sitting very straight, straighter than she sat in her chair in the office.

"Your friend Jürgen is certainly odd."

"Odd? Well yes, I suppose so."

They were now at the end of the development where Käthe and Jürgen lived. Off to the right, young horses ran gambled behind a fence in a wide green field. On the other side, a field of bright grass and a small road. In the distance, under the still-bright sun, Hermann could see the Water-Castle. The only sound was the buzzing of an unidentifiable insect, and the ripples made by Nikki's hand as it moved back and forth in the water.

"All that talk about the test-tube babies. What was he so upset about? They've been growing babies in test tubes for ten years now."

Hermann concentrated furiously on his paddling. The river split in just a few minutes, he remembered it from earlier. The wretched boy had almost capsized them just about here. How he wished he could see Nikki's face just right now. What on earth had Käthe said to her?



Hermann took a slow, deep breath. If he didn't calm down at once, his heart would keep moving in counterspeed to the kayak and he'd send them down the wrong passage.

"Oh, he's always been like that, Jürgen. But Nikki, did you have a nice chat with Käthe? What did you talk about--er, French literature?"

Her back stiffened further under the onslaught of his questions. Never had she seemed farther away.

"She talked about Anais Nin for a while. She likes reading Anais Nin."

"Is that all the two of you talked about? Please, Nikki. Please tell me what you talked about with Käthe."

Nikki took her hand out of the water. Her back heaved up and down as she took a long breath.

"She--she told me a story. I asked her about the house next door and how old it was and who were the other people who lived all this way so far from the town. And she told me the house next door was empty, because a German man had lived in it with his wife, who was a nurse. She was Norwegian, Käthe said. But she left him, because she didn't like Germany and couldn't learn the language properly, and then he left too, and the house never gets sold."

Hermann felt cold despite the heat pounding down from the August sun. What was all this nonsense? What was this latest trick of Käthe's?

"So--?" To his dismay his high-pitched voice had a threat in it.

"So, I don't think she said what she meant. I think she meant that people wouldn't accept the Norwegian woman. That there was no way she could fit in. That the same thing would happen to me if I stayed in Rudelsheim."

Damn Käthe, he thought. Damn Käthe and her horse face.

"Nikki—that has nothing to do with--I mean--"

They had gone round the first bend. Nikki had leaned over to one side as she dabbled her hand further down in the water.

"Hermann," said Nikki in a normal voice. "What is this ridiculous-looking thing we

are coming up to?"

It was the Water-Castle, one of the many the region was famous for. It stood in the middle of the river, a large round structure of slate-color stones joined to the land by a long, narrow drawbridge along which a group of middle-aged tourists, guidebooks in hand, were slowly picking their way. No windows were to be seen, and the ancient structure was overgrown with ivy. As the kayak drew nearer, the twittering of birds grew steadily more insistent.

"It is like the cuckoo clock in my friend Fritz's shop," said Hermann with a touch of bitterness. "It is a Water-Castle, so-called as you can see because of the moat. In the sixteenth century when it was built it was quite the latest thing—virtually impregnable against marauding armies. Now it is as you see."

And it seemed to him that he, too, was like the Water-Castle. For even if he could be transported this minute to Paris or Moscow or Swaziland or Tonga, he would still be recognizably a German who liked his buttered bread and his young Dutch cheese and his Fachinger every afternoon about four and for whom the music of Patricia Kaas would always be, quite simply, too loud.

Nikki shook her head, feather tips swaying.

"But surely it's better the way it is now. Are there more of them—the Water Castle, I mean?"

"Dozens. Do you find it too awful?"

Nikki sat forward in the boat and considered it. Her back had softened to the point where he thought perhaps he might reach out and touch it.

"No. Almost cute, really. But much too small. We have much bigger castles in Alsace. They for tourists too. Not so well preserved as this one but much more imposing."

"You know," said Hermann, without quite knowing what he was going to say next. His heart was fluttering again. Why couldn't he get it to stop?

"You know, it's possible to buy Water-Castles now. Why, I could buy one--for us I mean. Would you like to live in a Water-Castle, Nikki? A real Water-Castle? Just the

two of us?" And, looking at the small, straight back ahead of him, he went on, his voice rising, "Why, we could marry. Yes, yes," he went on as if arguing with someone. "We could marry."

"Marry? Good grief, Hermann."

Ahead of him, she laughed as easily as his friend Fritz, and the little flames under her ears laughed with her.

"How old-fashioned. Marry indeed. And of course marriage has been such a great success for you and your wife and your friend Käthe and what's-his-name her husband."

"But Nikki--" he said faintly. "What has any of that to do with us?"

They were at the channel now, almost back to the development. In another minute they would come to the take-out point from which he and Willi had ported the boat. He had the feeling one has in dreams of having come to a place one has been to before.

Nikki had stepped out onto the bank and was steadying the boat so that he, too, could exit.

"Hermann, please. What do we need with marriage? We could live together if you like."

"Live together?"

His voice squeaked.

"Here? In Rudelsheim?"

Divorce Irene and not remarry? Not divorce Irene and live with Nikki? He, Hermann Glück, at the center of a scandal? His soul shook within him, timid yet in love.

"Why not?" she said, the earrings shaking furiously under each perfectly shaped ear. "For heaven's sake, Hermann, it's 1978, not 1878." "Nikki," he said gently, as to a child. "I can't."

And then felt himself shuddering as her small, sharp face went pale with disappointment.

Goose bumps broke out all over his skin. All the reasons he could give to

himself--his position as head of the firm left him by his father, the kind of town it was, the humiliation of being talked about by Frau Leimbach and, yes, even Fritz--would clearly make no sense to her. Yet his happiness, his happiness--what of that?

Dismayed but unwilling to give up all hope, Hermann jumped off onto the bank, his heart pounding wildly as he struggled for what next to say.

“Nikki! Nikki! Wait!” he cried, stumbling as he went, enraged at his seeming inability to go faster.

She had reached the car and was opening the door when he heard Käthe’s voice.

He turned and saw the familiar, now detestable horseface above a crisp apron and a tray of tiny, unrecognizable things to eat.

“Hermann, come back. I made a special plate of *hors d’oeuvres* for all of us. Come back now.”

But he kept on going, his large body flailing through the summer air. He had to, or it would be too late.

Drawing the lace curtain to one side, Frau Gertrud Glück smiled a thin, fixed smile as she waved goodbye to her son Hermann in the Vennstrasse below.

To her annoyance, he did not look up. Standing next to his Ford station wagon, he merely took off his rimless glasses, held them up to the cloudless autumn sky, and rubbed at the lenses with a crumpled handkerchief. Then, with a quick, guilty motion, he darted into his car.

At once it roared out of the street, narrowly missing a speed bump, a young woman Frau Glück did not recognize wheeling a pram, and Fraulein Spaetz's Schnauzer, loose once more. Frau Glück let the curtain drop and suppressed a catch in her throat.

Oh, why had she not called out to Hermann at the last minute?

As a child he had been immensely irritating--overweight, pompous, phlegmatic, hopelessly nearsighted. As the years had brought him into middle age, these qualities had become hallmarks of which, all too often, he seemed perversely proud. Still, he was her son and now she would never see him again. Letting the curtain drop, she reminded herself with a dismayed surprise that for Hermann this was merely one more day with nothing out of the ordinary.

With the slow movements of advanced age, Frau Glück began to move about the living room of the big old house. One by one, she placed a water pitcher, a tall water glass, a small glass with a gold rim--part of her parents' wedding set from 1901--a bottle of Asbach Uralt and fifteen small prescription vials, each marked "One only, to be taken at bedtime" on the glass coffee table. Then she sat down on the horsehair pillows of her couch, resting an arm on the lace antimacassar she had made so long ago she could no longer remember the names of the stitches.

The gold carriage clock over the mantel showed almost four. In just a few minutes, it would be time for the commercials. She had decided months ago to do it during the commercials. Of all the things she watched on the little black-and-white television set Hermann had given her, she liked the commercials best. With their images of washing powder, gleaming crystal, and white, fluffy sheets, they projected a

world in which things were always flawless and people always in control.

In the real world, of course, people, at least the ones one knew, were unfathomable.

Take, for instance, Hermann. For the last three months he had come alone every Monday as always, drunk his coffee without his usual one and a half teaspoons of sugar, and stared listlessly at his half-eaten piece of poppy seed cake. Questions about Irene's absence were dodged with a cleverness and duplicity Frau Glück had not known Hermann to possess. Irene was ill, she was visiting a friend, she had to practice for a concert.

When had Irene last given concerts? Frau Glück could not remember. But she had said nothing.

Never in the entire forty years she had known Hermann--so phlegmatic, so predictable, so unlike her beloved Franz--had Frau Glück been entirely sure whether she would have liked Hermann had he not been her son. Still, she could not help but feel sorry for him as a fellow human being in trouble. And what kind of trouble was it, precisely? Perhaps, she thought as the darkness of the screen gave way to a box of soap powder with a name that sounded like *Parsley*, it was just as well she did not know. For what could she do in any case?

A screech of brakes outside shook the carriage clock on the mantel, followed by the pounding of large, erratic footsteps on the walk.

"Mutti-- Please forgive me for distressing you-- I forgot--"

Hermann, his face red with embarrassment, stood in the doorway. Behind the rimless glasses his eyes roved around the tiny, room, crowded with antique furniture and porcelain knick-knacks. Slowly, a foolish half-smile, clearly intent on masking some profound feeling, crept over his lips.

"Aha!" He darted towards the couch. "I knew I must have left them here!"

"Left what here?"

Really, thought Frau Glück. She had not seen Hermann so upset since the asthma attacks of his childhood.

"These," said Hermann, dangling a key ring before her eyes that, strangely, seemed to have only one key. At once he whisked it into a pocket.

How could she not have noticed a key ring on the sofa? thought Frau Glück, alarmed at yet another indication of how diminished her powers of observation had become with age. With a start, she realized it no longer mattered.

"Sorry to disarrange you, Mutti. See you next week."

As his lips brushed her cheeks with the obligatory kiss, Frau Glück said in complete disregard of everything she had been thinking and re-thinking and deciding and undeciding for months now, "Till Wednesday."

Then he was gone, the door slamming rudely behind him, and she had told him nothing and asked him nothing and this time she was truly sorry.

"Damnation," said Frau Glück out loud, straightening a lace antimacassar.

What key? Why forgotten? And what, oh what would become of poor Hermann, now ranged so far from his usual humdrum self? Poor little Hermann with his psychosomatic illnesses and his poor eyesight and some problem in the middle of his life whose name could not even be spoken--was there not something she could do for him, even now?

From the very first, Hermann and Irene had reminded her of her sister Bertha and her disastrous marriage to Horst Bienenfeder. But this time, having learned from her mistakes, she said nothing.

For it had been foolish to try to dissuade Bertha from the marriage. From the beginning it seemed clear enough that a man who derided the fugue at the end of Beethoven's Third Rasoumovsky as a symptom of "a neurotic inability to bring things to a close" was not a man Bertha should marry. But what had she, Gertrud Glück, gotten for her pains? The lifelong enmity of Horst and a retort from Bertha that a woman whose hair always looked as if it had been combed with a wire whisk should know better than to set herself up as an authority in matters of the heart.

Of course she had been right. But of what use was being right? One grew old anyway.

A face, youthful and unmarked, floated before her eyes with a reality it had not possessed in all the years since he had abandoned her by dying of an incorrectly diagnosed root canal infection--he, who had been lucky enough to have been wounded slightly in the First Catastrophe, thereby managing to avoid an active role in the Second as much as anyone could. Franz, who had always seen to it that she went to the doctor when she was sick and to the dentist every six months; Franz, who not only grafted the apple trees in the back yard but also told her exactly how many apple cakes she should make with them in the autumn. Franz, who with a single touch on the always-refractory hair could make her feel entirely peaceful. How very odd that, thinking of Franz just at this minute, she should remember him now even more clearly than all the photographs she had not looked at in years.

Moving forward on the couch, Frau Glück reached out a blue-lined, gold-ringed hand for another pill--large and green, with a mark down the center: an unbridgable divide.

So, thought Frau Glück. Even the secular mind gives way at last to a foolish hope.

An advertisement for a water softener that was also a bleach came to its friendly, cheerful conclusion, followed without pause by an advertisement for *Quark*.

Quickly Frau Glück poured more water as the pill threatened to stick halfway down. Had she forgotten anything? Perhaps a quick note to Bertha-- Looking around the room for a piece of paper, Frau Glück started as, she suddenly remembered how many years Bertha had been gone.

"Bah!" said Frau Glück out loud.

She reached out a hand for the water pitcher, filled the water glass, and swallowed the next pill, and the one after that.

Before her eyes a dishwasher was slammed shut. A configuration of wash and dry cycles appropriate to its precise contents was carefully chosen. Knobs were turned. Before her eyes, an enormous and surely excessive amount of white and frothy soapsuds began rhythmically but monotonously to dance.



Sliding forward on the couch, Frau Glück filled a small, gold-rimmed brandy glass with Asbach Uralt and drank it in one gulp.

Then, just to be sure, she poured out one more.

As he took the stairs at Engelstrasse 27 two at a time, Hermann could feel the erratic Thump! Thump-thump! of his heart going out of control. It was a hot day, and small beads of sweat were gathering on his forehead under his brown pompadour curls.

But all was not lost. In a moment he would be with Nikki again. She would be stroking his hair and his heart would be thumping for another reason. He would be acting like the foolish middle-aged man he was, and once more, for a little while, he would be entirely happy.

Impatient and eager, he rang the bell.

"Nikki?"

Could she not have heard? He rang the bell again and stood back, listening to its muffled clang. Well, it was a good thing he had gone back to his mother's for the key yesterday. No doubt she was in the back room, or plugged in to that infernal tape machine again, listening to one or another of those awful Patricia Kaas tapes.

As he turned the key in the lock, he had the oddest sensation that the name he had just spoken was echoing in the corridor of the old building. Nervously he looked both ways. Had anyone heard?

The door opened to reveal a room empty of everything save its old-fashioned, dark wood furniture. A small, warm breeze came in through the open window, along with a few rays of the late afternoon sun.

"Nikki?" he called louder.

Perhaps she had stepped out for a moment?

With a small but surely absurd sense of foreboding, Hermann walked into the small, dark bedroom and flicked on the overhead light. The traveling alarm clock next to the bed was gone. So were the stacks of *Vogue* and *Elle* back issues that usually

overfilled the night table.

Quickly Hermann walked to the mahogany armoire and flung it open.

A row of hangars jangled in greeting, empty save for his summer robe. Below, a single pair of worn leather moccasins.

Perhaps, he thought, if I left at once, went back down the stairs, remounted them at a sensible pace, and rang the bell calmly, with a greater sense of confidence.

Perhaps then--?

Slowly he ran a finger down the row of hangars and listened to the clanking sound. As it stopped, he noticed that his heart had exchanged its somersaults for a series of slow, ominous beats. He walked back into the living room and collapsed onto the sofa.

Could it be that Nikki had taken that business with Käthe more to heart than had seemed? She had given every sign of believing him when he had said it would never happen again. Or had his refusal to live with her outside of marriage made him seem, well, a relic from some earlier era? Pah! After all that had happened between them, it could not be that she had deserted him forever.

Hermann reached in his pocket, took out his handkerchief, and wiped his forehead. Even the breeze was hot today. Suddenly a thought too horrible to contemplate seized him. Could it be that, despairing of a solution, she had jumped out the window?

Getting up, he almost knocked over the coffee table before he realized that on it lay a cassette of Patricia Kaas, an envelope marked "Hermann Glück," and a single feather earring, its blind peacock eye staring resolutely in his direction.

"Dear Hermann," he read between his trembling fingers. "Please forgive me. There was no other way I could do this. Please do not try to find me. I promise I will contact you again in the right time. Yours, Nikki."

The warm summer breeze rustled the paper gentle as as a kiss.

Hermann sat down again.

She will be here in a minute, he thought. Surely she would be here in just

another minute. It was only some kind of joke.

Slowly he rose and walked over to the window.

Dusk was falling over the city. Slowly, deliberately, a few late shoppers strolled down the narrow street. The butcher's assistant, his white apron stained with the work of the day, was taking in a placard advertising a special on pig's knuckles . At the corner, the evening papers were being put out for display at the newspaper kiosk. Two students went by on black bicycles, both exactly like the one he had owned in childhood and kept all through University. The tinny sound of the bicycle bells reached his ears in a slow fade. Somewhere out of sight, an invisible dog barked a small, doggy bark.

Nothing had changed in this street since he had been a child, nothing would change until long after he was dead. How tedious, how provincial this town must have seemed to her. And how old and pompous he himself, with his middle-aged rigidities, his horror of scandal. He could feel his heart quieting now. She had been right: there had been no future for them. Yet he could not bring himself to believe that she was really gone.

Life can be sudden, he thought, grasping for a way to accept, if not understand. Feeling foolish, he stepped back from the open window and said it out loud: "Life can be sudden."

A loud buzzing noise made his heart seize up again. It was the telephone.

Nikki, he thought with a rush of joy. The world was normal again. Nikki!

"Hermann?"

It was a woman's voice, crisp and clear--familiar somehow but definitely not Nikki's. Without thinking, he answered with a disappointed "Yes?"

Only as he finished speaking did he realize it was Irene.

His mother was in the hospital, Irene said. She had taken, it seemed, a rather large amount of sleeping pills which her stomach was too old to digest. Fraulein Spaetz had noticed the television on after the commercials had finished and, rapping at the window, had seen Hermann's mother lying half-fallen off the couch. Could Hermann come home at once? She needed for him to drive them both to the Polyklinik.

I will get the house, thought Hermann. I will prune the apple trees in the fall and in the spring I will watch the apple flowers bloom. I will sit under the apple trees alone, watching the flowers fall, one by one.

And this thought comforted him until he realized that the only way he could get the house was for his mother to actually die.

"Hermann, please. Can you come at once?"

The voice, insistent and familiar, hurt his ears.

"Yes, yes, of course," he answered, overcome by a dull despair at how easily he relapsed into the role of dependable husband. "I will be there in ten minutes. Why don't you stand outside on the Ringstrasse? I will meet you there."

"Good," said Irene in a voice filled with hatred and relief.

And he was halfway around the Ring Road before he realized that if Irene had known where to find him, then she must know many other things besides.

As the white Ford station wagon screeched into the parking lot of the Polyklinik, Irene put a hand on Hermann's arm.

"Wait," she said. "There is something I must say."

Already the leaves of the ivy on the old, rust-color building had begun to turn. Nurses in white uniforms with high-necked blouses walked confidently by, talking in quiet voices. A sense of orderly life radiated from the building. As he opened the door of the station wagon so they would not altogether suffocate in the August heat, Hermann wondered with dismay how he had reached a point where all of the important conversations of his life took place in cars.

"Irene--" he said, feeling helpless. "Couldn't this perhaps wait a bit? I mean after--"

And then he stopped, realizing that he was not sure what "after" might mean in the present context.

Sitting next to him, the tiny middle-aged woman with elegantly bobbed hair and dark, angry eyes shook her head with a sense of resolution that, oddly enough, reminded him of Nikki. Yet it was Nikki he loved, not Irene.

"I have to know: do you mean to divorce me? Because if it is--I mean, if that's what you want, I shall make things as difficult as possible."

"Irene," he said gently. "I really haven't thought about any of it in quite these terms. Besides, my mother--"

She turned and stared at him with a hatred that was not entirely unlike desire.

"As if you had been the only one who was unhappy! As if it had been only you!"

He could not have felt more deflated had she stuck him with a hatpin. "You too were unhappy--? And I had thought--"

"Oh--when have you thought, lately? All this time, with this young woman, and then with-- with-- Käthe! Her of all people! Hermann, how could you?"

Hermann could feel his heart skipping like a Bavarian mountain goat. Even his breathing did not feel quite right. Had he really been so transparent? Yet he felt relieved too: as had so often been the case, she had understood him better than he had himself. At least he did not have to undergo the indignity of having to confess.

"But Irene," he said, groping. "Käthe was just-- just-- a--" He stopped abruptly. What was the right word? Peccadillo?

"Hermann," Irene hissed. "Do you know that for one entire year I have not been able to play the *Andante Favori* all the way through? For one entire year."

With the habit of years, he took her hand whereupon, to his immense horror, she began to cry.

He extracted the crumpled handkerchief from his pocket and held it out for her to take. Never at any crisis of their life together had she thought to carry a handkerchief. Would her next lover think to carry one? He rather hoped so.

Irene blew her nose.

"Here," she said, holding the handkerchief out by one corner.

"Not at all," said Hermann politely.

At once the handkerchief disappeared in Irene's purse.

"So," said Irene briskly. "You will divorce me and go off with your young woman?"

Hermann was silent.

"At the moment," he said in his high-pitched voice.

He tried again, but it was only a "harrumph" that sounded pompous even to him.

"She has disappeared," he said at last. "I don't know where she is at the moment."

Blurry-eyed, Irene looked up with a hope that died as her eyes met her husband's.

"I'm sorry, Hermann," she said after a minute.

"Thank you," said Hermann politely. "I would like to go in to the hospital now and see my mother. Do you want to come?"

Irene shook her head.

"See you later," said Hermann.

Irene ran a hand over her hair, which for the first time in all the years he had known her refused to return to its usual round, elegant shape.

A puzzled but not unkindly frown furrowed his large, smooth forehead.

"Why don't you take the car, Irene," said Hermann. "I can always get home by taxi."

In the hospital there was a smell of antiseptic and bright, clear lights.

An eager young man with rabbit eyes who was his mother's doctor

accompanied him down the narrow hallway. A sensation that he was floating, or perhaps walking on rubber foam. Something he had forgotten--something important. What was that?

"I'm sorry we were unable to get her a private room," the doctor was saying as they turned a corner. "Quite difficult on such short notice, you know. Perhaps tomorrow--"

Hermann nodded. He felt on the verge of an asthma attack.

"Take your time," said the doctor, drawing aside a long white curtain. "She may wake up or she may not, but either way she is really quite all right."

An old woman lay sleeping in the center of what seemed like a very large bed, her small, gold-ringed hands folded calmly on top of the blanket. Her mouth had fallen open, her thin lips were moving in a slight, gentle harmony with the rise and fall of her chest. Someone had put a pink lace bed jacket over her shoulders. In the dimness of the light from the bedside table, or perhaps the fog on his glasses, he could not tell if it was a hospital jacket or one of her own. Something in her gesture reminded him of his aunt Bertha, although he had never before thought of the two of them as having any resemblance.

Well, he thought grimly. At least I am not the first in the family to have had a broken marriage.

Hermann sat down on the chair provided, which made a creaking noise. His mother's eyes fluttered open; closed; opened again; and then, with a look of puzzlement, fell on him directly.

"Hermann," said his mother in a voice paler than any he could remember. "What are you doing here?"

"I might as well ask you the same question," he said, moving his chair closer. "How are you feeling, Mutti?"

She wrinkled her nose. "My stomach hurts. Oh--"

And as she tried to rise, she peered at him with a look of anger and of guilt now that she had remembered.

"It's all right, Mutti," said Hermann quickly. "Don't trouble yourself in the least."

Looking down at the blanket, she began to stroke it with her old, frail fingers.

Hermann reached for his handkerchief so that he could begin to clean his glasses, which had fogged again. Then he remembered he had given his handkerchief to Irene.

"But why Mutti? I mean--"

Slowly and with a grimace of pain, his mother pushed herself up on a pillow and turned toward him. He saw with relief that her eyes had brightened.

"It's quite all right if you divorce Irene," she said in a firm voice. "I knew from the very beginning she was not the right woman for you. The main thing is to marry irrationally, Hermann. Both people must like Beethoven. Or neither of them. Not like Bertha and Horst."

Although these thoughts were amazingly similar to his own in the past months, Hermann found himself unreasonably irritated. Then a memory fierce as pain went through him, and he clung to it: a thought of a feather earring in dark iridescent blue, and a tape of the loud, raucous voice of Patricia Kaas.

"It's not Irene's fault," he said, embarrassed at not able to keep the anger out of his voice. "Please, Mutti. We can talk about this another time."

How uncomfortable it was to discuss his most intimate affairs with, of all people, his mother! Surely he had not reached the point in his confusions where he needed his mother to arrange things for him.

She had closed her eyes again. Her face looked old and gray. Her hair, ruffled as the feathers of a dishevelled bird, looked almost yellow in the dim light. Yet he had to know.

"It was too much," she said slowly.

Her eyes, wide open now, stared at something only she could see in the dark ceiling above.

"Too much--?"

"Everything," she said wearily. "What to eat, what to wear, who should tend the



garden, how to get from one o'clock to two o'clock. Franz did these things for me, you know. Franz made all these decisions."

Her eyes looked down but past him, at someone else.

"For a woman alone, everything is too much. How can a woman live alone? It's simply not possible."

Nikki, he thought. And for a moment he was seized by a rush of hope, and remembered joy.

"Why don't you rest now, Mutti," he said gently. "They will get you a private room in the morning."

"Oh, I don't care about that," she said with a meekness that both surprised and made him sad.

"What is she like, your young woman?"

"She's Alsatian," he answered.

And was immediately angry that he had given so inappropriate an answer. For what did it matter if she was Alsatian or from Kagakhstan? She was Nikki, and he loved her.

"Ah, yes," said his mother. "Alsatian. You know we deserved what they did to us, we all deserved it. I think of it every day. Even though we lived so far out in the country, the smell--you remember it too."

"Mutti," said Hermann gently. "Try not to think of it. It was all a long time ago. It's over now."

His mother lifted a feeble hand from the covers and tried to make a gesture.

"You think just because we rebuilt everything to look exactly as it had--the cobblestones on the Ringstrasse, the gabled facades, even the ancient *Dom*? It's not that--"

The hand fell. Her eyes closed and a slight snore emerged from her open mouth. And so she fell asleep, even before Hermann could kiss her gently on the forehead as he had meant to do.

As he came in, Irene was sitting at the grand piano in her study, although he had heard no music as he had come up the walk. Neither friendly nor unfriendly, she looked up over the score she was reading with a wan expression. It was a Brückner sonata, a piece he particularly disliked. He hoped she would not play it just now, although he realized he was hardly in a position to insist.

"So, she is all right?"

"Oh yes, she's all right," said Hermann. "She seems all right, and the doctor said so too."

"I'll look in on her tomorrow," said Irene. "If that's all right with you."

"Of course, of course."

What time was it? Goodness, it was almost ten already.

"I think I'll have something to eat," said Hermann in a way he hoped would not encourage her to join him.

Irene nodded and resumed reading the score of the Brückner.

"There's liverwurst, salami, maybe some Dutch cheese," she said as he walked by the door. "Not young though."

How odd, thought Hermann, that one should still want to eat at moments like these.

In the little entirely white kitchen everything was neat and pristine, exactly as if life were still normal. Quickly and without enjoyment, he set out the food. How curious it felt to eat alone in this kitchen, without Irene to set out the plates and pour him his Fachinger!

And as he ate, he felt increasingly calm until for no reason at all he was suddenly besieged by memories of Nikki and of a happiness that had swept everything before it, or almost everything.

What is happening to me? he thought, taking off his glasses and laying them to

one side of his plate. What is happening to my life?

And then he realized that what he was doing was waiting for the phone to ring, or the mailman to come, or a telegram to arrive.

'Nikki," he whispered softly to himself.

His heart thumped slowly and strongly in its new erratic way.

Was there nothing he could do to become more comfortable?

The sounds of the Brückner sonata coming now from the next room made everything worse. Worse yet, Irene had she started at the second movement, which he had always found even more awful than the first.

Hermann rose helplessly, bent down to open the refrigerator, and retrieved the liverwurst.

But what else can I do? he thought as if arguing with someone. After all, moment by moment one must do something.

Which perhaps was what Irene was feeling, since in mid-bar, she abruptly gave up on the Brückner, exchanging it for an overly fast, entirely unfeeling rendition of Mozart's *Rondo alla Turca*, which Hermann normally liked but at this moment disliked even more.

II

NIKKI

Nikki pulled down the top half of the window in the second-class train compartment and leaned out over the grimy glass.

In the still-cool air of early morning, a tangle of black telephone wires, laundry lines, and crooked television antennae led out above stucco rooftops towards a blurred horizon. So this was Rome--the Eternal City!

For hours now--or was it days?--she had lived with a feeling that her very self, blanker than the window, was gradually disappearing with each meter the train distanced itself from Rudelsheim. The little pink leather identity card case around her neck that only yesterday had seemed so clever and pretty now flapped irritatingly back and forth against her chest together with its contents--her Alsatian identity card, a single feather earring bright as a peacock's tail, and a slip of paper on which was scrawled in an uneven hand, "Pensione Alberghe, 25 Via San Stefano." Could it be, she had made a mistake in leaving Rudelsheim--or were these merely the thoughts of a person awoken too early after far too little sleep?

Closing the window with a single, sharp push, Nikki fell backwards into the darkness. From behind, an unfamiliar male voice muttered with a thick, slurred accent not unlike what she had heard every day in Rudelsheim: "Roma?"

"Oui, Si," said Nikki as the train lurched to an unexpected stop. Then, steadying herself on the window handle, she found the right words.

"Ja, Roma."

The man grunted, then reached down to shake his companion in the bunk below. A smell compounded of gasoline and something unidentifiable but even less pleasant drifted by. The train, starting up, once more began to clank its way from track to track along some no doubt predetermined but nonetheless mystifying path.

"Lena," said the man.

He had a jowly, comfortable face, at the moment covered with the black fuzz of a

day's unshaven beard.

"Wake up, Lena. We are arriving."

Sitting up, he swung his legs over the edge of the bunk and began to button his shirt over his undershirt. As he did so, something in his gesture--perhaps the way his hunched-up shoulders seemed to drag his ample body forward, or simply the fact that he was in his underwear--reminded Nikki with a pang of Hermann.

"You make vacation?" said the stranger in a friendly, quizzical way. His eyes rested on Nikki's dark hair, flat as wet feathers around her thin face.

Nikki tucked the square leather case inside her white silk blouse and shook her head. Her chest tightened. Would all men remind her of Hermann from now on?

"Work?"

"I hope so," she answered, sorry to have revealed the uncertain state of her life to a total stranger. Yet whom else would she have to confide in from now on?

The man shook his head. His eyes ran down the center of Nikki's blouse to the brown leather miniskirt below.

"A bad place for working, Italy . Too much corruption. Too much money changing hands."

"Money changes hands in Germany too," said Nikki in an even voice.

The man shrugged as he fastened the last button of his shirt.

"Yes, OK. But not so much."

With a clank, the train halted again. The wires, presumably still overhead, could no longer be seen. That, and the way the number of tracks had multiplied far to one side suggested that they had almost reached the station. Overhead, the sky remained a stubborn, faceless gray.

Had it really been just yesterday afternoon that she had drunk that last cup of coffee at Cafe Schönberg--tiny, gemütlich Cafe Schönberg with its rosy-cheeked waitresses in black uniforms and white half-aprons and its pieces of humble apple strudel and honey cake?

As if at a great distance Nikki remembered with what care she had chosen Cafe

Schönberg for her last few minutes in Rudelsheim. Hermann had of course preferred Cafe Schönbrun much further up the Ringstrasse, where even the ladies' room was all white marble and silver, an ashtray in every stall.

As she had set the coffee cup down on the inevitable white paper doily, Nikki had felt entirely calm. It was over. Everything had been packed and sent off--clothes, Patricia Kaas cassette tapes, the last year's collection of *Elle* and *Vogue*--all in neat yellow boxes numbered sequentially and marked Roma, Central Post Office, Will Call, in three languages. All that was left to do now was to take herself and the big rattan suitcase that had belonged to her grandmother to the station. After which she would be free forever of Rudelsheim, with its stultifying provincial airs, its tedious Teutonic smugness and--yes, most importantly--Hermann Glück.

Thinking of Hermann, or rather trying not to think of Hermann, Nikki began to perspire. Had he gotten the note by now? Perhaps she should have told him where she was going--? Well, it was all right. She would contact him later and explain. The note she had left on the coffee table of the Engelstrasse flat said so.

As she gave these assurances to herself, a sense of dismay and confusion assailed her, only to be replaced at once by a sharp, swiftly suppressed thrill of desire. For that was how he affected her even in memory, pompous and middle-aged though he was: Hermann with his rimless glasses, his portly middle, and his perfectly pressed jeans. She remembered with a pang how he had reprimanded Herr Pfefferling for criticizing her work in so unpleasant a tone.

"We'll have none of that here," Hermann had said in a tone she never heard from him before or after.

He had ripped the page out of her Olivetti typewriter, examined it thoroughly for errors, and then glared at Herr Pfefferling, who paled visibly under Hermann's glare.

"Fräulein 's business German is better than yours. From now on you give the work to me and I will give it to her. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Herr Dr. Glück."

Herr Pfefferling looked down at his perfectly polished shoes, his round face

wiped clean of all expression.

"I would fire him if I could," Hermann told her later. "But of course I can't legally fire a German even if one of marginal competence."

Yet surely there was no future with a man who corrected her Alsatian accent; insisted she use the formal *Nein* at all times rather than the dialectal *Ne* she had picked up in the Rhineland. A man who snipped off even the tiniest thread trailing from the hem of her new leather miniskirt with his engineering scissors before he would consent to be seen with her in public. A man who frowned with a barely suppressed disapproval every time she had the black wisps of her hair layered in a feathery cut.

Well, let him be happy with horse-faced Käthe every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon while Käthe's husband--what was his name? Heinrich? Dieter?--buried himself in some obscure historical research even he did not care about to avoid Käthe, or maybe to mourn his Swedish--or was it Norwegian?-- mistress.

What irked her most was that Hermann had joined himself to Frau-Chestnut-Hair-of-Kiele with all the spontaneity of an actuary taking out an insurance policy. Was he with her now? It was Tuesday, wasn't it? Well, he deserved no better--and no less. Nikki shuddered. How sordid it all was! No, there was no doubt she had made the right decision. All that was left to do now was pay up and go.

Nikki took a malicious pleasure in crumpling up the paper napkin from her lap and set it on the saucer where, bit by bit, it soaked up the remains of the coffee--a most unGerman action. Swinging her head this way and that, she failed to see the red-faced, white-aproned waitress anywhere in the bustling scene. Perhaps it would be all right if one just left five marks on the saucer? It had always been four marks seventy-five before.

Oh well, thought Nikki, as she began to tear the paper doily under the empty coffee cup into little pieces. No harm in waiting another minute or two for the little hand-written chit, and the opening of the black change purse, and the last, meaningless "Auf Wiedersehen."

Above her, the waitress' eyes narrowed with disapproval at Nikki's brown leather



miniskirt and white silk blouse, as if to say: What is wrong with the politicians, that they let in these foreigners--or at least this one, with her sallow, unhealthy skin; her short hair layered in uneven, unbecoming wisps?

"Excuse please," said Nikki at last in her very best German, trying to think of something innocuous to say. "Do you have the time?"

"A quarter to four" came the answer, crisp as a cucumber slice falling off a grater onto its *Butterbrot*.

Nikki looked down at her watch. The hands stood at five past three.

"A quarter to four?" Nikki squeaked. "You are sure?"

With disdain the waitress motioned her head toward a large, rather cheap-looking electric clock on the wall, which--oh horror!--showed a mere thirteen minutes to four.

"But--but the train for Rome leaves at four o'clock," said Nikki.

There was no one to hear. Already the table had been cleared, the five-mark piece deposited in the black change purse. The waitress was taking the order of the next customer.

Rattan suitcase firmly in hand, Nikki pushed the glass door aside and stepped out onto the Ringstrasse.

Outside, all was as cheerful and crowded as on any other warm, sunny August afternoon. People strode under the arcade, string bags on one arm as they looked at the wares in the elegant little shops. Young girls in flowered print skirts strolled by, chattering. Bicycles weaved in and out of the traffic on the cobblestoned street and on the sidewalk, bells ringing. Nothing appeared to be farther from the minds of anyone than care, or worry, or the future. It was all charming and prettified and incredibly prosperous compared to Hagen, the town in northern Alsace she had come from. Yet she could not be free in Rudelsheim; there was no way she could be free.

"Perhaps if I walk," thought Nikki, entirely forgetting that walking to the station had been the original plan. "Let's see--the Neuerweg? No, no--up the Lindner Weg. Yes, that will be faster."

And so she began, even though merely crossing the Ringstrasse while carrying the suitcase made her pant with exhaustion.

A car honked. A spotless white Mercedes with a yellow-and-black taxi sign was trying, slowly and ultimately successfully, to navigate the traffic.

With a quick, uncertain motion, Nikki came to a stop. Putting the suitcase down, she stepped out into the maze of cars and raised one hand in the air.

"Central Station, yes?"

All briskness and efficiency, the taxi driver had already hastened the rattan suitcase into the trunk. A young German with a neatly trimmed black moustache and perfectly pressed white shirt, he had a veneer of sophistication that Nikki found at once attractive and--given that he would no doubt spend his entire life in Rudelsheim--a trifle sad.

"Central Station," she echoed. Gratefully she sank into the stiff leather cushions and breathed the cool, air-conditioned air. Already she was feeling better.

"When is your train?" said the driver, looking at her with interest by means of the rear-view mirror. Marks and more marks were cheerfully mounting up in yellow neon on the chrome yellow digital meter.

"Ah," he said as Nikki answered. "The four o'clock express. Track 5. You have of course your ticket?"

They were stalled in traffic just outside Cafe Schönbrun. In honor of the fine weather, tables had been put outside. Perhaps Hermann---? Her heart beating quickly, Nikki put down the window and scanned the faces under the umbrellas, trembling with a mixture of anxiety and sudden hope.

"Ticket?"

Who was that speaking now? Something about a ticket? Ah yes, the taxi driver.

"No," said Nikki in a small voice. Alas, the familiar, comforting paunch was nowhere to be seen. She could feel herself trembling with a memory of ecstasy. If she were not careful, in another minute she would order the taxi to stop, right here in the middle of the Ringstrasse.

"No ticket?" repeated the driver with a frown.

"Not yet," Nikki murmured. His tone made her feel positively guilty.

They were on the Neuerweg now. Heart beating like a hummingbird's wings, Nikki moved forward in the seat as an old white Ford station pushed its way in from a side street.

But it was much too clean to be Hermann's.

And now already they were almost there. The hands of the clock atop the doors to the station stood at four minutes to four. She was perfectly calm now. It was not her fault she was going to miss the train. She had done her best. It was Fate.

In another minute she would pay the driver, not merely rounding up to the next digit but leaving an extra mark, or even two. Then she would call Hermann from one of the telephones behind the newspaper kiosk. He would be surprised and still a bit angry, but pleased.

Within five minutes the ancient Ford would slide up to the station and they would go somewhere for dinner--yes, even Cafe Schönbrun if he wanted. She would explain what she had meant to do, and they would talk and talk, and everything would be as muddled as always, but she would no longer care. And at the mere thought of once more sitting at a table across from Hermann's round, bespectacled face, of putting her hand ever so gently on his in a moment in which the waiter was looking the other way, a quiet happiness lit up inside her, and she began to smile.

"Ah, not much," she murmured without interest as the cab driver asked whether she had been badly treated in Germany, given her funny accent and generally rather foreign appearance. Really, he was quite sweet--she spied a glimpse of the carefully trimmed moustache in the rear-view mirror--but surely her life was none of his concern.

Brakes screeching, the taxi pulled up at the station's outer rim. Up ahead people with suitcases newer and larger than hers were unloading. A bird flew over and landed on a bright yellow mailbox. A young couple in jeans embraced, although whether because of a journey or simply because it was a beautiful summer day she could not know.

"Please, you can let me out here."

Nikki handed the fare over the seat--an enormous amount, but a small price to pay for having missed the train.

"Come along," said the driver. "There's just time."

"But I have no ticket," Nikki reminded him.

A look of consternation clouded his young, handsome face, threatening to disarrange his moustache. Then his face cleared.

"Oh, that's no problem," he said. "You can buy one on the train. The supplement is the same price for international trains on board as in the station."

To Nikki's dismay, he smiled broadly under his delightful moustache, picked up the rattan suitcase as if it had been light as a feather, and headed off.

"Wait!" cried Nikki in alarm.

Trailing behind, she began to run. He was moving so fast she could hardly keep track of his head as he somehow made a way through the seemingly impermeable crowd.

By the time she caught up, he was already on the platform. Before them the ancient train waited, its khaki paint faded on both sides of the still-open doors.

Reaching inside, the taxi driver placed the rattan suitcase firmly inside the train. Patches of perspiration under each arm darkened the white shirt. Even the moustache, dampened by his exertions, looked awry. As he smiled again, he looked--compared to Hermann--not only young but positively sweet.

"Please," he said, with a slight formal bow as Nikki counted the fare into his outstretched hand. "I hope you have enjoyed your time in Germany."

Was there any way to retrieve the suitcase without looking like a complete fool? Yet she could not simply let it go off, containing her favorite Patricia Kaas tapes.

Nikki reached out as far as she could for the rickety handle. But the suitcase was too far for her arm, or perhaps her arm was too short. As she stepped inside, a pneumatic hiss announced the closing of the doors. At once the station, the platform, the taxi-driver--still smiling under his once-more dapper moustache--and the warm,

sunny August afternoon of Rudelsheim all began to move slowly, and then not so slowly, into the past.

An old lady in black holding a folding umbrella and a tabloid face up on her lap nodded at the vacant seat beside her.

"Please," she said. "This one is free."

Nikki leaned up against the window as the smells of Rome--diesel, cooking, rotting garbage--assaulted her nose. Outside, the morning awaited, cool and gray. A flock of pigeons fluttered overhead, some taking perch on the wires while others floated gracefully downward towards the concrete. Already the crowd was dispersing into the welcoming arms of friends, relations, and tour guide leaders.

Forcing herself to pick up the suitcase, Nikki began to walk with a trembling and unsteady gait down the now-empty hallway and, one by one, the rickety iron stairs. A short, stocky man of indeterminate age in a brown pullover carrying what looked to be a lunch bag hurried by.

With a timid smile, Nikki said in her best schoolgirl Italian, "Can you tell me please what is the best bus or tram route to Trastevere? I want to go to 25, Via San Stefano."

"Ah!" he said, nodding without the slightest trace of a smile. "Via San Stefano!"

To her dismay, he let loose a rapid-fire staccato of Italian that was entirely incomprehensible and walked off. It left her uncertain whether to laugh or cry. She had hardly foreseen this when, hiding her no doubt illegal activity from the clerk of Spitzer's Bookstore, she had copied out with secret joy the address of Pensione Alberghe from a travel book.

The train engine, now decoupled from the rest of the train, began to move down the track. A group of uniformed men, shouting to one another in loud voices, were already removing the city destination cards from the outside of the wagons.

Tourist Office, thought Nikki, shivering as a cold breeze swirled through, the white silk blouse, the brown leather miniskirt, and the feathery whisps of her short, dark hair. Surely there would be a Tourist Office inside the station with someone cheerful

and friendly who could give directions in French or at least German--or at least a free, and hopefully accurate, city map.

Slipping the pink leather identity case once more inside the white (well, no longer quite so white) silk blouse, she picked up the rattan suitcase. Ahead on the platform, a pigeon darted first to one side and then the other, dropping a bit of grimy pizza crust from its beak. Loud and noisy, a crowd surged toward her, or perhaps the train.

*Hermann*, she thought dully. *Rudelsheim. The flat in the Engelstrasse.*

But no feeling came.

Shivering with cold, Nikki tightened her grip on the suitcase and began to move forward under the gray Italian sky.

The room was narrow. Very narrow.

But it was Nikki's for as long as she could pay the enormous number of lire Signora Spazie demanded each week. From the roofs of the ancient stucco buildings to the laundry lines that crossed and recrossed the fire escapes, human effort contended everywhere with decay. From the street, the smells of gasoline and diesel rose up as the first light of morning broke over Trastevere. Far below in the courtyard, as if in response, one or another of the countless emaciated cats of Rome began to yowl.

Sighing, Nikki turned another unintelligible page of yesterday's *Corriere delle Sera* and sipped at the coffee Signora Spazie had left outside the door an hour earlier.

Again the rolls were stale. There was no help for it but to smother them with some more of the orange marmalade. Bittersweet and pungent, it was not entirely without allure.

Yet she could not help but long--just a little--for the inexpensive strawberry jam

she once used to buy in the basement of the Rudelsheimer Kaufhalle that once she had thought too sugary. To say nothing of the blood oranges from Spain she liked to have after supper, bought from one of the marketplace vendors on a cold winter evening as she strolled home to the flat in the Engelstrasse. Always at least one would have been cut open under the crude swinging lamp for display, its deep ruby-red pulp glistening like the heart of some wild beast.

How the oranges and the other fruits and the winter vegetables had shone bright in the outdoor market! In her memory, the wares were all carefully arranged on the stalls by the vendors--large and slow-moving in coarse aprons over their dark, heavy jackets. How she had liked to walk from aisle to aisle as darkness fell, light and shadow falling on the faces of the hurrying crowd from the bare electric bulbs on the wires above!

After breakfast, the ride to the other side of the city. This, too, was very different from Rudelsheim. In Rome people packed themselves into the trams so densely that it was very important to hold the tram ticket tightly in one's hand. And what a ticket! Made as it was of paper thinner even than the *Corriere*, it always seemed on the verge of disintegration. One could only hope it would survive until the end of the ride. Try as she might, it was hard not to regard it as a parody of the thick cardboard *Streifenkarte*.

With a sigh, Nikki watched this one flutter to the floor and disappear under a crush of feet and wet umbrellas. Well, perhaps it did not matter. Rome did not appear to have ticket inspectors. And certainly no one in Rome looked at the brown leather miniskirt or the short whisps of hair with the same kind of disapproval as the waitress in Cafe Schönberg. In fact, no one looked at it at all.

Mornings were spent going from one engineering firm to another, each checked off neatly on a list copied from Signora Spazie's long out-of-date telephone book. The sound of Nikki's bad Italian or perhaps the Teutonic cut of the white silk blouse provoked at best a "No, perhaps next month" or a rueful smile.

In the afternoon lull, seeking out a palazzo or a museum open to the public for not too many *lire*, Nikki heard footsteps echo behind her in the big, empty rooms, the

walls filled with faded frescos or an ill-matched crush of paintings hung mostly awry. In the churches people talked in loud voices while an occasional child sucked at an ice-cream. Even old women, their heads covered with black lace, were rarely seen to kneel, or cross themselves.

At dusk shadows bounced off the yellow stucco walls, and the streets became longer. Despite the onset of autumn, the outdoor restaurants of Trastevere were still filled with laughter and the sound of corks popping. Tables groaned under the weight of 2-liter bottles of Italian wine--cheaper and so much better than any Italian wine that ever got as far north as Rudelsheim. Under artificial lights and grape arbors etched black by acid-rain, people laughed and talked over Roman salads, real fresh bread, and whole chickens *fra diavolo*.

"Pizza! Pizza with fresh artichokes! Pizza with fresh fennel!"

Stopping at a stall outside a restaurant, Nikki bought two slices and walked on until she reached the Pantheon. As she sat down on its steps, a horde of cats with enormous eyes and piteous yowls surrounded her in a half-circle.

Ignoring them, Nikki began to eat. Images of all the things she had seen and done since she had come to Rome surged into her mind. At the top of a long marble staircase, a swirl of people in evening clothes. In the distance, bathed in light--the white, ruined stones of the Coliseum. And at the top of a twisting white marble staircase, the equally white marble skin of the Dying Gaul, his eyes frozen in perpetual reproach. In the half-second Nikki had to look at him, those eyes would have transfixed Nikki in guilt had not the crowd, no less dense but more fast-moving than in the tram, borne her forward, head back as far as she could manage yet not quite far enough to see.

A woman with short, tightly curled hair turned to Nikki, "What a shame--to be forced to pass by so quickly that one sees almost nothing."

"*Si*," said Nikki. The pink leather identity case hung from her neck like a stone. "*Come la vita stessa*." CHECK THIS.

Like life itself.



"Signora Ni-kki! You look so ti-red! Don't tell me you were going out alone again last night! You don't know how dangerous things are in the big city!"

It was Signora Clara, the chief secretary at the engineering firm of Maldetta, Maldetta, and Cie. It was from Signora Clara--so Signior Dottore Maldetta had said the day he hired Nikki--she should take direction.

Despite the black fishnet stockings punctuated by tiny red hearts, Signora Clara had a middle-aged, motherly air. In an earlier era, Nikki was sure, Signora Clara would have held a pair of knitting needles between her fingers instead of the keyboard of a large, aging typewriter.

"Oh, it's not so dangerous to go out alone at night," Nikki protested. "Not if you're careful."

Signora Clara shook her head without looking up from the word processor.

"You are as bad as Oswaldo, my nephew. He too insists on going everywhere alone, even at night. But of course, he is a man."

"Oh? Oswaldo?" said Nikki, feigning a lack of interest. "Is he the young man who waits outside for you sometimes?"

For she had noticed him already: a tall, thin fellow with a small beard who held himself ever so slightly apart.

She had seen him the very first day, the day Signior Maldetta--bald, with shrewd brown eyes, and a wen over his left eyebrow--had given her the worst fright she had known in all the days since she had left Rudelsheim.

"Former Employer?"

Signior Maldetta raised his pen in hesitation over a piece of onionskin paper that held, presumably, Italy's version of a personnel form.

"Herr Glück," she had said after a minute's hesitation. "Herr Hermann Glück."  
How sweet it was to say the name out loud after so long, even in so strange and inappropriate a place! She felt almost like herself again.

"Address of the firm?"

In the old, high-ceilinged room, the fan blades turned slowly through the humid air.

"Ahh--" said Nikki, looking away from her prospective employer's forehead, shining pink under the dim fluorescent light.

Signior Maldetta's eyes narrowed.

"R--R-Rudelsheim, Germany," she stammered. "Postal Zone D-3331."

Signior Maldetta's eyes widened as if he had just understood something, although she could not imagine what.

"A little town," he murmured.

Nikki nodded. With his oily manner and his cheap, ill-fitting suit Signior Maldetta was so unlike Hermann it was hard to believe the two were even of the same sex.

"Telephone number?"

Nikki could feel the blood draining out of her face. How could she credibly claim not to know the telephone number, since she said she had been--as indeed she had--the chief secretary? Yet if he called, then Hermann would know where she was and then--then what? Never yet had she been able to say No to Hermann in person. For sure there would be a rush down the autobahn in the old white Ford station wagon, turn after turn, through the tunnels under the Alps and then---?

She began to tremble. Above, the wooden fan creaked and creaked again.

Signior Maldetta looked up with a vague suspicion.

"49 27," said Nikki slowly.

An image floated before her eyes--an image of bright whiteness, but of what? The Water Castle--that ridiculous piece of ancient piffle? Of the little boat Hermann had been so unexpectedly good at paddling? A stab of pain went through her as she recognized it. It was the white table on the lawn and the sharp horse-face of Frau

Chestnut-Hair-of-Kiele. No surrounding snakes, but still the Medusa of Rudelsheim.

As he waited, not entirely patiently, for her to answer, Signior Maldetta's eyes continued to wander down the folds of the white silk blouse, past the outline of the identity card, to the edge of the brown leather miniskirt.

Nikki gave him back a hard, unyielding stare. Then she said, as fast as she could, "38952."

Signior Maldetta looked back with what, she was glad to see, appeared to be discouragement.

"39852?" he murmured.

From above, the fan continued to push yet another rush of hot air down on his pink forehead.

Nikki nodded, feeling herself relax.

She was safe now. Signior Maldetta would leave her alone. And if he called Rudelsheim, he would only get a wrong number.

Yet for this last she was not sure whether to feel relieved or sorry.

At night, she would lie awake on the hard narrow bed listening to the November rain as it fell on the crooked roofs, the laundry lines that crossed and recrossed one another, and the cobblestoned courtyard so far below.

Overhead, paint flaked slowly off the pale stucco wall, barely visible by the single light bulb not quite in the center of the ceiling. Propped up against the stucco (the pillow was simply too thin to count), she would turn the pages of last month's Italian edition of *Elle* and try to translate the captions. Miniskirts were popular. The new winter coats were fur minicoats--a concept even more absurd than Signora Clara's black fishnet stockings with appliqued red hearts. As for the *Elle* models--with their eyes outlined

black with *kohl* they reminded Nikki of the cats of Rome, only not quite so thin.

Lying down on one side on the threadbare cotton sheet, Nikki repressed a temptation to pretend--just for a minute--that she was still lying warm and comfortable in the Engelstrasse flat under the eiderdown, waiting for the telephone to ring, or a footstep on the creaking stair.

Had he forgotten her by now, Hermann, after her so abrupt departure followed by her equally inexplicable failure to explain? Had he returned to Irene, to the embraces of his wife--or, worse yet, had he allowed himself to be further enticed by Frau Chestnut-Hair of the German-perfect-down-to-the-last-adjective-case-ending, her nitwit son, and her thoroughly obsessive demented spouse?

For, Nikki thought sadly, there was no doubt anyone who set her mind to it could seduce Hermann, at least for a while.

Putting the magazine down, she took the iridescent feather earring from the soft little pink leather case and began to stroke it against her cheek. Was she right, in the end, to have left? Should she, even now, go back? Yet something prevented her, something she could not grasp. It might even be, she could still change her mind. Yet what would her life be like, in Rudelsheim?

Like a beautiful jewel, she thought with longing and disgust.

Like a beautiful jewel shut away from the world in a glass case, protected forever from dust and heat and life.

Was that why the Norwegian woman had felt? Or was she Swedish? The one married to the German who lived next door to Hermann's friend. What was it Frau Chestnut-Hair had said of her? "Was unfortunately not able to accommodate herself to Rudelsheim"?

She could remember it as yesterday--the gleam of the sun off the white lawn table and the jeweled grass, Frau Chestnut-Hair in her shorts and halter twisting a strand of long red hair this way and that.

For she had known, Käthe, she had known what Nikki and Hermann were to each other. She had known everything--except, perhaps, the lie Nikki had told

Hermann in the beginning, the lie that she had seen how married people could have affairs without anyone getting hurt. Was it because she had told that lie that she had let the words of the German woman wound her?

For she had believed, if not Käthe's words, what the words had really meant. That even if she had been able to accommodate herself to Rudelsheim, there was no way Rudelsheim would ever accommodate itself to her.

Somewhere in the Pensione Alberghe there was the sound of a muffled cough. Outside, brakes screeched. Under the noise of the rain, the cats began to yowl. The smell of gasoline, fried garlic, and oreganoed tomatoes rose up, as eternal as it was thoroughly unGerman.

Was it this time of year that Hermann took his *Kneipe*-cure? Surely it had been in November or December that he had gone to the spa where he would step first one foot in cool water, then the other in warm, over and over--rather, she thought with a mild surprise--like Hermann's comings and goings in the lives of the women who loved him.

Nikki pushed the magazine under the bed next to the old rattan suitcase and set the feather earring down on the floor. Picking up a bit of dust from the threadbare cotton sheet, she rose, padded over to the pink plastic waste basket, and flicked it in.

With one last look around the little room--plain, but hers--she reached up and turned off the light. At once a memory of brown pompadour hair soft to the touch assailed her, and the imagined sound of a pair of rimless glasses being folded up and put neatly next to a bed.

Nikki sat up. Was there to be no end to this longing? Her heart was pounding so hard she could barely breathe. Was this what Hermann's asthma attacks felt like?

Tomorrow, thought Nikki. Tomorrow the world would feel normal again.

*I must think of something else at once,* she thought. *Something neutral and calm.*

But as she turned on the light again and reached for a magazine, it irritated her once more that, of all yellow boxes she had mailed from Rudelsheim, only the one with

an entire year's back issues of *Elle* and *Vogue* had failed to arrive.

Tall and thin, Oswaldo lay on the bed naked, scratching his small black beard with a vague air of meditation, or perhaps distress.

He was much thinner and had more hair overall than Hermann, Nikki thought as she observed him from the chair by the window. Otherwise there did not seem to be much resemblance.

Oswaldo coughed. Then he looked down.

"I'm sorry I had--difficulties," he said obscurely. "You know--"

"Oh, that's all right," Nikki interrupted quickly. With the aid of a small hand-mirror, she began to trace a circle of *kohl* (what was *kohl* in Italian?) around her eyes.

"It's perfectly normal the first time," she went on. "Lots of men--"

Then she stopped, horrified lest Oswaldo think her more experienced than in fact she was.

Oswaldo nodded with as much emotion as if they had been discussing the weather.

"I have a cold too, you know," he went on with enthusiasm. "The art history exams are in only two weeks. After that everything will go better."

Feeling suddenly cheerful, Nikki finished the first black circle. For she did feel better, that was for sure.

At this distance, his body looked as smooth, if not quite as well muscled, as a Michelangelo. Even old Signora Spazie had noticed how good-looking he was.

"And you always the quiet one," she had said with a sniff, slowly counting the pile of tiny, crumpled bills with which Nikki was paying the rent.

"Shall we go out?" said Oswaldo, flipping idly through one of the magazines on

the little table by the bed and pausing at an advertisement for a fur minicoat. "I'm rather hungry."

"OK," said Nikki. "In a minute."

"You know," said Oswaldo, putting down the magazine. "It's really hard to read in this light. Would you like a lamp? I have an old crook-necked one I don't use any more."

"Of course you can give me a crook-necked lamp," said Nikki. "It would be very kind."

Observing a thread hanging off the sleeve of her new red cotton blouse, Nikki took a nail scissors from the drawer. She liked the new red blouse: it hid the identity card case better and besides, since it was washable, it saved on the cleaning bills.

"Do you mind if I put on this Patricia Kaas tape?" said Oswaldo. "She's really-- how you say--schwett?"

"Oh, well, but we're going out so soon--"

Nikki's voice trailed off. For she found she no longer liked the strong, gravelly voice with its easy promises of ecstatic bliss.

Yes, she no longer liked it at all.

Oswaldo put the magazine on the floor next to the bed, sat up, and gave her an inquisitive look.

"You are German, no? My aunt said you were German."

Nikki finished outlining her other eye and snapped the *kohl* shut. In its little black case, it looked like a dwarf's finger, or a tiny Etruscan jar.

"No," she said. "Alsatian. Like Patricia Kaas."

Oswaldo shrugged.

"Alsatian, German," he said with cheerful indifference. "It's all the same." As Nikki glared, he added, "My mother's German, you know."

"Oh," said Nikki with a pang. Oswaldo German? Or at least partly German? Was she doomed to spend the rest of her life with Germans no matter how many miles she put between herself and Rudelsheim?

"And your parents?" said Oswald. "They live in Alsace?"

Nikki looked away.

"My mother died when I was born. My father was a miner and got black lung disease after the war. He was made into slave labor by the *Boches*. He survived them, but I remember him only as a vague old man. I was raised by my grandmother, but she's gone now too. I'm like my grandmother," she went on, thinking of the old rattan suitcase under the bed, now frayed and empty except for the white silk blouse. "Only she was pretty."

"Pretty?" said Oswald, looking genuinely puzzled. He had sat up now and was giving his stomach another absent-minded scratch. "But you are very pretty. Surely many men have already told you how pretty you are."

"Oh no," said Nikki without thinking. "I'm too thin and pale and my hair always looks like pigeonfeathers."

And then she began to blink lest the tears destroy all the work she had just done with the *kohl*. For had she not wanted, that day on the river, for Hermann to tell her she was pretty? Had she not wanted it quite desperately as she stood on the bank holding the kayak by the lead watching Hermann struggle up the jeweled grass? She must have, or else she would not be crying now.

"Pigeonfeathers?" Oswald shook his head. "Surely not pigeonfeathers. But tell me," he went on, seemingly unaware of Nikki's discomfort. "Why did you leave Germany? Such a wealthy country. So peaceful. Although maybe that is the wrong question. Maybe the question is why did you go, since they killed your father."

Nikki fastened the brown leather miniskirt and took away from Oswald.

"I wanted to understand," she said. "How people could do such things. Or something like that."

"Did you?"

Nikki shook her head.

"Not really. I found a beautiful, prosperous country where everything was either brand-new or reconstructed to look very old. Cheerful people, hyperpolite almost all the



time. Yet sometimes a violence would break out without warning."

She thought of Herr Pfefferling, who had been so pleasant until the day he began to scream at her that her work was not good.

"They wouldn't accept me, not really"--except, she thought immediately, Hermann--"so I never had the chance to understand."

"So you experienced something of cruelty, then. Is that why you left?"

Her head was hurting now. Why did Oswaldo ask such questions? Wasn't it enough that he was here now, and so was she?

"I left so I could be free," she said, and even to her it sounded naive. She tried it again, louder, but this time it only sounded as if she was disagreeing with someone: "Yes, to be free."

Over his beard Oswaldo's eyes looked out in puzzlement. He had a long, thin face--like the face of a martyr, or an unhappy child. Was it merely the dimness of the light or did his thin face resemble that of the Dying Gaul--or was she thinking of the taxi driver in Rudelsheim?

"Ah, yes," said Oswaldo vaguely. He reached up and stroked her thigh. "Free."

"No, no, not that. I could have had that anywhere."

How could she explain it? She struggled confusedly with the thought.

Freedom, what was it? Something pure, something beautiful and unearthly, like light before a prism broke it into colors.

No, thought Nikki suddenly: that was Hermann. Hermann was like a light before a prism broke it into colors.

Nikki sat down on the edge of the bed. Her head hurt quite dreadfully now.

"Are you all right?" said Oswaldo, suddenly alert. Unfolding his tall frame, he got up and began to dress. "You look ill."

"Oh," said Nikki. "It's nothing. Just a headache. Really. It will go away in a few minutes."

"Perhaps it is the sinuses. I get sinus headaches, you know."

Amazingly, Oswaldo's vagueness had disappeared.

"Oh?" said Nikki faintly, afraid that in another minute Oswaldo would reveal that he, too, had been prone to asthma as a child..

"Yes, yes," said Oswaldo with as much impatience as if she really ought to have known. "Always. From my childhood."

Quickly he searched through his pants pockets, turning the smaller ones inside out.

"I have a really good medicine for sinus here somewhere," he said.

"That's all right," said Nikki quickly. "Why don't we just go somewhere and eat? I'll feel much better if I eat."

They had spent the morning in the Etruscan Museum where, in his slow, stilted German, Oswaldo had translated all the inscriptions for her--glass case after glass case of artifacts and images of a people whose physiognomy was nowhere to be seen in the Roman crowd. It had all made her sad, especially the statues of the young king and queen on top of their sarcophagus who had died at the same time and been buried together. She had needed to turn her face away lest Oswaldo see her eyes' sudden brightness. That would never happen to her and Hermann--although perhaps, in a way, it already had.

But to carry the analogy one step further, Hermann was a Roman and she an Etruscan. Or perhaps the other way round? Why was it that people had this need to bond themselves in groups from which all others had to be excluded, even at the price of death?

"Come," said Oswaldo, dressed now. "I know a good pizza place by the Pantheon. Fennel and artichoke and eggplant and everything. Cheap, too."

Nikki looked up over the blur that was the carriage of the ancient typewriter. Signora Clara frowned as she plucked another envelope from the stack. Amazingly, today's fishnet stockings were exactly the chrome yellow as her nails.

"Is it all right if I take a bit longer at lunchtime so I can cash the salary check?" said Nikki.

Which, as they both knew, was code for, "Has Signior Maldetta deposited enough money so that I can finally cash this check which you gave me two days ago?"

"Of course, of course." Signora Clara seemed just as irritated as if Nikki really had asked a stupid question. "Perhaps at the post office. Yes, at the post office. You can take the mail when you go and get it stamped."

Signora Clara rolled the envelope up into the typewriter and glanced across the desk at Nikki. In her gaze was a flash of dislike. Brief but intense, it reminded Nikki of the waitress in Cafe Schönberg.

Nikki sighed. Why was it that Europeans everywhere disliked foreigners? Why could they all not be more like Alsatians, willing to accommodate whoever ruled them, even to the point of learning their language? Although perhaps--she thought with a shock--perhaps Alsatians disliked foreigners too, only an accident of geography made them afraid to know it.

"Could I go now?" said Nikki, trying without much success to sound meek, or at least hide her irritation--for the rent had been due to Signora Spazie the day before. Perhaps Oswaldo was right that it was time for her to leave Maldetta, Maldetta, and Cie.

"It's already almost one," said Nikki.

In his glassed-in office, Signior Maldetta could be seen pacing back and forth under a broken fan.

Signora Clara thrust out a stack of sealed envelopes needing stamps. "Be sure and be back by two," said Signora Clara, looking away. "I would like to go out myself by then."

Outside, a pale sun was struggling to emerge from behind a solid layer of white clouds. For the first time since Nikki had arrived in Rome, the air felt truly warm.

Quickly she pushed her way through the crowd with its excited chatter and its smell of stale, friendly sweat. Why was it that in her memories of Rudelsheim it was always warm and sunny? The August crowds swirling over the cobblestones on the Spaziergangstrasse; the young couple in blue jeans outside the train station, embracing under the flight of summer birds. The reality, she reminded herself sternly, had more often been quite different.

In the Post Office, the check-cashing lines wound their way all around the huge nineteenth century pillars that held up the roof. It would take until long after two, although if she were not back by then, Signora Clara with her long nails would be fuming. But if she did not cash the check, there would be no roll of crumpled bills for Signora Spazie, and that would be, at least in the short run, much worse.

Nikki looked around the vast space. Then she noticed that there were only two people waiting on the line for the long-distance telephone.

Nikki stood very still. She could feel a flush spreading across her face. Was it permitted to pay for a long-distance call with a third-party check? She began to breathe slowly and deeply in a way that nonetheless did not satisfy.

Perhaps-- she thought. After all, she never had written that letter she had promised, now so long ago. Yet what would she say? That she lived in Rome, that she had been living in Rome ever since she had so abruptly left Rudelsheim? That she was sorry, sorry, sorry--the words echoed in her head in language after language, ending with *Mi dispiace*.

But for what? Well, it hardly mattered. There was no reason she could not just listen to his voice for a moment and then hang up.

Timidly Nikki took out the pink identity card case from under the red blouse and stepped up to the window. No doubt there would be some bureaucratic rule would protect her from the consequences of her own foolish notions.

But the girl merely gestured with a bored air toward one of the booths.

"Cabine 6," she said. "You pick it up when it rings."

Nikki pushed open the door of the booth and stepped inside. There was a smell

of dust and ancient wood.

Hermann, she thought. But all that came was an image of a pair of rimless glasses that reflected back herself: younger, more vulnerable, more frightened.

When it finally rang, there was only the double buzzing noise of a German telephone---a noise so weak and overlaid with static that when it finally gave way to a voice, Nikki jumped backward and sat down abruptly.

"Glück," said a woman's voice, sharp and clear. And then, impatient if not angry: "Glück?"

Disappointment ran through Nikki sharp as pain. Should she speak? Surely it would not make any difference now. Outside the glass, people who seemed farther away than Rudelsheim kept walking back and forth as if it was an ordinary day.

"Hermann?" said the voice at the other end of the line. Even through the static, the anguish was entirely clear.

"Hermann, please," the voice wailed. "Is that really you?"

A single tear ran down Nikki's left cheek and dropped, large and wet, into her lap.

So he was with Käthe now. Or someone else.

Nikki dropped the receiver in the cradle. She could feel her hands trembling.

Pushing the door out, she began to move toward the exit. She was running now: her own footsteps echoed in her ears. Suddenly there was a hand on her shoulder.

"Your change, miss." And the young woman frowned with annoyance at having had not only to come out from behind the window but to run besides. "It's really quite a lot, you know."

Nikki stared at the crumpled little bills in her hand and tried to reckon it all up. How much had the phone call cost? How could she have been so reckless! Her heart sank as she counted up the remainder--less than about half the rent she already owed. She would have to borrow from Oswaldo--or more precisely, from Oswaldo's aunt.

"Thank you," she said after a minute. It puzzled her that her voice was so soft. "I'm sorry to have caused you so much trouble."

Outside, the sun had finally managed to break through the clouds. From around the corner, a troop of demonstrators carrying black umbrellas began to march down the street, blocking the way back.

"Corruption!" they shouted. One held a fuzzy photograph of a man in a double-breasted gray silk suit from the pocket of which protruded a large, green handkerchief.

"Only he can save us! Only he can save us from corruption!"

A murmur ran through the crowd, although whether of approval or annoyance at the disruption Nikki could not tell. Several people held up copies of the *Corriere* over their heads against the sun.

What was it Hermann had said? Something about a Bishop. "Everyone else who spoke out was killed"--was that it? Surely her head hurt so much she could scarcely be expected to remember.

Nikki began to run, the pink leather identity card case flapping back and forth against her chest. Narrower and narrower, the streets led upwards. At the top of a long stone staircase Nikki stopped, exhausted.

Below, barely visible in the smog-laden air, a parade of small, battered cars circled the Coliseum. Beyond, the black twisted wires of a million poorly functioning telephones.

"The envelopes!" Nikki cried out loud. "What on earth did I do with the envelopes?"

At once she sat down on the stone staircase and put her head in her hands. At that very moment the envelopes were being swept out of Cabine 6 by the cleaning crew and taken away in the trash. .

As she opened her eyes, she saw a small, scrawny cat with enormous eyes. Yowling, it sidled up without being asked.

As she took it in her arms and began to stroke its thin yet not unpleasant fur, Nikki found herself murmuring over and over, nonsensical if comfortable-sounding syllables that, to her great surprise, had a distinctly German tinge.

The funicular went all the way to the top of the gardens, Oswaldo said. From there they could walk down. Unless Nikki preferred to walk up as well?

Nikki shook her head. Secretly she thought it silly to come all this way on a pleasant summer Sunday afternoon just to see a Renaissance garden, but she said nothing.

The garden was a feat of Renaissance engineering, and nowadays Oswaldo was interested in everything connected with engineering--especially if, as in this case, it was a wonder of art as well. With the help of a second cousin, he had just managed to transfer into engineering school from art history. Nikki sighed. For how a garden could be an engineering feat Nikki could not--not even through her new rimless glasses--quite see.

They were halfway there now, Oswaldo said. Above the funicular wire, a troupe of pigeons circled, making soft, soothing noises. Nikki smoothed her new blue miniskirt down over the matching fishnet stockings. What was that little book Oswaldo was so absorbed in?

It was a guidebook, open to a portrait of the duke who had commissioned the gardens. His beard, the same style as Oswaldo's only longer and less scruffy, came down just below his enormous ruff. He at least had survived better than the dying Gaul or the Etruscans--or rather, this perhaps flattering likeness had survived, penned no doubt by an artist he had patronized. He reminded her of someone, but she could not quite think whom.

"Look," said Oswaldo, tugging her arm.

Below, the garden covered the hill in what appeared to be a dark green maze. Arm in arm, people strolled downwards. Children ran, laughing, toward the ice-vendor's

truck. A breeze blew through Nikki's hair, bringing with it the almond scent of the shampoo Oswaldo had used to wash it with earlier that morning. That, too, had been his idea. Even now she was not entirely sure what she thought of him, with his odd mixture of practicality and vagueness, his unpredictable kindly gestures. Yet on the whole, she thought, she rather liked him.

Yes, she was almost sure of it now: she liked him very much.

With a jolt, Oswaldo jumped off the funicular and held out his hand.

"It's the fountains that make it so wonderful," he said. "It's all done with the natural water flow. There's not a single pump anywhere."

Buried in the box hedges of the maze was a stream that ran down the hill, punctuated by fountain after fountain, each showing forth a different figure from Renaissance myth. In each, the water spouted from a different orifice: for Narcissus, an eye; for Cupid, a hand; for Venus, both breasts and so on--the elegant ur-ancestors of every vulgar European fountain in every tiny European square.

Hand-in-hand, they paused, transfixed before a stone ear almost as tall as Oswaldo and of a tracery more intricate than her own.

"So," said Nikki, blinking through the glasses. "It's one enormous baroque joke."

"Renaissance," Oswaldo corrected her. "Not baroque. Much earlier than baroque."

Well, thought Nikki. At least a bit more modern than the Water-Castles.

"What was the name of the duke?" she said.

But Oswaldo, having run on ahead, was stopped now at a group of young people whom he seemed to know. They were waiting for her, with their easy animation and their faded jeans.

Suddenly Nikki was conscious of the cheap thinness of her skirt; of a small snag in the fishnet of her stocking, of the red blouse now almost washed to the thickness of onionskin.

Thinking of a long feather earring bright and shimmery as a peacock's tail, Nikki felt suddenly shy. Beyond them stretched the vast, unknowable city whose history did



not belong to her. Whatever would they think of a small, no-longer young Alsatian woman with a funny accent and a foreign past?

"Nikki!"

With an expression of impatience, Oswaldo motioned her on, his curved arm reaching out.

They were laughing, these pleasant-faced Roman young people, laughing at the ridiculousness of the recumbent Venus spouting water from both breasts--or perhaps simply because, at some moments of life, there is no pain at all.

"So," thought Nikki with some apprehension. She was almost there. And how should he introduce her to his friends? It would say a great deal about his feeling for her, how he introduced her. Yet how should he?

Then it came to her, so simply that she wondered why she had not thought of it before.

"I am the woman who loved Hermann Glück," she thought, surprised but pleased. "I will always be the woman who once loved Hermann Glück."

And that very evening, as she sat by the narrow window in the Pensione Alberghe, under the crook-necked lamp, the silence broken only by Oswaldo's rhythmic snores, Nikki finally managed it.

Slowly and carefully, the new rimless glasses falling down again and again only to be pushed up, she wrote the letter that explained everything once and for all--why she had left, what she had found, why she could not go back--that long, long letter of which, in years to come, she would remember not a single word.

IRENE

At last the ceremony was over.

One by one, the guests, attired in the unaccustomed formality of black, began to walk slowly back to their cars, leaving only Hermann and Irene by the still-open grave. They had neither spoken to nor looked at each other since meeting earlier that morning on the Ringstrasse. As the guests, one by one, murmured a few last condolences and melted off into the forest, they continued to maintain this self-imposed decorum.

Under the gray sky of northern Europe, a slight mist began to fall. At once the line of the horizon disappeared, hidden in a chromatic blur between the darkness of the earth and an uncertain sky. Hermann, averting his eyes from the polished wooden box, whistled a high, tuneless air as Irene slowly began to undo the buttons of one of the long gloves that reached almost to her elbow. Under a tree pitted by acid rain, two young men in jeans leaned on their shovels and waited. In the preternaturally dark light, a single gold earring worn by the smaller of the two glinted now and then, like an eclipsing sun.

"So," said Irene, in a tone she hoped sounded controlled. "What happens now? You have your mother's house, I suppose. But what will you do?"

At once the mist began to turn to rain. Drops fell on top of, but failed to penetrate, Irene's firmly pinned coiffure. Slowly they turned and began to walk back to the parking lot, making their way slowly through the now-dampening paths.

Hermann surveyed the wet leaves underfoot.

"I really haven't thought about it," he said. Then, in an unpleasantly high-pitched voice, he added, "Did you know that my Aunt Bertha was a lesbian?"

Irene wrinkled her nose with distaste. For it seemed to her that now she and Hermann had been living separately for seven and a half months, there was something inappropriate, even embarrassing, about this revelation in a moment of family stress.

"Yes," Hermann went on without waiting for an answer. "Uncle Horst told me one day after she died when we were out in the forest gathering blackberries. She ran off with another woman and went to live in Berlin. They had a salon together before the war. Of course it was a great scandal."

Irene observed Hermann out of the corner of her eye as, with taking off his glasses, he shook them free of raindrops, scoured them with a crumpled handkerchief, and then replaced them on his nose. At once they began to slide downwards.

How like Hermann, thought Irene, to be perturbed about a family scandal that had ended thirty years ago and been a secret besides. And his own affair with--what was the name of that young Alsatian woman? To say nothing of his far more outrageous liaison with a member of their own intimate circle. Even now she could barely bring herself to think of it.

Hermann wiped the high, shiny forehead under the damp pompadour curls and stuffed the handkerchief awkwardly back in his pocket.

"I suppose it's an option," said Irene.

"Running a salon?"

Irene shook the rain off her carefully coiffed hair, took a small black umbrella from her purse, and opened it.

"No," she said. "Lesbianism."

Behind the round, fogged glasses, Hermann's eyes grew larger.

Holding the umbrella with her ungloved hand, Irene struggled to undo the glove on the other. Now that the formalities were over, she felt self-conscious wearing them. Still, they gave her great pleasure. Once, long ago, she had worn them on the way to concerts, to keep her hands warm. Yes, her hands. Large for a woman her size, she had made them larger by finger exercises until they reached two whole notes past an octave. They had a peasant's strength to them, and a peasant's look, the plain nails kept always filed down to the nub. But she liked them--even if now and then she had suffered a pang or two of envy for normal women, who could have long, perfectly polished nails.

Should she offer Hermann the umbrella? It was raining quite hard now, although Hermann seemed hardly to notice.

"Are you sure your Aunt Bertha was really lesbian? Perhaps she was just too strong-minded for the men of that time. Perhaps she just gave up on them, or they on

her."

"Perhaps," he said. Then his face fell. "I suppose I should have asked my mother when there was still time."

And again he put his hands in his pockets and began to whistle--this time, a mournful, disconsolate air. Far off in the forest, they could hear the sounds of the gravediggers at their work.

"But you haven't answered my question, you know," said Irene. "I mean, as to what happens now."

Hermann's face, blank and vacuous, registered puzzlement.

"Now? Why, now we go to a restaurant. When I was a child we always went to Am Wassertor after funerals and ate a big old-fashioned meal. Sauerbraten and venison and so on. It was quite nice, really. They had rather good lingonberry sauce."

Then, with the unthinking politeness Irene had always found at once infuriating and charming, Hermann added, "Unless you would rather go home---?"

"Home?" said Irene, shaking with so much rage that raindrops flew off the dark, smooth hair. "Whose home? Yours? Mine? Your mother's?"

They had reached the parking lot. Streaks of dust, turning one by one to mud, ran down the sides of the white Ford station wagon--a sign, Irene thought, of how far Hermann had let himself go.

Before them, on either side of the road, a row of trees stretched, dark and mournful. In the fields beyond, headstones rose up like reproaches, each bearing some familiar and distinguished name now nearly indecipherable in the old *Fraktur* script. Here and there, far from the road, a flowered wreath could be discerned.

Rain etched the folds of Hermann's raincoat as he leaned against the car. The distant, thumping noise with a not-quite regular rhythm which he had at first thought to be his heart was--he now realized with relief--merely the gravediggers.

Which it made him sad. Despite the months of anticipation, it was only with great difficulty, and for short periods of time, that he could allow himself to feel that his mother was really gone.

"You know, Irene, it's a strange feeling. Mother, Father, Aunt Bertha--all gone now. And I am at so early a stage in life. After all"--he shook the rain from his raincoat and ran a hand over his now thoroughly soaked pompadour curls---"I am only forty and already the last of the line."

"That's hardly my fault, you know," said Irene, bristling.

At once she was sorry. It was true that over the years Hermann had refused, time and again, to have a child. Yet surely it was cruel, at such a moment, to take revenge.

Catching a sideglance, she saw to her relief and irritation that he did not seem to be have taken offence.

Hermann fumbled in the depths of a pocket, presumably for the car key. Then he turned and gave his wife a long, steady look.

"As far as divorce goes"--he paused and sniffed--"I leave that completely to you. You have only to say the word. Herr Verfügel is completely at your disposal. I told him so last week."

His stomach, never small in all the years they had lived together, now spilled gracefully but unmistakably over his belt. The snuffle was perhaps from a chronic cold--he had always been subject to summer colds in addition to his asthma and a vague internal malady he attributed, with no medical evidence whatsoever, to his spleen. His pallor spoke, as usual, of too-heavy meals and insufficient sleep. How often in the old days she had woken in the middle of the night only to find the other bed empty and Hermann seated on the plush carpet of his study, sipping camomile tea as he clipped articles from his favorite tabloid--"Invading Aliens Demand Place in Romanian Parliament" or "Two-Headed Dog Born in Koblenz." Begun in parody of Jürgen when they were all students at the university together, it had always seemed one of his stranger, if more harmless, habits.

Irene stepped into the waiting car and shut the umbrella. Slowly she shook it out over the curb, then placed it at her feet as she snapped the door shut.

"I am not interested in divorce at the moment," she said, to her own surprise--for

she had decided just the opposite only this morning as she walked down to the Ringstrasse.

Out of the corner of one eye she observed Hermann's evident discomfort with a growing calm.

"Perhaps at some time in the future," she added. "And then again--perhaps not."

Hermann bent his head as he reached down for the ignition.

"I see," he said, his lips in a thin, pale line.

At the corner of the Ringstrasse, Hermann pulled the car up on the curb and stopped, the motor still running.

"Bye," Irene said faintly. "See you."

A vague and almost imperceptible movement of the brown pompadour curls was the only sign that Hermann had heard.

As she slammed the door, the white, or once-white, Ford station wagon pulled out into the heavy traffic coursing around the Ringstrasse, spraying water in all directions.

Irene stood as if transfixed. Pedestrians on their way to somewhere where life was still normal streamed around her, grumbling as the light changed. For a moment it seemed to her she knew how they saw her: a tiny, well-turned out woman alone on a street corner, teetering at the edge of middle age. How small and insignificant she must seem! It was good they did not know how little she had accomplished in her life.

The rain, steady now, was at least lighter. Taking a deep breath, she moved one small, high-heeled foot off the curb.

In the hands she had once thought would make her famous, Irene found herself clasping a small and thoroughly wet folding umbrella; the key to the flat, bought for them both by Hermann so long ago; and two long, hopelessly unfashionable gloves.

"'Ap-ril, Ap-ril, whatever she wills, that's what she wants.'"

"No, no, Käthe. You've got it all wrong. It's 'Ap-ril, Ap-ril, she always wants whatever she wills.'"

Ahead of him, Käthe was splashing--much too quickly for it to have any medicinal value--through the shallow pools, alternately warm and cool, of the foot baths known as the *Kneipe*. Her breasts, enormous compared to Irene's or Nikki's, jutted out into the humid air of the spa room in a manner at once curious and self-possessed.

As she turned, waving him on, Hermann wished, not for the first time, that he had been able to come alone this year as usual. Still, he had to admit he did not entirely mind. Her chatter took his mind off things. Besides which, there had never been any hope that Käthe would let him spend his annual visit to Bad Kurkenheim alone. He knew she was jealous even of his solitude.

Hermann pulled the soft, white towel more firmly around his middle and tried to knot it together so that this time it would hold. Nothing seemed to have gone right this year. His mother's slow decline after her failed suicide attempt last summer had caused him to put off his visit until April--so late in the season that, really, there was hardly any point. Already the cycle of spring rain and brilliant skies had begun. It was highly unlikely he would catch a cold now. Yet he had not wanted to forgo Bad Kurkenheim, even though it meant having to pretend to the spa administration that Käthe was Frau Glück. Was that what Käthe had wanted all along? She had certainly seemed pleased when they had registered. He had never seen her blush before, her cheeks turning suddenly pink as her long dark hair fell in a rush over her bony shoulders.

She was waving at him again. Even through his steam-fogged glasses, he could still discern how her body radiated impatience. Slowing, Hermann put a toe in the next foot bath. Really, there was no point at all in doing this if one was going to rush. Perhaps if he slowed down she would take a hint--?

Hermann cleared his throat. What should he say? She seemed to expect him to say something, and he did not want to appear a fool. But they had been in the baths



now for almost an hour, and he was tired. Indeed, he could feel in himself the beginnings of a desire to lie down.

As he reached her, he took off his glasses and rubbed them on the damp towel around his middle, which was once more threatening to fall off entirely.

"Actually, Käthe, your recollection, or rather misrecollection, of the proverb describes me rather well, while mine describes you."

With a toss of her head, Käthe stood up straighter and smiled.

"Yes, it is true," she said with an exaggerated coyness that only annoyed him further. "We are always thinking of one another now."

Hermann brought the other foot down into the next bath--it was one of the cold ones. Towel in hand, he stood still and tried to see. Rubbing his glasses on the towel had merely smeared them, and they were fogging again now in the humid air. Even so, they failed to obscure Käthe's triumphant smile.

Why did women always misinterpret him? Was that why, long long ago, Irene had told him he had "too many girlfriends"? He had hardly meant to flatter just now, let alone say anything that could be construed as a declaration of love. He merely said the first thing that came into his head. Hermann frowned, he hoped sternly.

"The idea is to put the body through a series of nonstructural modifications," he said in a slow, even voice. "First warm, then cool, then warm again. Always without shock. Little by little the body strengthens itself under this moderate stress so that extremes of temperature have less power over it in the future."

"I see," said Käthe in a skeptical voice. "Another one of your homeopathic remedies?"

To his annoyance, she splashed from side to side with her enormous body, causing water from the bath she was in to splash into his.

With one edge of the towel, Hermann wiped a damp knee.

"Homeopathic, no," he said with dignity. "Nineteenth century, yes."

"Yes. Well. I still fail to see how something which affects only the foot can help the entire system," said Käthe.

The long, carefully dyed chestnut hair tossed back and forth over the huge breasts in indignant agreement.

At the end of the long room, a door opened to reveal a small, squat woman of indeterminate age in a white uniform, her hair gathered firmly back behind a pair of long, finely shaped ears.

"Herr Glück, Frau Glück. Very nice to see you again, Herr Glück. I hope you have had a healthful year. When you are finished, please ring and we will finish as usual with the water cure."

As quickly as it had opened, the door closed.

"Whatever does she mean?" said Käthe as, once more grasping the towel around his middle, Hermann caught up.

"She will hose us down with cold water when we are done," said Hermann. "Starting from the extremities--feet and wrists--and working inward, very gradually so that the pulses are not distressed. It is all very scientific."

Käthe made a noise indicating protest that yet another antique ritual was still to come.

"One more time," said Hermann firmly, turning around and preparing to walk backwards through the footbaths.

At once Käthe began a long, one-sided discussion about her son. Was it because of them--she meant she and Hermann--that Willi was now becoming so entirely difficult? To be sure, as things between them (that is, she and Hermann) had developed over the summer, Willi had been neglected. Indeed, the series of kayak lessons had never come to pass, nor had Hermann's plans to teach Willi how to play chess. And now he went to rock concerts with his friends and drank beer and did God only knew what else when he was out. Yes, yes, Käthe wound up, something must be done--but what?

Both towel ends pressed firmly in one hand, Hermann stepped out of the last footbath and pressed the bell next to the door. Everything was ruined now, he thought. Even this room, so familiar and comforting, now felt strange and made him irritable.

The last time he had rung this bell he had been Hermann Glück, dipl. Ing., aging and frustrated and unhappy and secure.

And now? Now he was Hermann Glück, of uncertain marital status, accompanied against his will by his mistress, who was now carrying on--virtually with herself--a long conversation about her son, who had failed his maths with no sign of remorse, went to rock concerts on the weekends with a group of rather scruffy youths he insisted on calling friends, and had just--oh horror!--begun to sport a gold earring in one ear.

"It doesn't mean anything nowadays," said Hermann absently. "All the young people do it, boys as well as girls. Perhaps it's better, not having so many differences."

But then he shuddered, thinking of Irene's insistence that he be the one to scrub the stairs in front of the flat every four weeks when it was their turn.

With another toss of her head, Käthe turned her face away.

"You might feel differently if it was your son," she said in a low voice.

Hermann closed his eyes, wishing there was something equivalent he could do with his ears. All in all, Bad Kurkenheim this year felt less like an illicit rendezvous than like a parody of domestic life. Even the familiar room of the Kneipe baths no longer looked the same, even though absolutely nothing had changed, not even the pale green and white of the tiles. The attendant now gently directing the nozzle at his toes looked exactly as he remembered, down to the ears. Yet the little ritual, which he remembered as a comforting, if trivial, moment in his former unhappy but well-ordered life, now failed to lessen his unease. Was there nothing he could do? Would life never be normal again? Feeling a slight sensation of vertigo, Hermann leaned against the damp, tiled wall.

"Are you all right?" said Käthe. "Hermann, dearest, are you quite all right?"

"No," said Hermann weakly. "Perhaps I had better lie down."

His heart, which had been quiet since the funeral, was now pounding away in his chest like an anvil wielded by a madman.

Lying in one of the reclining chairs facing the full-length window, he allowed

Käthe to arrange his blanket and turn up the collar of his robe. Reflexively, he found himself smiling with childish gratitude, all the while detesting the part of himself that liked being taken care of.

Soon she lay beside him, falling quickly into a sleep marked by shallow snores. Outside, the forest darkened in the late afternoon light. An April rain had begun to fall--- big drops at first, then hail sheets of water cascading against the glass. Well, at least his heart was thumping normally again in its cage.

For some reason a memory of that distant sunny day when he and Uncle Horst had gathered blackberries in the Neuwald surged up into his mind. It had rained then, too. Under the huge, dark trees, little mushrooms had risen up underfoot like tiny hats left behind by mistake. How long ago it seemed! He had been happy then, a mindless teenager. His worst conundrum had been where on his bedroom wall to tape his newly acquired poster of the latest American movie star.

Without warning, he felt a stab of pain, then a triumphant surge of joy. An image, not at all blurred, of a single iridescent feather earring rose up in his mind. An earring all too familiar, flung carelessly on the coffee table of the Engelstrasse flat--clearer and more real to him than any of the trees outside.

Above, lingering and just barely out of reach, a face turned--towards him? away from him?--then paused in silhouette, half-hidden by some wisps of short, dark hair.

As it does in many towns in the region of the Water Castle, the D-29 passes quickly over the cobblestones of the single big street in Plittendorf, quickly hastening onward to places of far greater importance.

At the very end of the town, just as the D-29 turns into a country road, stands a large, solid edifice of brown wood and yellow plaster in the old farmhouse style--one of

the few buildings to have survived both the onslaught of the Russian army, the American air assault, and the tanks of the British occupation that were still sometimes to be seen, aimlessly wandering through the countryside. (The cobblestones of the main street, just like the cobblestones of the Ringstrasse, had of course all been replaced after the war--as, indeed, they had been many times before.

A large, somewhat rusted knocker on the door of the house appeared to announce an unconventional lack of concern with appearances, or perhaps more simply a lack of funds. On closer observation, to the right of the knocker was a new if smallish bell with a gold plaque beneath, spotlessly clean and carefully lettered with the simple legend: "Hufnagel. Please ring."

Here lived alone, as she had for many years, Irene's mother, Frau Anni Hufnagel. In a uniform sewn by his wife, Herr Hufnagel at twenty--an enthusiast of the Party--had marched cheerfully off to the Russian front, from which he had not returned. Frau Hufnagel had kept up the Plittendorf house on her widow's pension. An unexpected bequest from a distant uncle had paid for the Bechstein on which Irene had showed so early and so distinct a talent. Piano lessons and the remainder of the mortgage used up the rest. As for herself, Frau Hufnagel disliked classical music. In this--and only this-- she resembled her son-in-law.

All this of this past, however, was now as dimly present to Frau Hufnagel's recollection as the sermons of the Bishop or the transit camp just outside Plittendorf of whose existence everyone had been aware but of which no one spoke. Sitting side by side with Irene on the couch in the cluttered living-room, she poured out the afternoon coffee and placed it next to the two pieces of apple cake with raisins. Her hair newly rinsed in henna, Frau Hufnagel leaned forward on the couch as if to make a point, her fine aquiline features stiff as wax. Lined with age and carefully, if lightly, powdered, they resembled Irene's as little as her house, filled with Hümmel figures and other small, hard-to-dust objects, resembled the flat on the Ringstrasse, where style was equally informed by Irene's rage for order and Hermann's desire for calm.

"It's really quite charming," Frau Hufnagel was saying. "Next time you come we

must go together."

"Charming? What is so charming?" Irene sighed. "I'm sorry, I'm afraid I wasn't paying attention."

Frau Hufnagel replaced the china coffee cup in its saucer with a single, precise motion and leaned back.

"The new museum, Irene. The one I have been telling you about for months. I was saying I was thinking I might volunteer--just an hour or two a day. You know, to pass the time. I do think it would be rather nice."

It was a museum to house the snuff boxes of Kaiser Wilhelm, abandoned in Plittendorf at some point in the Great War and only recently--to the great delight of the Mayor and the Town Council--rediscovered.

"Look," said Frau Hufnagel.

She held out a small square box painted a faded yellow. As she opened it, a smell somewhere between must and tobacco rose up.

Irene nodded, trying to hide her repulsion. How could it be, that this woman was her mother?

"So," said Frau Hufnagel, shifting her weight on the couch while stirring in a bit more condensed milk into the cup. "You and Hermann have finally agreed to divorce?"

Irene took a swallow of the coffee, noticing too late that it was scalding.

"Not exactly," she heard herself say in a faint voice.

"Not exactly?"

Frau Hufnagel's eyes narrowed and her lower lip curled downward in a way that someone other than Irene might have construed as bitter.

"Irene," said Frau Hufnagel with unmistakable reproach.

Next to the couch, the sound of a bird chirping could be heard under the green cover of an old-fashioned cage. At once Frau Hufnagel rose, walked out to the kitchen and returned with a small rectangle in her hand that looked like a piece of cork.

"Special vitamins," said Frau Hufnagel in answer to the question in Irene's face. "Good for little birds--at least if the television is to be believed."

Her chest heaving, Frau Hufnagel opened the cage and placed the biscuit on a wire rack, on which the bird at once descended. As her mother continued to stand, making a series of clucks and whispers as the bird began to eat, a sadness came over Irene.

"Irene," said Frau Hufnagel. "What you are waiting for? Why hold on? It is my perception that Hermann never made you happy, even on the best days. Isn't that right?"

Frau Hufnagel sighed as she closed the little metal door and sat down.

"You know, there is never quite so much time left as one thinks--to do what one wants, I mean. If you can't have one thing, why then you must try to have another. It's never any good to hold on. And, in any case," Frau Hufnagel wound up obscurely but not without logic, "what is there for you to hold on to?"

As the hood descended on the little cage, the bird chirped once and then fell silent.

"Is it him--I mean Hermann? Is he unwilling to divorce?"

"No," said Irene. "He has spoken with Verfügel."

A flush spread across Frau Hufnagel's face.

"Really, Irene," she said in an all-too-familiar tone. "I simply don't understand you. It seems to me you never do anything at all in a normal way."

A pain welled up inside Irene, although whether from the discomfort of the moment or from something else, she did not know.

For no reason she could understand she remembered the last concert, the one at the Brautherzen summer Festival in Cerne. For once she had thought to win easily. The nearest challenger, a young man with heavy black-rimmed glasses and an already receding hairline named Hans Krueger, had a tendency to forget cadenzas mid-way through. Yet as she had sat before the great piano, its black lid propped open like a huge, orphaned wing, it had been she and not Hans Krueger who been unable to go on.

"It's not time yet," said Irene, not understand herself what she meant. "It's simply not time."

"Nonsense," said her mother as the bird under its covering once more began to chirp. "It's long past time."

Irene looked away. By chance her eye fell on one of the many porcelain figures in the room. It was a shepherdess in an eighteenth-century style, the fixed smile on her lips faded to a pale pink, and the gold of her shoes almost worn away. Always before she had thought of the porcelain figures as belonging exclusively to her mother's world, not hers.

Yet what was the difference, in the end, between spending one's days tending ancient, empty snuff boxes and playing Satie at midnight for oneself only, however beautifully--or worse yet, sitting at the keyboard and not playing Satie?

As the clock on the Rudelsheim cathedral tower chimed two, the shadows of its frail hands marked out against the lighted backdrop, a slight noise came from the study.

*Hermann*, thought Irene automatically. Hermann with his camomile tea, his bizarre clippings.

Which, of course, it could not be. In front of the Bechstein in the music room, she turned a page of the score of *Gymnopédie* with one hand while soaking the other in hot water. They hurt from playing all day, but even though it was long past midnight, there was no hope of sleep. So there was nothing to do but remember that, after a certain point, studying the score was more important than the mechanics of practicing--mechanics which a mature pianist in any case should long since have mastered. Well, she had not reached that point and probably would never. Still, it could do no harm. In any case, the neighbors would be grateful.

There was that noise again--or had she imagined it? Walking on the balls of her feet like a thief in her own flat, Irene approached the study. The small green art



nouveau lamp was on, casting a yellow triangle of light over the plain wooden table that had for years served as Hermann as both desk and engineer's drawing board. With a shock, Irene recognized the large, round back bent over a stack of papers.

Softly--and then not so softly--Irene coughed.

"Hermann," she said.

Slowly he straightened up and faced her, an insincere smile pasted on his face.

"Excuse me," said Irene. "What are you doing here?"

Her anger drained out of her as she realized that he looked ill.

"Sorry if I disturbed you," he said as casually as if they had spoken five minutes before. "I was in the neighborhood, you see. Some papers, you know. Verfügel wanted. Other things--here--"

Hermann stopped, letting the paper in his hand drop. Although it was not at all warm in the room, the light from the green art nouveau lamp revealed beads of sweat under the brown pompadour curls.

Good heavens, thought Irene. He is not well. And for a moment she could not think for fright. Asthma? Spleen? Should she try to persuade him to see a doctor? But as he continued to mumble, her heart grew cold. After all, it was hardly her problem now. He could always ask Käthe.

"Irene--" said Hermann with a trace of his old indecisiveness.

On the desk, directly under the small green lampshade, the phone rang.

At exactly the same moment, they reached for the receiver. Their fingers touched, then ricocheted off each other like billiard balls.

Irene looked away, her shoulders stiff.

"Please," she said.

Hermann made a mock-courtly gesture.

Irene shook her head.

As the phone continued to ring, Hermann picked up the receiver and handed it to his wife.

"Glück," said Irene. Then again, louder: "Glück."

Irene hung up the receiver with a puzzled look.

"That's very odd," she said. "I had always thought these phone calls were from you."

"Phone *calls*?" said Hermann, raising an eyebrow. "More than one?"

"Yes, yes. I get them all the time now. Sometimes even this late. But obviously they can't be from you, since you're right here."

Hermann frowned. Reflected in his glasses she could see, in miniature, the green lamp, the desk, the dark room beyond--even the tiny figure that was herself.

"Obviously not. But this is modern life, you know. Strangers can cause annoyance to strangers now with virtually no effort, even across continents."

"But perhaps the phone calls are for you," said Irene slowly. She paused. "You know. I mean, from--?"

She stopped, unable to say the name.

With a plop, Hermann sat down at what had once been his desk. To her immense horror, he began to cry.

"She is gone," he said simply. "She is gone forever. It's all in the letter. Oh, such a terrible, terrible letter. No one should ever have to receive a letter like that."

Irene made a noise. That Hermann could cry---! She felt as if a crack in the world had suddenly opened up.

"She refuses to see you?" said Irene after a moment.

Ever so slightly, Hermann nodded.

A strange sensation of joy and powerlessness swept over Irene, succeeded by a numbness. Nothing had really changed. Yet was this not what she had wanted, what she had told herself she wanted more than anything for months?

He was coming to himself now, handkerchief in hand and his glasses cast--how many times had she seen them there before, but never so carelessly--on the pale wooden desk.

"Irene," said Hermann, his voice almost normal. "You must excuse me. I am not at all myself these days."

Without a word, she moved closer to where he was sitting. Tentatively, then firmly, first, she began to run her fingers through the once-familiar brown pompadour curls. The sensation, strange yet not without pleasure, brought her closer to a feeling she could not quite name. Could one ever go back? Often she had thought so, yet this did not feel quite right. It was like taking a dress from a closet one had not worn in years, only to find the fabric worn, thinned, smelling of camphor, a moth-hole at the breast.

His arms were slowly but definitely tightening around her waist. Was there any point in going on? It seemed not, yet she could not find the will to stop.

"Irene," said Hermann somewhat, but not entirely, hesitant. The tone reminded her of his historically more manipulative moments. "Perhaps it would be better if I were to lie down?"

Had it always been like this, he coming to her for comfort and she taking him in? She rather thought now that it had. Yet for what? Whatever the real nature of his demons, she had failed to tame them, let alone drive them away. She remembered now like a pageant unrolling before her eyes how, little by little, she had closed herself off from him.

But it was impossible not to take some solace in the way his arms clutched around her, and in the morning she was not sure whether she was glad or sorry on finding, as she expected, he was gone.

Slowly but definitely the D-29 wound its way slowly around the curve of the small manmade lake that lay just at the outskirts of Rudelsheim. Between the road and the lake, a mare and her foal could be seen sporting in the meadow, their dark coats sleek and wet with the dew that coated the newly green grass under their feet. Above, a pale

spring sun looked out from--then hid behind--an equally pale cloud. Far off, at the edge of the visible world, the stone facade of the Water Castle rose above the horizon, ancient and clear as a dream.

Irene steered the car carefully round the turns, slowing reluctantly as she went. It was Wednesday afternoon, time for the weekly visit to Frau Anni. As every turn of the wheel brought her nearer to Plittendorf, her sense of dread grew. It angered her that her mother--whose most unconventional gesture, so far as she knew, was an occasional, minor deviation from an embroidery pattern--had from the beginning pushed her to divorce. Had everyone in Rudelsheim suddenly gone mad, or only those she loved--or had loved, or should have loved?

Irene ran a hand over the smooth, precisely coiffed hair. The Water Castle was almost upon her now, with its ancient stone presence. In the weak spring sun, it looked almost welcoming--or perhaps as welcoming as it could. There was a sign outside, still too far away to read. Should she stop? It would at least put off for few moments the journey's inevitable end.

A few meters before the drawbridge, Irene braked abruptly and jumped from the car. A group of middle-aged tourists walked quickly towards her, guidebooks in hand. Out on the river an orange kayak floated erratically through the swells. On the stone walls of the Water Castle, yesteryear's leaves hung, brown and crumbling. Slowly and deliberately, as if oblivious to danger, their elaborate and fragile nets swung back and forth in the gentle breeze.

A young man was pulling the kayak ashore, waist-deep in the river's swirl. Could it be--? Why yes indeed: Willi, Käthe and Jürgen's son--a tall thin youth with tousled blonde hair, a gold earring, and the inevitable jeans--was pulling an orange kayak up on shore. Putting it atop his head tortoise-like, he approached.

To her annoyance, Irene could feel herself blushing. Did he know about Hermann and his mother? What an absurd situation! She could feel in herself a resistance to being polite, although it was hardly Willi's fault that his mother was her husband's mistress.

"Lo, Frau Glück," mumbled Willi, looking intently at the ground.

"Good day, Willi," said Irene, forcing a smile. "Nice day, isn't it? For being out on the river, I mean."

"Mmm" came the answer. "A little cold yet, Frau Glück."

What was the polite thing to say? For a moment it would not come to her.

"And how are your mother and father? It's been a while since I've seen them."

"Poppi's fine," said Willi. "Excuse please. Need to port the kayak."

Did she imagine it, or did she detect something other than the normal and entirely meaningless residual shyness of youth?

"Bye, Frau Glück."

Slouching, Willi loped down the path.

Did he know? Irene sighed. It was hard to say if it even mattered.

Slowly Irene began to walk across the drawbridge. On either side, a piece of ice floated by under the pale spring sun. Somewhere in the vines, a bird twittered. Irene felt a sudden rush, however foolish, of hope.

Ahead the entrance waited, dark and cool. Small gray slits like eyes--or rather, narrower, for they were barely wide enough for eyes, only for arrows--looked down, disapproving. For a moment Irene let herself imagine the bridge up, the circular gray stone sealed, safe from the world, impregnable.

At the entrance, the guard, middle-aged and portly, scowled in welcome.

Irene shook her head. No, she had no pre-paid ticket. No student-pass or--thank goodness--senior ticket. It would cost how much?

From beyond, in the half-dark, she could feel the cold, damp air.

"Ten marks fifty," said the guard. "Might as well--before it's sold, I mean."

He pointed to a small, neatly lettered sign next to the entrance.

"FOR SALE. Contact Verfügel and Company, Ringstrasse 57, Tel. 358955."

For sale? The Water Castle? It hardly seemed right. Yet there was the sign, not to be argued with.

"Thanks much," said the guard as he handed Irene a ticket already torn almost

through and a small pamphlet in three languages, each with slightly different information.

"This Water Castle," she read in the German version, "is the most recent of several castles built on this sight. The first, built by Sigismund of Fingau, was destroyed in a fire sometime between 1180 and 1193. The second, built in the fourteenth century, was conquered by the Swedes during the Thirty Years' War of 1618-38 only to be partially destroyed at the time of Duke Elfried the Unready's war with the Archbishop of the Palatinate.

"Of all the surviving Water Castles, this is the largest. Rebuilt from 1665 to 1692 to celebrate the marriage of the Landesgraf with the only daughter of the Elector of Bavaria, the Water Castle was later converted to a prison when the Landesgraf found that he had been betrayed by his wife and his younger brother. His brother died in a duel and is entombed in the Water Castle" (here an inset map marked the exact stone) "while the Princess spend the remainder of her days in the Tower, known henceforth as the 'Tower of Tears.'"

Ah, yes, thought Irene. The good old days.

"After the cessation of hostilities in the eighteenth century, the Castle came into the possession of the Berghart family, known at that time for the manufacture of hunting rifles and today as the owners of a large pharmaceutical firm. Amelie Berghart, oldest daughter of Herr Siegfried Berghart, is renowned even to the present for her poetry"-- here appeared the severe countenance of a young woman in a high-necked velvet dress with a small pearl choker and a stiff lace ruff.

"This remains the best known poetry produced anywhere in the region of the Water Castles, and perhaps beyond," the guidebook concluded

And indeed, Irene had heard of her but it made her sad to realize that not one of her poems could be called to mind at this exact moment.

Irene shuddered. The ancestral damp was seeping into her bones. Turning on a heel, she walked toward the entrance and then back over the drawbridge, which swayed slightly under her insubstantial weight. A new troupe of tourists came toward

her, all guidebooks and chatter and low-heeled shoes, frightening the birds into temporary silence.

Part way down the drawbridge, Irene stopped. Majestic and still, the Water Castle looked out over the landscape as it had for centuries. Its covering of leaves, one by one gradually loosening their hold on the dessicated strand, moved gently in tandem with the comings and goings of the breeze. The river that once had filled the moat under the drawbridge continued to flow. Beyond, in the meadows, the dark sheen of the horses could be seen far off, running back and forth in the green fields.

"Are you all right? You don't look good."

It was the guard, jacket over his shoulder. Behind him the gates of the Water Castle were locked for the night.

"Yes, of course I'm all right," said Irene, with more than a touch of irritation. How dare he?

Then, realizing with surprise that she was about to be sick, she leaned over the rail.

Below, in the river, the last ice floes of the winter were slowly pushing their way toward the unknown sea. A breeze blew down from the drawbridge, colder than before.

Above, among the tiny brand-new leaves just beginning to sprout, a single bird sang, loud and clear.

That tune he had been whistling at the funeral--what was its name again? Hermann tried it out on his tongue once more as he strode up the walk to his mother's--no, his--house.

"Drive, drive, drive, on the *Auto-bahn*"? Yes, that was it. Drive, drive, drive on

the *Auto-bahn*--he was sure now. Nikki had liked it. It had been on one of the tapes she had always insisted, despite his objections, on playing.

Was that how she had left? On the Autobahn, in a rented car? He hoped not, since she could hardly drive. He could still remember the few occasions on which he had acceded to her desire to learn to drive "like the Germans do." Then had come the night she had failed to pull over at the approach of an ambulance, all flashing lights on a dark, two-lane road.

And then her answer, no doubt incorrect:

"But in France you only have to pull over when it's on your side."

What had he said? Not, "Well, we're hardly in France now." At least he had shown that much sense. Yet in the end it had not mattered. She had left him anyway.

Hermann unlatched the door and, still whistling, went in. He was free, entirely free, for the rest of the day. Käthe was leading the German club this afternoon at the Gymnasium. Her time would be fully occupied until she had to go home and fix Jürgen his dinner. Leaving work early, he had bought a book at Spitzer's Bookstore on how to care for apple trees. Was it too late now to prune? Since his had just begun to bloom, he rather thought so, but there was no one he could ask. Franz knew as much about gardening as he did about clocks.

He had read only last week in one of the tabloids that in Japan apples were encased in paper flutes even when they were still on the trees. Was that a better cultivation method than the German? Or was it made necessary by the difference in climate? Or simply an Asiatic idiosyncrasy, like German driving styles? He had never thought of these things before he had known Nikki. He had read, too, that Japanese apples were so expensive they were often given as gifts, as when one made a visit to a friend. Perhaps Nikki was in Japan. She had told him many times that she wanted to travel, even beyond Europe. Of course the letter had been postmarked Rome, but that might have been a ruse to throw him off the track.

Taking some rye bread, middle-old Dutch cheese, mineral water, and an orange from the little refrigerator, he settled down on the couch. The pages of the new book,



thick and glossy, felt pleasant under his fingers. Even the binding was pleasing--green suede, with gold lettering. Could it be, that everything in life would be pleasant for him from now on? He was resolved to do everything he could to make it so--but, then, he had been so resolved for a long time.

The sound of his own chewing, and the crisp, clicking sound the pages made as he turned them still seemed loud to him even after all these months of living alone. Would he never get used to it? Pouring out a bit more Fachinger, he began to make some notes on a note-pad that had been his mother's.

"So," he murmured to himself. "I will need a pruning tool, some fertilizer, insecticide, a garden hat---"

As the mineral water continued to make a series of reassuring if arrhythmic fizzing noises, Hermann paused. Then he took off his glasses, wiped his brow with a handkerchief, and loudly blew his nose.

"But this is all unworthy of me," he thought. "To busy myself with butter, cheese, mineral water, gardening. Surely I can find better things with which to pass the little remaining space that is granted to me of human life."

Tearing off a leaf and inserting it into the book as a marker, Hermann stared off into the distance.

"Happiness," he wrote slowly, underscoring twice.

"I. Definition of.

"II. How to obtain.

"III. How to prolong."

But nothing further came to mind. He felt as if a fog had settled around his brain. Should it be "How to" or "Means to"? "Prolong" or "sustain"? Scratching out "prolong," he noticed with annoyance that now "sustain" rhymed with "obtain." With a thump, he sat back among the cushions, transfixed.

All at once the cuckoo flew out of the brown clock over the mantel only to be dragged back at once by an invisible force. At precisely the same moment, the phone rang.

"Damn," said Hermann aloud as he rose from the couch. What on earth had he been thinking of when he had allowed Franz to persuade him to buy the cuckoo clock that he had never been able to sell? He had only done it, as he had done so many other things, out of weakness.

At the other end of the line, he could hear Franz's voice, distant and odd. Had Hermann seen Irene lately? No? Ah. Well. In that case.

"For God's sake, man," said Hermann, exasperated. "Out with it."

Franz had seen Irene on the Spaziergangstrasse only that afternoon. At first he had not recognized her. As they had passed each other just in front of the cathedral clock, she had merely nodded with a faint smile as if everything had been as always.

"She is pregnant" came Franz's voice over the wire. "Four, maybe five months. She looked rather happy, you know."

Hermann stood up, then sat down again. How dare she? And with whom?

"Say, Hermann," said Franz in a sly voice. "You wouldn't happen to know who the lucky man is, would you?"

"Hrrmph," said Hermann. He could feel himself beginning to perspire. "I'll call you later."

In the silence, he listened to his heart do erratic somersaults. So, he thought, his eyes running over the neat if old-fashioned furniture, the tidy if uncomfortable room he had known, virtually unchanged, since childhood. It was settled then. He would live here alone forever. But what else had he thought would happen? Never in his wildest dreams had he wanted to reconcile with Irene. That last time--well, he had not been fully himself then, had he? Still, he felt betrayed. That he should hear something like this from Franz! She could at least have told him.

The doorbell rang. Outside, the last few moments of May sunshine were streaming down over the Lindner Weg. Row after row of well-trimmed lawns glistened back at him, their stubby strands waving back and forth in the late summer breeze. Framed in the doorway, a young woman in a dark blue miniskirt smoothed a few errant wisps of short, strawberry blonde hair back behind her ears in a nervous gesture. As

Hermann continued to stare, she began to speak so quickly he could hardly make out what she was saying.

Her dog was gone--had Herr Glück seen it? Such a nice little dog--a miniature Schnauzer with a new leather collar. She had only had it a few months, and now it had run away. Always she was afraid it would be run over. Could Herr Glück perhaps look in the orchard behind the house? It might be that the dog was hiding there. But of course if Herr Glück was busy-- By no means would she want to intrude.

"Not at all," said Hermann in his heartiest voice. "We can look together. I am not at all busy at the moment."

He was having difficulty keeping his composure. A once-familiar pleasure was flowing through his veins, not as powerfully as he remembered but still, still there.

Suddenly the proverb flew into his mind, and this time he was sure it was right: "Ap-ril, Ap-ril, she doesn't know, what she will."

So, he thought with satisfaction. I am not quite dead yet.

"Fraulein Spaetz--it *is* Fraulein Spaetz, isn't it? Of course we can look for your little dog--what is his name? Please allow me to show you my apple trees--or rather, my mother's apple trees. Do you know, I was just reading about apple trees when you rang. I'm afraid I'm rather a novice when it comes to gardening. No doubt you are better acquainted with horticulture than I. Your aunt's rose bushes have been always quite magnificent. Does she still have the white ones on the other side of her house? Why, I remember when I was a child---"

Slowly their footsteps receded into the darkness of the hallway. Slowly, beads of moisture were forming around the glass of Fachinger.

An ant, crossing the coffee-table, struggled to pick up first one crumb, then another. The gnawed rind of bright yellow cheese; the moist rye crumbs; the still-uneaten orange--everything stood out brightly against everything else, as if all had been carefully arranged and not--as was in fact the case--brought together by random chance.

Over the mantel, the cuckoo flew out, squawked once, and withdrew. With a final

burst of effort, the last of the sun blazed up briefly, and then was gone.

In what had once been the house of Anna Glück, all at last was still.

IV

KÄTHE

Everything was ready--indeed, everything had been ready now for quite some time.

Since early morning Käthe had been in the tiny room dusting and scrubbing, polishing and buffing. And now the tile floor, the white walls, the small table of light wood that folded down off the wall and could just as easily be tucked up and hidden behind its wooden door--everything positively sparkled as the summer sun struck now one, now another of their surfaces. Even the bed, which almost filled the room, had been carefully tended, its sheets thoroughly washed and pressed, then stretched firmly under a coverlet which, though made of the very latest synthetic material, was at least as soft as down.

It was mid-afternoon. Outside in the field a group of cows sat in a circle under a gnarled but spacious tree. In the room a smell of mint mingled with something else equally pleasant--a fruity scent, or crushed mint.

As the phone rang, Käthe was sitting at the edge of the bed, running a hand back and forth over her skirt. At once she sprang forward, knocking the table upwards. Slowly it moved down, crested several times, then stopped in mid-air with a thud.

"Where were you?" she whispered, although there was no one there to hear.

"Where was *I*? Where were *you*? I waited and waited until I was afraid someone would notice my very odd behavior."

"Waited *where*?"

"In the parking lot." This last was spoken rather testily. Continuing, the high-pitched voice at the other end of the line reached a crescendo: "Where we agreed, just behind the Siemens."

"Behind the Siemens? But I thought we said on the other side, over by Hertie's."

There was a long silence. Then, in an even higher pitch:

"I am really *quite\_sure* I said behind the Siemens."

Käthe swallowed and took a breath at the same time, causing a momentary pang of heartburn.

"Well, perhaps," she said. "Yes, of course."

There was a buzzing noise rather like a small lawnmower as a fly landed on Käthe's lap. Without thinking she swatted at it with her free hand. To her horror, it soared once more aloft, darting off in the direction of the kitchen where the raspberries for Hermann's yogurt were sitting out, washed and hulled and vulnerable in a large white bowl.

"Why don't you drive round to the Zielstrasse?"

Phone in hand, she walked as far into the little kitchen as she could get.

"You could park behind the bank and walk through the field. It's Saturday, so there would be no one at the bank. And the field is deserted--I can see that from here."

"You think it would work? The Zielstrasse I mean."

To her relief, Hermann sounded doubtful but willing to be persuaded.

"Of course," said Käthe firmly, hoping she sounded as convinced as she wanted to feel. The buzzing noise of the fly, just out of reach where it hopped about on the kitchen counter, made her head hurt. Opening the window with her spare hand, she waited to see if the fly would go out--or another one come in.

"Why would I suggest something that wouldn't work?" she went on, fighting a growing sense of despair. "Just come along the path under the trees. And if you should meet someone, just smile or whistle. After all--it's pleasant enough today that anyone might want to take a walk in the country."

For the house was at the very end of the subdivision. Beyond lay only the fields and the cows--now a bit to the right of the tree but still in the shade, still in a perfect circle--and the river, which as always at this time of year lay low beneath its banks. In the opposite direction, just out of sight, was the Water Castle which, to Käthe's way of thinking, was just as well. Next to the gleaming new town, it was downright shabby.

"All right," said Hermann. "Watch for me in ten minutes and if you see anyone, lift the curtain at one end. Otherwise I'll assume it's 'all clear.'"

"But will it work?" she wondered as with irritation and relief, she watched the fly escape through the open window. "Will it still be possible? Or will he be too tense, too irritated from all this trouble?"

As if in a dream, she put her head outside the window. At once the heat of late summer, like a drug, emptied her mind of all thought. A smell of fresh-cut grass, sweet and mingled with the faint, far-off scent of cows. Swiftly a bird flew across the field, landing on the dirt path that soon, yet not soon enough, would bear the imprint of Hermann's feet. A sensation she had lived in all her life of being stretched taut, mildly frightened, on the edge of dread, drifted off and away, light as a fly or the bird that now returned back over the field and hid itself from view somewhere on a branch. Could it be, that the world was merely a home to be lived in? That she too had a right to be happy? A gurgling sound that could have been the beginning of a laugh or the sound accompanying a tear escaped her throat.

"Ha," she said out loud. "Ha-ha-hahaha!"

In the distance, barely to be discerned where the trees on both sides of the path converged, a plump and portly figure moved cautiously but definitely in the direction of the house.

"Hot water," she murmured. "Hot water to refresh the tea, a splash of cologne, and mouthwash."

But instead of doing any of these things, Käthe turned away from the window and folded up the little table, installed in the days when, needing somewhere to be alone, she had convinced Jürgen to make the guest room over into her study. Straightening the coverlet, she went out into the kitchen where Hermann's tea--now mint essence--continued to steep.

As she stepped back into the little room, she could feel the beat of her heart, a line of sweat across her forehead. There was a tingling sensation in her palms.

The figure was half-way down the path now, walking quickly in from one tree to another, then disappearing as it hid behind a trunk.

How silly, thought Käthe.

And then, in panic: Will he really come? And if he does, then what?

A loud, languid "moo" rose up from the circle under the tree. An ancient cow, udders sagging, struggled up as if to lead the herd. Otherwise, everything was quite still--which was, of course, hardly surprising since it was the long Saturday and the



shops were still open, at least for a while. Jürgen had gone off to buy himself a typewriter (his fifth, all manual, but Käthe had long since learned not to ask why a man who hardly ever wrote needed one typewriter, let alone five). Willi, despite the lateness of the season, was out on the river. Every one else was no doubt about similar kinds of errands, or asleep. Only Hermann, now leaving the protection of the trees, broke the stillness. As his brows furrowed ever more deeply under the brown pompadour, his plump yet to her utterly adorable body gathered speed.

Quickly she walked quickly through the hot summer air towards the door. The thud of a step on the landing; then immediately another.

Hermann flew through the door, beads of perspiration strung across the furrowed brow and dressed in the inevitable pale blue shirt and perfectly pressed jeans suit. Collapsing at once onto the bed, he took out a handkerchief and began to mop at his forehead.

Trembling with relief and anticipation, she began at once to help him off with his vest. As she ran a finger through the stubbly curls, she could feel with joy that his agitation was beginning to diminish. As he fell backwards onto the bed, she began to untie his shoes.

"Really, Käthe, next time we must find an easier way," said Hermann in a strained voice. "My nerves were simply not cut out for this sort of thing."

She could feel the joy beginning to flow throughout her body.

*Next time.*

Crossing the kitchen on Tuesday evening on her way to the refrigerator, Käthe came upon Jürgen, whom she had been trying to avoid for hours.

Dressed in a pair of shorts and a T-shirt that, since it bore the name of a well-known European football team must have been one of Willi's, Jürgen held open in front

of him a copy of Adorno's *The Authoritarian Personality*, its edges frayed with use. Without looking up, he kept walking across the kitchen, coughed, and slowly turned a page.

"Sorry," she said in the voice she would have used had she bumped up against someone inadvertently in a department store.

Knobby knees, thought Käthe. What knobby knees he has.

Had he always had knobby knees?

"What's for dinner?" said Jürgen.

"You mean when, don't you?"

For in the code in which Jürgen was speaking, what he really wanted to know was how much time he had left to read before dinner.

Käthe took the thin slices of meat, the onion, pickles, and thick seeded mustard--the first steps toward assembling them into *Rouladen*. Which suddenly seemed to her absurd, since *Rouladen* had always been Jürgen's favorite dinner and pleasing him was now hardly her first concern.

"Yes, of course I mean when."

Jürgen slammed the book shut and glared.

"An hour and twenty minutes at the least."

The noise of the knife dicing the onion on the little white chopping board; the noise of the skewer going through the rolled-up meat now encasing the onion, pickle, and mustard; the noise of the scissor clipping the string that would hold it all together; and the frying pan heating up the oil almost to the point of smoking.

At once Käthe could hardly stand it--that she should be in this kitchen making *Rouladen* the way she had made it hundreds, perhaps thousands of times before yet now everything felt wrong, wrong, wrong, and she was helpless to make it right, or even to say how wrong it felt.

In a loud voice Käthe said: "What brings you to read Adorno again? I would have thought you had him down by heart now."

For long, long ago, Jürgen had been a student of Sociology as well as History. For many years now he had talked about going back to university to finish, at long last,

his doctoral work.

"I'm writing a paper," said Jürgen. "It's for a conference next summer in Norway."

"Really? In Norway?"

"Yes, Norway. Bergen, to be specific. Why not?"

For a moment Käthe thought of confronting Jürgen with the fact that there was something truly silly about his academic pretensions. After all, no one would read any paper he wrote five years from now--perhaps even one year from now. In truth, in the Gymnasium he labored to inform the uninformable--as did she. But, really, to what end? The question of his aspirations, like all questions between them, was moot. It was not as if she really cared what he thought.

As Käthe watched the *Rouladen* sizzle in the hot fat, Jürgen scratched his stomach and stared at her in a way Käthe found herself at a loss to interpret.

Jürgen: a man with knobby knees whom she no longer loved.

Which was annoying, yet by no means as annoying as the intimacy itself, a momentary pseudo-intimacy. Yet she saw no way out either. For they were Willi's parents, or the people who had once been Willi's parents, and for the rest of their lives that fact would now and then bring them together.

"Have you noticed anything strange about Willi lately?" said Jürgen as if in echo to her thoughts.

"Why no, not really. Have you?"

"No, not exactly. It's just that sometimes I have the feeling--"

"Yes, yes, what feeling?"

"I don't know exactly-- It's hard to say."

Firmly and precisely, she washed her hands and dried them on a small white towel,

"Really it's nothing, Käthe," he said in a way that was either manipulative or genuinely pathetic. "I'm an old man now. Old men have strange fancies."

As he turned, she saw it was true. He was old now--no doubt because he wanted it so.

"Please Jürgen. If there is something wrong with Willi, I too should know."

"It's not any one thing," he said slowly. "As I said, just a feeling. The way he won't look me in the face when I ask where he's been. The way he mumbles. The gold earring."

Käthe sniffed.

"But that's all normal for his age."

"Yes, yes, but there's something about it--"

Just at that moment the door slammed, and Willi, T-shirted and with tousled hair, flew through the kitchen.

"Lo, Mutti, 'lo Papi," he murmured, half-incomprehensible, and kept on going despite Jürgen's question as to where he had been and Käthe's order that he stop and chat.

"You see---"

Jürgen waved a hand in the air as if to demonstrate, or perhaps conduct inaudible music as soon as they were once more alone.

"I see nothing," said Käthe, deglazing a bit and putting the cover on the frying pan. "Nothing at all out of the ordinary."

Really, Jürgen was quite absurd, as abstract as the ancient tome in his hand--or as youth itself.

"I hope you're right," he sighed. "It's just-- There's this proverb-- A Spanish one I think--"

Which Käthe hardly heard, since she was thinking of brown pompadour curls that smelled freshly of soap and shampoo; of that slight far-off sound that could only be a cow; of the sensation of a warm breeze as it passed over her bare middle on its way to somewhere else.

"Jürgen--" she began, pausing with a dish in mid-air.

But as Käthe looked up, Jürgen was gone. Willi too.

Nonsense, she tells herself.

Nonsense to think that their departure is not a perfectly normal, everyday event, rather than--as seems to her in the moment--a prophecy of things to come.

She stands before a mirror, naked except for a single strand of pearls.

"My neck is so long. Do you know, I have always hated my neck? When I was young I thought I would keep growing until the rest of me was as long as my neck-- comparatively speaking, I mean. I cried the day I realized I had stopped growing."

Hermann, standing behind her:

"Is that why you wear scarves? And your pearls? I always thought you look quite nice with a scarf. That red scarf you wear with your gray suit is quite fetching."

"Yes, yes," says Käthe with impatience. "My scarves are pretty, but they don't do any good for the neck."

Käthe reaches up an arm and strokes Hermann's hair. With her other hand, she leads his fingers to her breast. Then she sighs.

It is Wednesday. There is a half-hour, perhaps thirty-three minutes before Jürgen will return his research, today at the university library.

So little time, Käthe thinks. Why is there always so little time?

"Think of it as a Modigliani neck," says Hermann, running a finger over the pearls.

"Yes, yes," Käthe murmurs, thinking that he seems distracted.

She leans back and presses. Then, tentative, she presses again, places his hand on her navel.

His skin, lacking in hair except for a touch of soft fuzz, has a sweet, soft smell, delicate and tender as a baby's yet recognizably Hermann's. Like everything about him, his skin is delicate, fastidious, hypersensitive. It pleases Käthe immensely. She would like to ask if he bathes several times a day, or just before he visits her, but she is afraid to ask so personal a question.

"Think of it as a swan's neck," says Hermann. "Think of it as a Picasso neck."

"It's all right about my neck," she says.

Is that true? Amazingly, it seems true.

Hermann raises his eyebrows.

"Really," she protests.

As he begins to nibble the curve of her neck, Käthe breathes in with a mixture of relief and ecstasy. She leans back falling, falling.

I must get my hair curled, thinks Käthe. Short flowing curls. A henna rinse also.

In the mirror, the last thing she sees is the pearls nestling into the crevice of her collarbone, just below the hollows.

Late July. Summer evenings. In Scandinavia the evenings have already begun to get shorter, and there is the first chill in the air. The last of the sun, falling over Rudelsheim as far as Kiele, makes its way into the bedroom where Käthe and Jürgen are reading.

Their beds, on opposite sides of the room, are joined--or, more precisely, separated--by a long, low shelf on which lie books; pencils; student examinations waiting to be graded; an ancient copy of Adorno upside down and open, the spine broken. There is also an even more antique copy of Hegel which Käthe suspects Jürgen has no intention of ever reading again but prominently displays to give himself a comforting sense that he is the kind of person who would read Hegel when he wasn't required to. One of the six (or is it seven?) typewriters--a genuine antique, black and with a keyboard from the period before keyboards had standardized--rests next to Jürgen's bed. The air, hot--although not yet at the fever pitch it will reach in August--is filled with the smell of cut grass. In the distance a cow makes a loud, low sound--a bellow of ecstasy, or pain.

"Käthe?" Jürgen murmurs.

In the half-light of dusk, his nose looks beaklike, and the folds of skin on his neck are bunched up in hollows. Under his robe, the knobby knees lie protected from view.

Putting down her copy of this year's Iris Murdoch, Käthe murmurs an answer she hopes is uninviting. She has been thinking of Norway, where she once made a trek with a student youth group through the mountains above the sea. She remembers the hairpin turns of the roads; the sudden passages from bone-chilling fog to summer warmth; the tiny round red snowberries; isolated villages; salmon in dill sauce with honey and mustard.

Norway: a place far from Rudelsheim; a place where no one knows her, or Hermann. For a moment Käthe allows herself to think about herself and Hermann, in a Norwegian mountain hut, taking their holidays together. Then an image, vague but unmistakable, of a woman with short cropped dark hair rises up before her--her! that woman! how dared she!--and cuts short all thoughts of the farther North.

"Käthe--"

Jürgen is giving her a glance that is clearly meant to be sexual--not that it really is, or would be taken as so by anyone other than Käthe, but in the code of their more than twenty years together, she recognizes it for what it is.

And burrows further, deeper, into herself, where no one, not even Hermann, can reach. And then, as Jürgen begins to talk about the article he has just begun on moral relativism and the hermetic circle, Käthe realizes that she does not need the the thought of the mountains, of a far-off refuge, to feel safe. Everything she does is all right now. That is what Hermann has done for her: he has given her a new way of moving in the world. He has given her a way of feeling safe no matter what happens ever again.

Käthe asks Jürgen to explain again the particularity of Gadamer's views on the hermeneutic circle and then realizes she has no interest in the answer.

The sun sinks a bit further. A car, distant, drones off into the summer air.

Käthe puts the book face down in her lap and pretends to listen.

She wonders what part of the field the cows are in now. Hermann has noticed--not she, who has lived here for years--that the cows make a round throughout the day,

always seeking the shade and, if possible, relief from the flies.

Where do the cows go at night? Käthe wonders. Do they dream?

Jürgen has gotten up now, is sitting on the side of her bed and stroking her hand.

It strikes Käthe that it does not matter what she does next. If she makes love with Jürgen, it will roll off like water. Either way it doesn't matter.

Still, there are the bony knees.

Reaching past him, Käthe swats a fly. The she yawns meaningfully and turns off the reading light on her side of the room.

"We were looking into the abyss of old age when the children came from behind and pushed us in," says Jürgen.

Käthe shudders.

"What nonsense is this?"

From his side of the room, Jürgen yawns.

"It's a proverb. A Spanish proverb. The one I was trying to remember the other day. Antonio Machado, School of '98."

He smiles, not altogether pleasantly.

"I would have thought you already knew it. You got up to the Quixote, didn't you? Or are your university days too long ago now to be remembered?"

"Good-night," says Käthe.

As Jürgen settles back on his pillow, his face pale with anger and disappointment, Käthe feels guilty and a bit pleased.

At once she submerges herself in a dream of the North; the piercing rays of the Arctic sun; reindeer; the warm, blood-red centers of cloudberry.

On the last Sunday evening of an unusually warm autumn, Käthe and Hermann walk together hand-in-hand through the streets of Turnebrück.



Turnebrück is a restored medieval town about an hour and a half north of Rudelsheim on the autobahn. It has taken Käthe several weeks to persuade Hermann it is safe for them to be seen in public together in Turnebrück, and even now she is afraid he will bolt and run.

But it feels like a lucky day. Jürgen and Willi have gone to see Monchengladbach play Peru. They will not be back in Kiele until long after dark. And really, the chances of meeting anyone they know in Turnebrück are quite small. For Rudelsheimers, Turnebrück is a long way away.

As Käthe and Hermann make their way slowly up the main cobblestoned street, even the ancient hills above Turnebrück seem to smile. In the ritual of Sunday evenings, people walk slowly by, talking in low voices as they look at the newly arrayed mannequins in the spotlessly clear shop windows.

Suddenly, as if called up by a magician, a row of pale yellow streetlights lights up. Their glow burnishes the immaculate glass of the shops; the dark wood of the restaurants; the ancient, well-worn stones.

For no reason at all Käthe has been thinking of summers spent as a child at the North Sea. She thinks of how, so many years ago, she learned to swim.

In the calm, clear waters of the North Sea, she would lie face down on the surface, paddling away in an uncoordinated fashion with all four limbs, her father's hand under her stomach. At some moment, gradually but without warning, he would withdraw it, on the theory that she really did know how to swim and the hand was necessary only to keep up her confidence.

But it wasn't true: the moment he let go, she would begin to scream, and sink.

Why did he have to do it that way? thinks Käthe, still outraged at a man who has been dead now over three decades. Wasn't there some other way?

Her father: a black-and-white photograph with clear edges; a set of medals in a white cardboard box; a uniform.

Käthe thinks of a child in a rough blue cotton swimsuit: a child with braids on either side of her long neck, big-eyed, unhappy. And feels almost as sorry for the child as if it had been a stranger, rather than herself.

They have come to the end of the street. They have come, it appears, to the end of Turnebrück.

Is there no way to go but back?

"Look," says Käthe.

Over a pseudo-medieval door, the name "Gambrinus" is writ large and, under it, a hand-lettered sign announcing "JAZZ."

"Come," says Käthe, taking Hermann's hand. "There won't be anyone we know here.

Inside, it is dark except for the candles and what little light comes in from the street. They eat bread and cheese on little wooden boards; a salad consisting of a whole head of lettuce; a wine that tastes of something else--berries perhaps, or woodruff. Käthe looks down at the little porcelain-handled knife and fork and takes them in her hand. Everything is calm, peaceful, charming. Although she has never been in such a place before, it feels entirely natural.

"I do sometimes wish," she says slowly, running a hand through the henna curls. Hermann looks farther off, beyond the candle.

Käthe's voice falters, then resumes as a whisper.

"I do sometimes wish you would say just once that you love me."

Hermann's eyes widen behind the rimless glasses as Käthe freezes.

"Of course I care about you," he says in his romantic voice. For once he does not seem distracted, although he does not seem sincere either. "I care deeply. How could you even for one moment think otherwise?"

*He won't say it, thinks Käthe angrily. Then, surprised: Does it matter?*

Suddenly the lights darken, and a spotlight is thrown on a microphone in one corner of the room. From somewhere in the darkness comes a woman's laugh, short and sharp.

"Oh look," says Hermann with the enthusiasm for the trivial that is one of reasons she loves him, has perhaps loved him since she and Jürgen and he were students together at the University. "A singer. A French torch singer." He chuckles. "How charming! I don't suppose we will ever have a French torch singer in Rudelsheim."

As the music begins with a loud rhythmic strum, all the attention of the room focuses on the corner where a small woman in a tight black dress with short wispy hair stands before the microphone, clutching it like a man in a typhoon would grasp a lifeline. On either side of her head, a long black earring dangles down.

"This isn't jazz," says Käthe, frowning.

"No, it's better than jazz," says Hermann excitedly. "It's quite modern--you know, like Patricia Kaas."

Käthe frowns again. "Patricia Kaas? who is Patricia Kaas?"

A deep, throaty voice tears through the silence. Hermann's eyes go bright, wide and alert beneath the brown pompadour curls.

"Oh, Käthe," he says, grabbing her hand above the table in enthusiasm. "Isn't this wonderful?"

*Above the table: he has grasped her hand above the table.*

Her chest heaves ever so slightly, as the laugh bubbles up and rushes out into the air disguised as a cough, the laugh of triumph against all the pain of the world, or at least of her life.

Hermann smiles, listens, finishes his last salad leaf.

"Should we pay up now?" he says as the applause dies down. "I suppose it's getting late."

"Oh, just one more," says Käthe as the applause dies down.

The singer, one hand over her head and one on her hip in a gesture Käthe finds vulgar, prepares to begin again. In some obscure way, Hermann's enthusiasm for the singer troubles her.

"But what will you say to Willi and Jürgen if we are late?"

"Oh, that my car broke down, or that I went to visit a friend--what difference does it make?"

Käthe touches the back of her neck to make sure the clasp of the pearls is where it should be. She pushes a few leaves of her salad onto Hermann's plate.

"Stop fidgeting. After all, if anyone does see us, it's much more my look-out now than yours. You, after all, are barely married now, at least as far as what people think."

Hermann stiffens.

"I was only thinking of you," he says.

And this, although hardly like to be true, sends a *frisson* of pleasure down Käthe's back.

"Hermann," she breathes, taking his hand between hers.

To her surprise, her eyes fill with tears. As she looks down, one falls on the white tablecloth; then another. Can it really be true? That he was thinking of her reputation, not his own?

"Käthe for heaven's sake," says Hermann, not unkindly. His eyes dart around the room as, tears still falling, she squeezes the hand that is trying so hard to withdraw. "Not here."

Always Käthe has been a person who hates waking up in the morning. For her, the most difficult part of teaching has always been the need to get up early, and at a fixed time. Weekends and holidays she will lie in bed "forever" (as Jürgen says), or at least until noon.

Jürgen calls this her laziness, but it is not true, or at least it is more complicated. For the first sensation Käthe has as she wakes is always a sensation of dread, a sureness that something terrible is about to happen. If Käthe then closes her eyes and drifts--no, frantically back-paddles into sleep, it is to move away from the sense of dread, or to gather strength in order to endure it.

So it has always been, until Hermann. Throughout the summer, every morning--even on days when she knows she will not see him--she has woken cheerful, confident. And has been so all day. Everything that is not Hermann flows off her like water.

Somehow Käthe associates this feeling with the summer--the warm, fragrant air; the smells and noises of the cows; the way the sun is almost every day, reliably there.

But as the summer shortens into autumn, as apples replace raspberries in the market, as she holds in her hand a gold, burnished pear, even as school begins-- nothing changes.

"It's happiness," says Hermann matter-of-factly. "You are happy, that's all. Happiness--that feeling that you want to go on forever and ever."

She is puzzled when, under the brown pompadour, he frowns.

"What else did you think it was?" he says. "Did you really think it depended on the weather?"

Swimming: the moment when, her father tiring of the lesson, Käthe puts her feet on the sand, silty and pleasant between her toes, and lets the water swirl around the ruffles of the blue cotton suit, feels the soft swell of the tides back-and-forth in their most harmless, most miniaturized form.

And even long after she really had learned to swim, years later, the best moment would still be the one when, at last, at last, she would let down her feet and feel the bottom--the proof that she was no longer over her head.

How long it always took her, to get to that moment! How long even after she was clearly in sight of the beach chairs, the umbrellas, all the paraphernalia of the others as they waited--not for her--on the shore.

On the day when Jürgen tells her that Willi has been caught shoplifting, it is already winter.

Snow--the first and almost certainly last snow of the year--has paralyzed Rudelsheim traffic. The lower schools are closed: Käthe has used this as an excuse to stay home all day. In the fields around Kiele, only a few bits of brown earth can be seen between the patches of white. Overhead the sky is a darker gray than usual. But on the roads, people continue to drive their cars flat out, as they always do. Once, twice already Käthe has called Hermann to warn him to stay home even though he comes only once a week now, on Mondays.

In preparation for grading student essays, Käthe has turned the modern baseboard heat in her study up as high as it goes and made herself a cup of mint tea almost as strong as the way Hermann likes it. As she pushes back the lace curtains which Jürgen detests and which she has had made to please Hermann, she wonders: Where do the cows go in the winter? It occurs to her for the first time that someone must own the cows.

Shortly after Jürgen comes into the room radiating bad temper, there is a tinny noise, a noise with a *ping* at the end of it. Two little gold earrings like the one in Willi's ear roll across the little table she has folded down from the wall. Slowly, one moves toward the edge and falls over.

"That," says Jürgen, "is what he has stolen."

As he falls down on the bed, which Käthe now thinks of as hers and Hermann's, Jürgen loses all energy and looks suddenly really old. His shoulders hunch up around his ears, and he leans forward.

Käthe picks up the earring that has fallen on the floor and inspects it. Then, slowly, she puts it down.

"What is all this, Jürgen? What is happening?"

"Just what I just said--our son stole these earrings from the Hertie's. Our *son*."

Only as Käthe says, "You are sure?" does she realize she is whispering.

Unhappily, Jürgen nods. He moves even farther forward on the chair and puts his head in his hands.

"How do you know?" says Käthe.

"The police called at the Gymnasium, from the bureau on the Talheimerstrasse.

At first they wanted to press charges."

"And then?"

Jürgen shakes his head.

"And the earrings," says Käthe sharply. "Why are they here?"

Jürgen turns his face away.

"I bought them," he says. "I don't know why."

Outside, the sky is still gray. Someone--perhaps a farmer--is walking slowly over the field. It will be fifteen, perhaps sixteen hours before Käthe will see Hermann again, perhaps longer if the snow returns.

"Did he tell you why--Willi, I mean? Did he tell you why he did it?"

"Oh please," says Jürgen, frowning in disgust. "You of all people know *why*."

Käthe puts a hand to her throat and rests it a minute on the pearls. Then she says in a loud voice:

"And who started it? Who started it in the very beginning with that Norwegian woman--that Astrid--

"Anje," says Jürgen quickly.

"Whatever her name was," says Käthe angrily. "That nurse who liked nobody really except herself--not even you. The way she would always hide in her short ugly hair so you couldn't even see her face!"

Käthe lets her eyes fill with tears even though she is really not angry about it any more, that affair Jürgen had so long ago. In fact, she thinks now that she rather understands.

As Jürgen looks up at her, his face has the look of a hurt child. Then it crumples.

"You are right, Käthe," he says. "It is all my fault. I am like Adorno when he called the riot police against his students when their only crime was taking his ideas too seriously."

Jürgen swallows hard.

"Please," he says, holding out a hand. "I'm sorry."

Käthe looks away.

"Of course," she murmurs, polite as if Jürgen has picked up a napkin that has

fallen by chance to the floor, or asked her if she wants a glass of tea. With a sudden sense of panic, she gets up and begins to walk about the room.

Where can they possibly go from here? Where is Jürgen trying to take them?

His eyes follow her as she continues to walk around the room, now and then passing a hand absent-mindedly over the long, red curls.

"Käthe--" he begins.

But she rushes out, motioning with one hand that she does not, she absolutely does not want him to follow.

Later, perhaps for the rest of her life, Käthe will remember the first afternoon at the spa.

She will hardly remember the other or days, or even nights: the long hours spent at Hermann's insistence going back and forth in the ridiculous hot-and-cold foot baths; the walk in the dark forest looking--without success--for blackberries, found there by Hermann the year before.

No: she will remember holding hands after the foot-baths, holding hands as they lie next to each other on the *Liegenstuehle* wrapped tightly in Turkish towel robes, listening to the rain strike the glass picture window with the force of a waterfall. *Alone and not alone.*

And in the night, waking in the half-darkness, she finds him always there beside her, comforting her, running his fingers--so gentle and delicate, so unlike Jürgen's--through the soft curls of her hair.

"Are you all right, Käthe?" he whispers, although there is no one else there to hear. "Have you slept? You seemed to be sleeping."

"Yes," she murmurs, wanting to say that she feels transported above the world like the bride and bridegroom in a painting by Chagall she saw long ago on a school trip



to Paris.

Dare she say it? She wants to, and yet--

"Käthe," says Hermann without opening his eyes. To her surprise, his voice sounds a trifle peevish. "I have a slight pain in my back. Do you think you could--?"

"Oh Hermann--are you all right?"

As she begins to massage now one, now another vertebrae, it strikes Käthe that the thought of Hermann in pain is more awful than anything, even more awful than the suffering of the child in the blue cotton swimsuit--still present now and then to her, although so long ago.

The rain splashes against the glass like a waterfall. Hermann sighs, relaxed at last.

Spring now, Spring again.

It is the second spring.

In his bed on the other side of the room, Jürgen types loudly away on a small black typewriter that fits on his knees.

Käthe pries open the binding of the novel she has bought at Binder's that afternoon on the Ringstrasse. For some reason it is all the latest rage. Over the noise of the typewriter, she reads out loud:

"It was the afternoon of a brilliant day in late August, and all over northern Europe the holiday season was all the more intense for being so near its end. On the north German plain in little towns just as modern and even more prosperous than anywhere else on the continent, the human desire to enjoy life was not to be contained. In Holdesheim, young girls linked arms as they strolled over the ancient cobblestones, in the cafes Italian ices were enthusiastically washed down with lemonades. Little cars moving swiftly, even frenetically, along

the Ringstrasse, managed somehow to miss one another. But as Bruno sat in the half-darkened anteroom of his friend Franz's cheese shop, he was aware of none of this. He ate his customary cucumber *Butterbrot* and listened to the piece of apparently harmless if maliciously meant gossip with which Franz was regaling him. But all the while he found himself in a state of absolute terror, like a man with a knife held constant at his heart."

"In the name of heaven, Käthe, what is this nonsense you are reading?" says Jürgen without missing a keystroke.

"It's the latest thing at Binder's. There's a huge display in the window. And it has a Water Castle on the cover so I thought it was a history--I thought perhaps even you might be interested. But I must say I rather agree with you. It's clear here from the start how the story will come out. One can see at once that this story has been told many times before."

"Well, if that's the criteria," said Jürgen mildly, "then few books are worth reading."

"And it's equally clear the author doesn't know anything about this region. 'Little cars moving swiftly, even frenetically'--what nonsense is that?"

Käthe turns the book over and over, scanning the text on the jacket.

"The author lives in a little town in the south, in the Black Forest, it says. No wonder he doesn't know anything about us, or our history."

"Well, in that respect, he doesn't differ very much from us, does he? And I am not so sure our history is all that different from little towns in the Black Forest, or anywhere else for that matter."

Käthe slams the book down on the night table.

"Jürgen, what in the world are you doing? It's almost one in the morning."

Jürgen stops, looks across the tiny room at her, and frowns.

"It is my essay for the *Schriftfest*," he says, partly ashamed and partly proud. "It is called, 'Europe, Beautiful Between the Wars.'"

"But it wasn't," Käthe object. "At least not in Germany. Not in the Twenties, to

say nothing of the Thirties."

"I mean Europe now," says Jürgen. "It is about how unprecedented this long period of peace is for us, this Pax Americana, and how--like all such periods--it must one day come to an end. It is about, too, how this peace allows us to become absorbed in little lives, magnifying them as never before."

"Really," says Käthe coldly. "You know, Jürgen, you are in some danger of making gloom into an art form."

Click, click, clickety-clack.

"If you are going to do so much typing, why don't you at least buy yourself an electric machine? You could go much faster then."

"Buy one for Willi if you want," says Jürgen. "He is still young enough to want to be modern."

Since the incident of the gold earrings, Willi has had a small accident with a friend's kayak; been given a warning by the police for throwing beer bottles on the stage at a rock concert; acquired (where? when? how?) a small tattoo on his left arm in the form of a curled, green snake.

Käthe runs a hand through the henna curls, which need to be dyed every two months now instead of every three.

"Jürgen," she says. "What do you want me to do about Willi?"

"Do what you want," says Jürgen. He has put the typewriter down now on the shelf that runs from his bed to hers. Lying on his side facing away from her, he turns out his light.

"What you want," he says again. "Or nothing--as you will."

Summer. Again, summer.

In the half-dark of late afternoon, a sensation of softness. A sensation of reaching out in the half-darkness and falling and being caught, and reaching out again. A sensation, palpable as if it were real, of heat; softness; the lapping of small waves against rocks; the sounds of cows.

Holding Hermann in her arms as he catches his breath, she is still, amazed. For these encounters have no resemblance to anything she has known so far as sex. No, this is more like the slow fading away of a line into something not itself, like a hand carved by Michelangelo fades off into the stone it came from and remains inseparably attached to. Yet there is no place where the hand ends and the stone begins.

She thinks of the years when they had all been students together--herself, Jürgen , Hermann, Franz. She had typed Jürgen's papers then, on the old manual that was still not as old as the one he was using now. It all seemed like so long ago--it was like thinking about different people.

Only one thing has not changed: even then, she had wanted Hermann.

Käthe rises in the darkened room, slips on a pair of pink feathered slippers and a flower print robe, then heads toward the kitchen. It is time to mix Hermann's jogurt with a puree she has already made of dried apricots, currants, and raisins, time now to bring Hermann his mint tea.

When she returns with the tray, she finds Hermann still lying back. In the half-darkness he looks ill, perhaps even in pain. A chill comes over Käthe. She ties the robe around her waist, then begins to pour.

"Something wrong?"

Hermann opens his eyes and yawns in a way that makes Käthe believe he is only pretending to be tired.

"No, not at all," he says.

"Would you like some yogurt? Tea?"

"Tea," says Hermann, his voice weak.

"Are you sure you're all right?"

"Please, Käthe," says Hermann. "There is absolutely no need to make a fuss over me."

But there is, Käthe is convinced of it now. Something is wrong, dreadfully wrong. Has she done something? Is it her fault? He can't still be thinking about that Frenchwoman with the man's name. After all, that was more than a year and a half ago.

As they sit together in silence over the tea, Käthe allows herself to toy with the notion that perhaps nothing at all is wrong. Perhaps what startled her was merely that, she now realizes, this is the only time she ever has seen Hermann in the light without his glasses. Although they are rimless, without the glasses the familiar face looks different--less forceful; less well articulated, like a painting left out in the rain; the face of a man who has lost his bearings. Indeed, the face looks as if it is not quite his.

"Some aspirin? You know, my father used to take an aspirin a day, for no reason. He always said it made him feel better."

She can see Hermann struggling with himself, as if taking an aspirin would be tantamount to an admission. But of what?

"Yes, yes," Hermann murmurs. "A little headache, you know?"

The slippers clatter on the tile floor as she goes back to get the aspirin.

"Enough nonsense, Käthe," says Hermann matter-of-factly. "I am perfectly all right."

He puts on his glasses and once more becomes himself.

"Here," says Käthe, handing him his shirt.

For it is already past four an August afternoon. The cows have returned, and the smell of the new mown grass. Hermann's mother lies under the already fading gravestone in the Rudelsheim Cemetery; next year Willi will finish the *Realschule*, one step nearer to being fully grown.

Hermann is sitting up now, glasses firmly on his nose, fastening the last button of his shirt.

Käthe sighs with relief. Around her, the air swirls gentle as a wave.

Beneath her the earth, apparently unmoving and solid, like sand.

With the window open to let in the last of the summer's air, Jürgen lies in bed watching television while Käthe reads, or tries to read, Proust.

Always before, Käthe has found Proust boring. Thinking that the new deepening of her feelings that has come about through Hermann and changed so many things might also have changed this, Käthe decides to try again. But alas, she can discern no difference. Proust remains just as unreadable as when she was eighteen.

"Yo!" Jürgen is shouting in a show of enthusiasm usually reserved for football. "Right again--absolutely!"

Monchengladbach against Duisburg? Germany against France?

Käthe looks up to see a panel of somber-faced, dark-suited men on the TV.

It is a debate about the work of Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen explains, and the current members of the Frankfurt School. According to Jürgen, the side favoring Marcuse is losing.

"In the long run, the exaltation of individual pleasure to the status of a social good ends by destroying civilization as completely as the Nazis," says Jürgen with satisfaction. "Indeed, the Nazis were by no means against individual pleasure so long as it did not undermine them."

Käthe turns a page and then realizes she has read nothing.

"For goodness sake," she objects. "What is civilization if it does not include the ideal of individual pleasure?"

Outside a bird sings, and then another--so high and long that it is possible they may be larks.

Käthe has seen a pair of larks only once, hovering stationary over a cabbage field. Oh, how she wishes she and Hermann could be like that--high above the earth, together yet unmoving!

"Yo-hoo," cries Jürgen in triumph as the debate comes to an end.

"Yes, yes," he continues as if arguing with someone. "This is what modern civilization will come to unless it returns to its fundamental values rather than

transvaluing them anew along the lines of some cleverly disguised, some vastly more attractive Nietzsche."

"It wasn't everyone," says Käthe suddenly. "It's not true to say it was everyone."

Jürgen moves his head first to the right, then to the left. A quizzical, judicious look spreads over his face. Then he nods as if in agreement.

"You are right. There was the Bishop. He did speak out. Of course by then it was rather late in the game. Also, one has to wonder if as a member of the nobility he fully grasped the situation he put himself in. And really, nothing much happened to him compared to others. Still, we can always point to the Bishop."

"I didn't do it," says Käthe in a loud voice as the somber, distorted faces fade from the screen. "I was hardly born."

Jürgen gives an unpleasant laugh as he rises and flicks the television off.

"Yes, yes," he says. "That's what we all say."

On the road that runs by the Water Castle Käthe drives Willi as fast as she can towards home.

Not because of any need to get there quickly but out of anger, or perhaps embarrassment. For this time it has been Käthe who has received the call to go to the police station in the Talheimerstrasse. This time it has been Käthe's turn to make the explanations, the excuses, the half-histrionic, half-real pleas that are necessary if, once again, little Willi is to be spared the heavy consequences of his own foolishness.

This time it is a mask. A mask without features, so odd she is not sure whether it is meant for sports or for *Fasching*. A mask from the Kaufhof basement, of all things, costing a mere 75 marks, which either she or Jürgen would have been only too happy to give him.

As they go around the turn just before the Water Castle, a ring of cows can be seen lumbering toward a far tree. Which right now reminds her, absurdly, of Jürgen as every night one or another of the little typewriters is pressed into service for the doctoral work, now almost completed: "Squaring the Hermeutic Circle"?

In this last part of August, Jürgen is rarely to be seen at home, so rarely that Käthe wonders if he too has found a solution to the problem of the personal life.

Which is all right with her, except in moments like this. For today is Wednesday, this afternoon is--or rather was--to be the afternoon. At the moment when the phone rang in Kiele, Käthe had just given a final brush through the henna curls in preparation for meeting Hermann at the Cafe Schönbrun, right in the rush of the noonday traffic along the Ringstrasse.

For she has convinced Hermann that the safest course is to be seen openly from time to time, as friends from student days. Then, if ever Hermann is seen approaching down the path lined with trees, the explanation is right at hand: out for a drive in the country, he stopped on impulse to see his old friends Jürgen and Käthe. For what could be more natural, that he turn to old friends in his time of troubles?

Yes, the plan had been to rendez-vous at Cafe Schönbrun, perhaps even outside in the cafe on the Ringstrasse, and eat a lemon ice or a piece of apple cake or even a plate of asparagus with melted butter and boiled parsley potatoes under one of the big umbrellas. Even though they have done this several times already, the elegance of Cafe Schönbrun still intimidates and thrills--from the little white-and-black marble table tops to the gold knives and forks that accompany the food to the tiny marble ashtrays next to the toilet--all icons of self-indulgence, if not depravity. And--best of all--when the mid-day pause has come to an end and everyone else returned to work, then in separate cars they can make their way back to Kiele, filled with erotic longings, with anticipations sure to be fulfilled.

But now that is all ruined, ruined. The entire afternoon will be spent in conversations with Willi that will go nowhere, and an entire week will be lost.

Against her better judgment, Käthe has asked Willi why he did--does--it, and beside her, as the green and pleasant countryside flies by, the boy is mumbling and



blubbering, all things that make no sense.

Something about not wanting to be a trouble; a loss of direction; knowing how disappointed they (Käthe and Jürgen) were that he could not be admitted to the Gymnasium; something (undecipherable but angry) about kayaking, kayak lessons, chess; something incoherent about rock music, Amsterdam, the Third World, a desire to live in Indonesia.

The car has gone around the turn. Ahead, old and dilapidated, looms the Water Castle--never can Käthe understand why Hermann likes it--and now next to it there stands a large sign that says, simply, "SOLD."

Käthe pulls over and motions Willi to get out.

"Look, Willi," she says. "We cannot go on like this, you and your father and I. So tell me, please--yes, you must tell me: what is it that I must do?"

The hot sun of late August shines down on them, causing Käthe to perspire. A bit of water drips over the rock beds, passing down the moat. In the silence, one bird sings; then another.

Käthe listens to Willi's long, outlandish mumblings about wanting to be a great kayaker, and he lifts a teenage, tearstained face.

Nothing he says makes any sense to her, but the expression is familiar, too familiar. Is it the face of the child, so long ago, in the blue cotton swimsuit, the child whose existence she has abolished with a year--no, more than a year now--of happiness?

It comes to Käthe in a flash of recognition and dread.

It is Hermann Willi reminds her of.

It is the face of Hermann, in her dreams or when she holds him in her arms; the face of Hermann whom lately she has felt as if she were pulling toward shore, holding him afloat.

It is the face of Hermann, and he is unhappy.

A pain runs through Käthe that is a new pain, more awful perhaps than anything she has known before. Quickly, with determination, she pushes it away, at least for now.

"Come," she says, taking Willi by the arm. "Let us go home and call your father."

On a brilliant early afternoon in late autumn, a woman of uncertain--but almost surely middle--age stands waiting in a gray suit and red silk scarf on Platform 3 for the 12:03 to Kiele.

Above, a sky of cloudless blue shines down on Rudelsheimer train station, no more than half-filled with housewives, students and a few old people. With a mechanical equivalent of a cough, a sharp crackling sound announces the presence of the loudspeaker.

"Attention! Attention! The train to Kiele has a delay of 14 minutes. Alternate connection through Ochtendorf over Wielefeld on track 6 at 12:05. Repeat please: the train to Kiele has a delay of 14 minutes."

"But the train to Ochtendorf is slower in any case," thinks Käthe--although, indeed, this might have been a motive for taking it, since in truth she is in no hurry to arrive home. For this is the afternoon she has promised to take Willi to the Kiele-Rudelsheim game. It's a way to spend time with him, to make him see what nonsense his new idea of going to live in Amsterdam is, let alone Bali or Cambodia or wherever it is this week.

"Germany is finished," Willi has said. "Everything is up with Germany."

Which is nonsense, of course, the eternal nonsense of youth that age will eventually put an end to, but Jürgen with his eternal gloom takes it seriously. It's Jürgen's idea that one of them take Willi to every game this season. This week is Jürgen's turn, but he is presenting his doctoral work at the conference in Bergen, after which (and this is hard to imagine) he is to take a cruise along the coast. In one of his silly, unending attempts to be trendy he has retitled his essay "The New Historicism--Dead End or A Way Out?"

"Dreadful!" shrieks the old woman standing next to Käthe. "Absolutely dreadful! Look at that--late again! Why only last week I was on a train that actually went down the wrong track and had to back up. Imagine!"

"Hmm," Käthe mutters, all the while thinking that this is just this kind of thinking that it is now more than ever essential to avoid.

A breeze with more than a hint of cold in it blows across the row of platforms, causing Käthe to tuck her scarf more closely around her neck. Yet, still--she thinks--it is a beautiful day, even if no doubt one of the last of its kind for the year.

Indeed, looking around the platform, Käthe feels herself possessed of a sense of well-being that might derive from the pleasurable sense of new beginnings that autumn calls forth in all those for whom the school year is the only real calendar. Or, on the other hand, it might well have something to do with the fact that the very next day was certain to be Friday and Friday is now--so Hermann has decided--*the* day.

Only one thing troubles: an irritant like a pinprick, or like the pea that no matter how many mattresses it was buried under still disturbed the princess' sleep. On the way to the station after having bought some chocolates at a shop that sold only chocolates and champagne and picked up her pearls at the jewelry shop--in for preventive repair of the now-old and often sticking clasp--Käthe has run into none other than Franz, despite the fact that it was still shop hours and the fashionable Spaziergangstrasse was rather far from the little watch-and-clock shop.

After the usual exchange of meaningless pleasantries, during which Käthe observed with mild shock how much more jowly, how much more unhappy Franz seemed than she remembered, Franz bent closer as if to impart a confidence, his stomach spilling over his waist belt with a dilapidated air.

"Do you know Irene is pregnant? Our dear sweet little Irene who didn't have the self-confidence to open her mouth--can you imagine?" For all practical purposes not married and not about to be either, since a divorce would take months and had apparently not yet even been started. Worse yet, positively beaming with happiness at the fact that her stomach preceded her at this point by several minutes. What a sly one in the end, Irene. Whoever would have thought.

Feeling a growing sense of annoyance--yet why? for surely it was none of her business--Käthe had asked in a tone that to her surprise sounded rather schoolmarmish, "And who, pray tell, is the father?"

Franz's lit up with malevolent joy.

"Ah--that's the best part," he crowed. "No one knows--not even Hermann!"

Käthe gave a start.

"Hermann? What do you mean?"

"Yes, yes," said Franz, not bothering to hide his glee and thinking at the same time that Käthe was getting more and more sharp-edged as she got older.

"The--how shall we say--estranged husband," he went on. "What a joke! What a joke life is!"

And without waiting for her reaction, which was clearly of no interest to him, he was off down the crowded street, disappearing under the promenade and leaving Käthe to clutch at her packages as a drowning man might seize a flotation device, even one with a visible tear.

Käthe fought off a sensation of faintness. So Irene, that little mouse, at forty-two (or was it forty-four?) had done something even more scandalous than anything she, Käthe, had ever contemplated. And, stranger still, Hermann had known and not told her.

What else could there be, that he had not told her?

A whistle announces the arrival of the 12:05 to Octendorf. Across the station, on track 6 Käthe can see the old woman pushing the button for the doors to open.

And then the train is gone and Käthe is once more alone, waiting.

Waiting until, as the sun moves higher in the sky and another breeze clears the air, the good feelings that were there only a moment ago begin to return. For tomorrow is still Friday, and there are several weeks more before winter, moving down from the North, will arrive, putting an end to this brilliant autumn sky which has covered her once a year as she remembers from childhood, and has covered the land for centuries before.

There are still several weeks--perhaps months--before it will be time to let

Hermann go, as she will have to do. Yes, she will have to do it, for she is the stronger. Although, to be sure, the thought terrifies her more than finding herself alone in a cold, gray sea, far from shore and far above sand. For will the dread then come again? Or will all the strength and wisdom she has gained from Hermann stay, at least for a while? In the end, who will the joke that is her life be on?

The 12:03 to Kiele, now in delayed arrival at 12:17, appears at the other end of track 3. Käthe smooths down the red silk of her scarf and puts her hands momentarily in the pockets of her gray wool suit to keep them warm. As she walks forward toward the button that will open the door with a pneumatic fizz, the sensation of the cold breeze on her skin mingles with the warmth of the summer sun and the thumpa-thumpa of the slowing train in a single rush, slower than her heart yet not so fast as happiness.

The train before her slows, and then stops.

Not yet, thinks Käthe, feeling lifted up and not knowing or caring why. *Not yet.*

*Not yet.*

*Not yet.*

V

Jürgen

Jürgen picked up the pen, aimed it toward the square of white vellum paper, then stopped in mid-air as if held back by an invisible hand.

It was an old pen but still beautiful: on a black background, gold inlays in the shape of pears--or were they tears?

*My dear Anje,* he wrote.

*From the far-off land of the Water Castle I greet you again after so long, my Anje, if, indeed, you are still so. You cannot imagine my intense longings--*

"Nonsense," he said out loud, hoping to stop himself. "All of this--utter nonsense."

Holding the pen up to what little light from the summer sun had managed to invade his study, Jürgen studied the inscription on the barrel. In the tiny, *Fraktur* script, it was far too small to be deciphered.

"Coward!" said Jürgen to himself. "Failure--a failure in all aspects of life!"

Outside, a cow made a noise that could have been either midsummer satisfaction or pain. A breeze stirred, filled with anticipation and the warm summer air.

"Yes, a failure. That is what I am--or a madman," he muttered. "This is pure madness. We know she cannot live here and I cannot live there. Why am I even thinking of contacting her again after so long?"

The cow bellowed, the pen scratched and scribbled. Jürgen pushed it steadily across the paper, raised it briefly, and then brought it down once more.

As the sound of a woman's voice rose up from below, his hand stopped in mid-air.

"Jürgen! Jürgen! Where are you?"

For heaven's sakes, what did she want now? Could she not leave him alone with his own thoughts for even one minute?

And there Käthe was at the door of his study, dressed in a peach-colored blouse and black skirt that on anyone else he would have thought entirely fetching.

"I'm going into town for a bit -- will you be all right?"

"Of course I'll be all right," he shouted. "For God's sake, Käthe, what do you

think I am-- a child?"

And then, penitent or perhaps just wanting to hide his agitation, he added, "You are going to do the shopping for dinner?"

"Yes, yes. A trout perhaps, some potatoes, a lettuce. Is that all right?"

He shook his head wearily. What did she really want?

"It's market day, you know," said Käthe brightly. And then without warning her face crumpled and she stared past him at something he--and perhaps she as well-- could not see.

"What's wrong?" he said automatically.

"Wrong?" She sniffed and tossed the small chestnut curls, now shot through with gray. "Nothing's wrong, Jürgen. Bye--see you later."

As he heard the far-away door slam, he could feel relief spread throughout his body. Something was up, that was for sure, but he no longer cared.

"At last," he thought, refilling the gold pen slowly and carefully from the small bottle of black ink he had bought specially last week at Bleisteller's.

But when he re-read it at the end of half an hour, his shoulders slumped and he sighed a long, dissatisfied sigh.

Jürgen held the little square of paper over the ashtray and moved it closer to the lit match. The flames sputtered up, then died out as he dropped what remained of the letter just in time.

"Perhaps tomorrow," he muttered to himself. "Perhaps tomorrow I will feel better, I will be able to do what I should do--exactly nothing."

He rose abruptly, letting the ancient pen clatter onto the floor. In the half-light of late afternoon, the old inscription looked back at him, etched forever, incomprehensible. From the nib a drop of black ink oozed out, perfect and indelible on the pale beige carpet.

Jürgen backed away, as slowly and cautiously as if the pen had been a small, rabid animal. At once he began to pace back and forth in the little room, carefully avoiding the stain.

"If someone saw me!" he said out loud. "If someone saw me! How utterly



absurd I would seem!"

Reaching out a hand, Jürgen picked up the telephone and dialed with a small, violent motion.

"International operator, please," he said. "I wish to place a call to Norway. The name I know but not the number."

Outside a cow bellowed again, a car rushed by, a young bicyclist with groceries hanging over the handlebars rang the little bell and began to peddle slowly down the path that went by the meadow. Without warning Jürgen slammed down the receiver with such force that the telephone itself bounced and gave a half-ring--the sound of a phone call to no one.

"Failure!" he shrieked, jumping once more to his feet. "Coward! Imbecile! Give it up, man! For God's sake, give it up!"

He felt a pain in his head spread downwards and into the inner recesses of his being. It settled in, went deeper, and held him in its grip. It was as familiar as it was unbearable. Slowly and carefully Jürgen closed the window and then let out a long, low moan.

The cows swished their tails. The ink splotch was spreading in an irregular pattern out in all directions. Flies rose in the air, then landed where they had been just a moment before. Nothing, it seemed, could change. Was this the source of the pain?

Jürgen sat down again. He capped the pen, then set it down carefully parallel to the blank note pad.

"International Operator," he said slowly into the black receiver. "Please connect me to the International Operator. I want to place a call to Norway. The name I know, but not the number."

It had begun almost as a kind of accident.

It had been a cold morning in early March the year after he and Käthe bought the house near the Water Castle. An absolutely ordinary morning-- one of those mornings in northern Europe when everyone is thoroughly tired of the gray, encrusted skies; the bitter winds that contain not even the slightest hint of spring; and the endless errands that have to be completed by shop-closing time at noon on Saturday morning.

He was on his way to the car standing in the driveway— Käthe had tasked him with picking up some cheese at the little shop that had more than a hundred kinds— when he had seen a young woman struggling with her groceries in the next driveway. Her short dark hair swirling around her face in the unforgiving breeze, she struggled to no avail with string bags, packages wrapped carefully in brown paper and tied with strings, and a large leather purse. A pound of New Zealand butter, a package in white paper that could only have been a fish, two lettuces, tomatoes, a dill bunch—all the usual things one bought at the market tumbled out on the concrete and lay there looking up accusingly.

Amazingly, she did not seem at all fazed. As he helped her pick up the results of her Saturday shopping, she thanked him and explained that she could not drive.

Had she walked all the way into town and back?

Yes, certainly. A good walk, only she had overestimated the capacity of the string bags she had bought at the Hertie's. Next time she would plan this better.

And from her rather good German with only a trace of a Scandinavian sing-song, he realized she must be the wife of his new neighbor, a dour-faced fellow whose work seemed to take him out of the country as much as he was in.

And somehow, perhaps out of a sense of obligation (after all, she was a foreigner, one did not want her writing home tear-stained letters about how unpleasant, how unfriendly Germans were), he had offered to take her to the new supermarket outside of town the following weekend on the long Saturday for the monthly shopping expedition. For this too, alas, was one of his household responsibilities, as Käthe had many times informed him.

At once he was sorry. And fearful, too, that Käthe or Anje's husband might

misinterpret this gesture of casual kindness, which was in any case so far from his usual behavior—or at least what anyone who knew him would have thought of as his usual behavior.

He had remained sorry all day but also—and he remarked to himself this was odd—strangely calm. That night as he lay awake in the narrow bed listening to Käthe's snores coming from the other side of the room, he was strangely untroubled by how that last paragraph he had written about Adorno simply did not work. He lay quiet, his mind drifting through the universe like an abandoned boat on a brisk but by no means stormy Northern sea. So calm was he that he even failed to ask himself the origins of this wholly new sense of confidence that sleep would come, eventually, and if it did not, it hardly mattered.

“For, after all,” he thought wonderingly, “in any case my body is resting and repairing itself, and is that not what sleep is for?”

The next Saturday the sky was once more cold and gray as they drove together along the newly paved road at the outskirts of Rudelsheim, along the twists and turns marked out no doubt many centuries ago by medieval shepherds. He had opened the sunroof of the new Golf—how proud he had been of that car! Anje had shivered a bit with the cold, he thought, but was too polite to say so.

Much later she told him she had not been cold at all, that the smell of the earth and the new leather of the car and the smoke from the fires still burning in people's houses mingled together in her memory with another new sensation. The sensation of being relaxed, comfortable, and immediately a sense of puzzlement. For after all, who was this odd German neighbour? She hardly knew him.

Many months later they were driving down the same road on a summer's afternoon. Käthe was at school grading papers; Anje's husband was on yet another business trip to Bangkok, or perhaps Croatia.

“I have been thinking—you know—perhaps we could have an affair,” Anje said.

As if she had suggested a coffee at Cafe Schönbrun, or a stroll down the Ringstrasse.

“Anje!” he had replied in horror. “How can you think of such a thing? I am far too

conservative, far too old-fashioned for such an affair. How do you come to such an idea?"

How adorably her short hair swirled around her face in the breeze! And why was there a line of dampness across her forehead?

"But isn't that what you want?" Anje answered. "Isn't that why over and over you have asked me to go places with you, to be friends, to enjoy the small moments of life together?"

"Me?" he had said, wide-eyed. "Such a thing would never occur to me."

"But if that isn't what you have wanted, really, why have you not done all these things with your wife instead of me?"

"But your husband," he had said weakly. "He will kill me."

Anje sighed.

"Really, Jürgen," she said with a sadness that had surprised him. "I hardly think so."

They had stopped by a field growing spinach, or perhaps kohlrabi—he always mixed them up. A bicycle bell clanged, a child rode by, and already Jürgen was paralyzed by fear that the child would know what they were talking about, would know some friend of Käthe's. It was preposterous, what Anje said. And yet . . . .

"Have you seen such things in Norway?" he said as he put the car once more underway. "Have you seen such things happen without people getting hurt?"

"Oh yes," she had answered, confident. "Many times."

On the evening of the solstice they had dined together in a restaurant for the first time. He had chosen the Inn of the Horse because, alone of all the inns in the region, it had an incompetent chef and hence the likelihood of meeting anyone they knew was small. Over a plate of woody asparagus with Hollandaise sauce and tepid boiled potatoes with no parsley, he could not make out her expression.

"Have you been to see the Water Castle?" said Jürgen in a formal way, as if they had just met. "It's really quite the attraction in this region, you know."

Haltingly, he explained that on the whole, he rather liked the Water Castle. Not because it was a famous landmark or because it was something they could show

tourists that dated from another era but because, if you looked at it in and for itself, it was, like all history, a mystery one could only pretend to understand. It was an incomprehensible artifact of the dead, the long-dead whose lives and minds they would never, could never understand.

“And that is why you study history—to frustrate yourself?” she had answered, smiling.

“Perhaps,” he had answered. “Or perhaps to give myself an impossible goal that will take my whole life to never reach.”

How beautiful she was in her simple wool sweater! How fragile and strong at the same time! How he longed to reach out and stroke the soft, dark hair!

He began to hope she had forgotten that entirely embarrassing conversation in the fields and that soon he would too. He hoped it over the mediocre Nierburger Riesling and over the pudding with bad coffee, he hoped it over the drive back, he even continued to hope it as he stopped the car near a wooded brush he remembered from his student days and suggested a brief walk in the night air before returning. As they lay down on the bank by a river whose name he had once known and now could not remember, he stopped hoping.

“This is not a good idea,” he said a while later as Anje held him in her arms as the half-moon climbed and climbed through the sky.

“Perhaps not,” Anje said. “But are you sorry?”

He saw the sharp outline of the moon above, the darkening blue-black sky over the land, a few stars scattered over the horizon’s arc.

And felt in all his being (was it still his?) that he had entered now, for the first time, a world suffused with love.

So this was what normal people felt, he thought. So this was what all his life he had been denied, or had denied himself.

Slowly he rose, smoothing back what remained of his hair.

“We should go now,” he said. “And tomorrow?”

At home, Käthe asked him no questions despite having arrived home first. Quite by chance it turned out she was entirely preoccupied with the roof.

Noticing a tile that had fallen off and landed on the front lawn, she had called a roofer to investigate. After an afternoon spent climbing over the gutters, the roofer announced that their almost-new little house had not one, but two roofs—a front one and a back one. The front one, which everyone saw from the road, was made of the finest tiles and would last longer than either of them could possibly live. These tiles were classified as “infinite tiles.” The back ones were not. They were classified as five-year tiles. The roofer had found proof of this in the bundle of papers the developer had given them and they had never bothered to read carefully. Hence, the fallen tile, the roofer assured Käthe, was only the first.

“If only we could call the company that built this house to account,” Käthe in fury. “I had no idea things were classified in that way.”

“Really?” said Jürgen, smiling. “Don’t you know by now that everything in this country is graded—perhaps even you and me?”

“Please, Jürgen,” Käthe answered. “Be serious.”

“I am being serious,” he had answered. “Actually, I think it’s very practical. Marriages should come with certificates like that too.”

And was at once horrified at his own overly spontaneous and all-too-relevant words.

Only later did it strike him that this was the best thing he could have said—flippant, perfectly in accord with his normal character.

For it had worked. At once Käthe went off grumbling by herself, leaving him alone with his newfound sense of joy.

The boat had left at sunset and now as the first dark fell over the ocean, Jürgen could feel the slight rocking of the waves far beneath. On the deck, some travellers were strolling slowly back into the bars and the restaurants; others had made camp on the deck, plumping blankets around themselves as they settled comfortably into the

deck chairs. The engine hummed on, dim yet reassuring. Would it keep on? Jürgen hoped so but found unreasonably that he was not sure. Pretending to feel at ease, he straightened his cravat and hesitated at the door to a small and dingy bar. Was it really time to go inside already? Perhaps a herring with some bread and salad? He had taken a cabin but there were seven and a half long hours left before they would dock: seven hours he would have to be alone in a place where no one looked at him, indeed, it seemed no one looked at anyone else.

For that was what he missed now that he had left Rudelsheim, however temporarily: the sense of being always on display. How odd that he missed what he had always hated, or thought he had hated. Here on this huge, not overly clean commercial boat, it no longer mattered that he had a cravat, that his white shirt was starched, that his shoes gleamed and his clean if thinning hair was parted precisely on one side. It certainly did not matter to the teen-age couple in jeans and bright green hair that squeaked passed him giggling and cooing in some language he did not recognize. Well, he thought defiantly, it mattered to him.

As swiftly as if he felt confident and at ease, he walked up to the bar and leaned one elbow on the counter (was that the right thing?) as he waited for it to be his turn. And then he froze. What language should he order in? His English, grammatical but accented, would be comprehensible but perhaps not a good idea. His French was somewhat better but might not be understood. Spanish--well, surely not.

Next to him a man and a woman ordered some sausages and mineral water in what he was pretty sure was Danish.

And when his turn came, the word *Bier*, or *Beer*, flew out of his mouth as if he had planned it although in truth he preferred wine.

Only as he stood there drinking and realizing that he was indeed hungry did it strike him that if anyone asked where he was from he could claim to be from Zürich, or Vienna, or, better yet, Berlin.

In the morning the boat steamed into a deep, narrow harbor towards a city

much smaller than he had imagined. In fact as the boat pushed on into the fjord it all looked like a miniature--the skyline, higher than in Rudelsheim but scarcely bold enough for a world capital; a few tall buildings, modern and gleaming in the morning sun; smaller structures stooped over the deep blue of the fjord. At the docks, only a few fishermen's trawlers and one aging cargo ship borne down by a load of freshly cut pine. Even the white craggy mountains in the far distance seemed small to him compared with the Alps. Not sure if he was glad or distressed that no one was waiting to meet him, Jürgen furled a woolen scarf about his neck, picked up his valise in one hand, and followed the crowd up the cobblestoned slope.

His first impression was the people all seemed unexpectedly small--indeed, entirely ordinary. As he walked up and further up the sloping street, he was surprised to find how much taller he had become than at home. And his clothes, old-fashioned to be sure with their perfectly pressed creases and round starched collar, were far more elegant than the rough jackets and jeans he saw all about him. Where he had expected to find himself at the bottom of some new social scale, he saw now that things were more complicated than he had imagined.

Another shock awaited him as he approached the tram stop. People were not at all friendly. Indeed, whereas at home everyone was watching everyone else all the time, here people seemed pinched, closed in on themselves. Few looked him in the eye, and when he stopped at a little stand to order a coffee (this was easy -- "*café*" and a single finger held up in the air) the transaction was more brief and impersonal than anything he could have done in Rudelsheim. His "Good day!" or "How are you?" were met with neutral, disinterested stares. He felt he might as well have had a name-tag on his lapel that said "Foreigner."

And despite how impatient he had always been with these archaic social conventions--the fixed, meaningless smiles, the queries for which one did not bother to hear the answer--he found to his surprise that he missed them. Very much.

He had taken the hotel recommended by the conference organizers which, while expensive, turned out to be far from the conference itself with rooms much smaller than he liked, and plainer. He had to walk up the stairs himself--there was no elevator--and



the room at the end was more like a student or a hostel room than a hotel. The narrow bed, the wooden chair without a cushion, the plain wooden table, left little room for comfort. He noted with annoyance that there was no closet. He unpacked the shirts that Käthe had only so recently folded and hung them on the two hangars on the hook behind the door.

In the afternoon he bought a pair of sunglasses against the Nordic sun that did not fit, exchanged them for another, and walked about the clean, modern streets-- offices with glass windows, apartment buildings larger and--how could he describe it? "soulless"? than anything in Rudelsheim.

*What am I doing?* he thought, a wave of panic rippling through him. *What am I doing here?* It was almost five now. The harsh sun continued to shine into his eyes. Jürgen put up one hand before his eyes and reminded himself he could still leave.

In the evening he walked through the old city and had dinner at the Grand Café, one of the most famous sights in the city. Yet the atmosphere was calm, even staid, with the nearby dowagers looking at him in a way so neutral he wondered what they were really thinking. But no one paid him any real attention. Uncomfortable with eating alone, he strummed his fingers nervously on the tablecloth as he waited for his herring, potatoes, salad, and mineral water.

And all the time he was thinking: *Now. Now. What will she be like now? What will she be like in her own country?*

When the bill came, he paid it quickly and walked back in the still-blazing sun to his hotel, where he had to ring the bell despite it being long before midnight. He went through the door with the eagerness of a man under pursuit. Had people really been staring at him behind his back all day or was this the idea of a diseased imagination?

Without bothering to undress, he lay down on the bed and closed his eyes. The sun blazed on behind the thin shade over the single window, and through the open window came smell of the sea and of dead and dying fish--a smell of far-off places and unknown ways of living that would never be his.

When he woke, he was stunned to realize it was three in the morning by his watch, and the sun had faded just a little.

Later, he would remember the conference in a blur. It had the same unreal quality as the little hotel, the endless day, and the city itself. For despite the furious and passionate debates, the high drama of the panel presentations, at every moment all he could think was "Anje! Anje!" And "Soon! Soon!"

The conference hall was new and brightly lit, with shining antiseptic surfaces everywhere, rather like an operating theater except that here only theories about the dead were put under strong light, then carefully and with surgical precision eviscerated. In the commentary on his paper he noticed what he felt was either a certain restraint, perhaps a hidden scorn. To be sure, it seemed of little interest to anyone except himself.

Much energy was spent on theories of historicity in which he did not believe, like the theory that too rapid a transition from feudalism to modernity promotes a certain proclivity to violence that, in the end, explains much. He had argued that the explanatory power of any theory was limited; what should be explored were the relative strengths of each in relation to each other. But in truth he remained skeptical of all proposed answers.

"I am not theological" had been his response--clearly unsatisfactory--to one of his questioners.

By the end he had realized he should have never have strayed into the arcane, abstract reaches of theory even though any history, even the primitive chronicles on which he had foolishly spent so many years of his life, presupposed some kind of theory even if unarticulated by or even unknown to the author. He should have stayed with his original field: the religious conflicts of his region, the Anabaptist rebellion of the 1500s and later the Thirty Years' War, a conflict over such questions as whether the bread and wine of the Mass were literally transmuted during the ceremony or perhaps it was more simply a conflict about whether the Bishop of Cologne or the Swedish king was going to rule the plains of northern Europe. He still remembered as a child asking why several black iron cages swung in the breeze from the church he passed every day on his way

to school. That the cages had once held the bodies of the rebellious Anabaptists had been, to say, the least, an unsatisfactory answer but perhaps one that had piqued his curiosity and set him on his path. It had not helped either when he had learned that over fifty percent of the population of Europe had died in the Thirty Years' War--in those pre-technological days it had taken thirty years. It had not helped either when as a teenager he had learned that the countryside had been Protestant and the town itself the seat of the bishopric--divisions unchanged since 1648 when the great peace ending the war had been signed in Rudelsheim. Visions of the Anabaptists dancing naked on the Ringstrasse, the Anabaptists cavorting with their multiple wives, the Anabaptists speaking in tongues and rallying around their charismatic leader--these, to be sure, did sometimes go through his head as, spending his days in hushed, sacred libraries, he translated the old chronicles slowly and with great difficulty. And the visions stayed with him long after he had pulled the iron gates of the libraries shut behind him. They were ghosts he had woken and could not put back to sleep, ghosts who troubled but from whom he could not seem to extract a lesson.

In retrospect, a paper on some obscure footnote of history would have been better--the origins of the Anabaptists perhaps, their geographical meanderings north from Switzerland. He should have stayed out of theory, which inevitably led by one path or another to the questions for which no one had an answer, like "Why did it happen?" and "Could it have been stopped?" and "Why did it happen the way it did?" At moments as he listened, it seemed to him that all the carefully crafted phrases hurled through the air of the conference hall like missiles were, in the end, so much smoke--intricate and sophisticated excuses not to look in the mirror, or to hide what they knew they would see there if they did.

As he walked back through a city he would never see again, Jürgen reminded himself that, after all, the conference had always been just an excuse. It was just a way--the way--he could get to Norway without taking Käthe and without arousing her suspicions. From the moment when he had seen the call for papers in *Neue Historische Zeitschrift* his first thought had not been about his dissertation and the possible university posting that might result if he could ever manage to finish it. Oh no.

His first thought had been the same as his last: *Anje. Anje.*

At the hotel he packed up his things quickly if not so neatly as Käthe had. He was surprised to note his hands were shaking. In the small, scratched mirror, a face he did not know looked back at him. He got out a razor and went to work on the bit of stubble that had grown since the morning, combed his hair again, and straightened his tie.

But the valise felt strange in his hands, as if the soft worn leather case belonged to someone else now, and the march of his feet down the old, narrow stairs felt unsteady.

*I can still go back to Rudelsheim,* he thought. *There's still time.*

But the feet nonetheless went forward, and for reasons he decided not to examine, he went with them.

The train pulled into the station with a screech, stopped, then moved forward slightly, causing Jürgen to lurch across the aisle of the second-class compartment.

"*Pardon, pardon,*" he said without thinking and was relieved to note that neither the teen-age couple from Sweden on their way to a youth hostel nor the older woman from the far North seemed to have taken his words anything amiss although that might have been because they thought he was speaking French.

Now that the moment had almost arrived, he found himself strangely calm although his hands were still shaking as he got the valise down from its perch above the seats. He had not turned back. The time had come for everyone on the train to depart, for the temporary society it had created to dissolve, for his new life to begin, or not. Already people were streaming out of the train and into the street. There was nothing more he could do, or had to do. He had not turned back.

At a kiosk he bought a map and looked, calmly at first, then with increasing distress for the street on which he was supposed to meet her. Telling himself he would find it--he had at least five hours left--his hands began shaking so uncontrollably that in the end he had put the map away, wawked outside and sat down at a nearby fountain

in the center of a pedestrian shopping street, waiting until he would be himself again.

How strange it was, to be in a town where so much was different yet so much the same! He spread the little map out on his lap, noting that it had the same bright pinks, blues, greens as the city street map he had at home of Rudelsheim. Even the shapes of the streets looked the same. Here too an old inner city with its squares, restaurants and cafes; governmental buildings, museums, institutes; further out in one direction ring roads leading to the newer suburbs. Yet here "street" was a different though clearly related word; different little symbols adorned some of the vowels, to what oral effect he did not know; and in the other direction from the station, the little blue strand of the river led out into the wider blue of the fearsome sea. Was this why he felt so unsettled? Because everything felt familiar yet somehow wrong?

Here, too, the sun was shining, but  
umbrellas here but why? automats more modern than at home?

he realizes he could have told kaethe -- but that would have been a way of making a decision, of taking responsibility; as it is he can reject Anje and no one will ever know. He should think of those other trains at the end of which was no new life for anyone.

### 3.

The cruise ship was called the Hurtigrute—an odd, sing-songy name.

In the morning he woke to find it was running slowly and elegantly close to the coast. An occasional house looked back at them from the nearby shore—actually, two houses, the real one and its mirror image in the black crystal of the fjord.

Little towns where once fishermen had lived their hard fishermen lives overflowed with tourists from all countries, bumping up against each other in huts all painted the same dull rust-color red—a color, Anje said, from the cod liver oil of which the paint was made. It was an exact complement to the vivid blue skies.

The huts, the skies, and the wisps of white clouds drifting through them—all found their doubles in the waters below. Shimmering in detail just as precise, as seemingly real as their originals, each image was no sooner seen than vanished as the ship moved slowly on.

Zeno rules, thought Jürgen . A world in which everything is in perpetual motion.

On the whole, Jürgen liked the ship despite the fact that Anje had booked them in the intermediate class. Not in the inner staterooms that had no windows, nor in the upper staterooms with their separate sitting rooms and free passage three times a day to the upper reaches of the elegant salon where real meals could be had.

It reminded him of far-off student days as, slowly and cautiously, he made up slides of bread with butter and caviar from the Bergen fishmarket.

“The red and the black,” he mused, beholding his handwork. “But which am I?”

Later, his feet up on the rail in one of the large open public rooms, he found himself face-to-face with one of the ship’s personnel—a young woman with a severe face who confiscated his half-full bottle of Pils with all the righteous self-satisfaction of a customs inspector.

“Alcohol must not be brought on the *Hur-ti-gru-te*,” she admonished him in English. “Beer can be purchased at the bar on Level Four.”

Which was so entirely Teutonic an experience that, on the whole, it rather pleased him.

CODA

"What a beautiful baby," said Hermann Glück, hoping his voice did not betray his entire lack of sincerity. "So--so--"

He paused. The baby, although big for her age, was still in the stage of looking at once very young and very old. A few wisps of blond hair gone askew did little to cover the otherwise bald head. Did the fact that the eyes were still blue mean they would not turn? He would have to ask Irene. In any case, they looked out at life with neither wonder nor fear. Perhaps, thought Hermann, she could not see very far yet. Really, despite being eight months old, she looked hardly born. Had he not known it by other means, he would have had to guess from the pink ruffles that before him stood--or rather lay--a little girl.

"She is really very--very--round," he finished up in his heartiest voice.

Looking up, he was relieved to see that no one seemed to have realized he was trying to avoid being truthful. Irene, an afghan over her lap, observed the baby sternly as it played on the rug, yet by no means as sternly as she had often observed him. Next to the Bechstein, Frau Hufnagel fussed with a tray of cookies entirely appropriate for Sunday afternoon--tiny yellow snails made of sugar, nuts, eggs, and just enough flour to keep the other ingredients from coming apart; big round sugar cookies, overlapped on the plate to make a half-circle; tiny cones of latticework made of walnuts and citron and dipped in chocolate, these last--for some reason unknown to the Italians--known throughout the region of the Water Castles as *Florentiner*.

More than a year had passed, and it was now autumn. The Ford station wagon, declared by the Rudelsheim Inspection Station to have rusted out, had been replaced by a brand-new white Passat. Franz, for reasons he did not explain, had sold the watch-and-clock shop and gone to Soho, convinced things would go better, or at least differently, for him across the channel. Verfügel had almost finished his work, which had proved to be more arduous, and certainly more expensive, than any of them would have guessed. Still, he had done a good job, making sure the divorce came through just in the nick of time--although, alas, the hospital had insisted on listing "Glück" as the



baby's family name on the official birth certificate over Irene's objections. Frau Hufnagel, making a sacrifice of both her beloved parakeet and the snuff boxes, had moved in with Irene--"for the duration," as Frau Hufnagel put it--whatever that meant.

As for Käthe, she was not really satisfied with just Fridays but, really, how could he give her more? Wednesdays was German club at the Gymnasium, and the other two days were spent helping, or at least watching, Willi at his kayak lessons. For after having almost been arrested for shoplifting in Kaufhof basement--a near-escape that only parental intercession had prevented from turning into tragedy--that young man had announced that his life-goal was to make the kayak team in the next Olympics.

With only a few signs of wood-bores, the apple trees behind the house in the Lindner Weg had bloomed and were bearing more apples than Hermann would have believed possible. It irritated him now that he had not thought to bring some apples for this visit. The invitation, arriving on a formal note from Irene, had left him uncertain how to behave. Indeed, he had approached this occasion, his first time in the flat since the baby's birth, with a sense of trepidation, if not outright fear.

On the Persian rug, Clothilde wailed as she wriggled on her stomach. All at once she had pushed herself up with her forearms--amazingly strong for so young a child, thought Hermann--while her fat little legs moved swiftly behind her in a horizontal parody of running. Then, abruptly, her arms collapsed. Over she went, with a wail louder than before. As she landed on the small of her back, her blue eyes looked up at the grown-ups, puzzled and aggrieved. Then, as if it were all entirely new, she rolled over, ruffles upwards, and began the entire sequence once more.

"She's been doing that for two weeks now," said Frau Hufnagel, frowning.

"Really?" Hermann murmured.

Slowly, he took a snail from the tray and placed it carefully on the edge of his saucer.

Irene leaned forward in her chair, a bright spot of pink in each cheek.

"How like a woman," Frau Hufnagel sighed as, looking down at her hands sternly, she filed an errant nail. "Clothilde must have done that hundreds of times now, and still she doesn't learn."

"Nonsense," said Irene. "Clothilde is ambitious to try it at all, at her age. Give her time."

On the Bechstein, rows of faded scores with yellow covers were stacked neatly off to one side. For the first time that Hermann could remember, the lid of the piano was shut.

"Irene," he said with alarm. "Have you stopped playing altogether?"

Irene nodded.

"But Irene," said Hermann, fighting down an obscure sense of guilt. "Why?"

Silent, Irene observed the baby, who was once more on her stomach at the beginning of the process.

"It was time," said Irene. "One day I realized that even if I was good, all I would ever do would be to imitate others--Giesecking, Myra Hess, Horowitz, Rubinstein. And these others would always be far more skillful than I would ever, ever be. So that was the first way in which my life was a shadow--no, a mere shadow of a shadow. And there was also a second. Because a pianist spends a whole lifetime studying the soul of someone else without creating anything new, searching the score which is the record of someone else's feelings. And this someone else is someone long dead, whom one can never really know. One day I realized that my whole life so far had been nothing but an imitation. On that day I closed the Bechstein."

"But Irene," said Hermann delicately. "I think you are looking at this the wrong way around. When you play, the beauty you create is always new. What does it matter if that beauty has to rest on something old? The way you play a piece is your own, can only be your own. Why, Irene--" He stopped, feeling his forehead grow warm. "You must not give up like this. You must not abandon your right to be an individual."

She stood before him, her dark eyes glistening with passion. A bit fuller and healthier-looking than he remembered, she had dressed in a simple, peach-colored dress he had never seen before. On either side of her face, two little ivory combs held up the smooth dark hair like wings, or guardian angels.

Oh how he wished he could have loved her! To have loved her as she deserved! Even now, he would give anything to be able to do it. How many people would have

been spared unhappiness--Nikki, Käthe, Jürgen, Irene--even (it came as a shock) himself.

And it was not that she was not beautiful. Her hands, strong and unvarnished, were among the most beautiful he had ever seen. Yet they lacked something that Nikki's--yes, and even Käthe's in lesser measure--had, at least as far as he was concerned. In all other ways, Irene was admirable. Yet in the end, it was the other thing that mattered. It was a mystery beyond comprehending.

"Of course Irene will play again," said Frau Hufnagel, passing the cookies in a way that suggested the visit was almost at an end. "She will play as soon as Clothilde is out of pinafores."

"Hermann," said Irene suddenly. "Do you know if they have sold the Water Castle yet? There was a "For Sale" sign on it just before Clothilde was born."

"I have no idea," said Hermann with a trace of stiffness. For some reason it pained him to think of the Water Castle.

"The Water Castle?" said Frau Hufnagel. "Why would you bother yourself about an old thing like that? And you of all people, Irene--you who always prided yourself on being so modern."

Frau Hufnagel picked up little Clothilde and began to rock her back and forth.

"You know," said Hermann. "I have been thinking she reminds me of someone."

Bending down, he peered into the round little face.

"Ah yes," he said. "Now I have it. My mother's sister, Bertha. That is who she reminds me of."

Frau Hufnagel frowned.

"Surely not. Of course Bertha was heavy as well but the nose was entirely different. And the eyes!"

Hermann considered it. Perhaps he was wrong? A photograph would settle it one way or the other, but he feared he had none. Perhaps if he asked his mother--?

With a pang, he remembered. He sniffed imperceptibly.

"No doubt it is merely coincidence, if indeed she does resemble my Aunt Bertha at all."

Taking the afghan from her lap and folding it up neatly, Irene rose from her chair. As if in echo, Hermann rose too and, after a moment's thought, put out his hand. As Irene bent her head, her hair fell forward over the combs, swirling first this way, then that. Hermann could feel his heart begin to thump. Would she take what little he had to offer?

Looking up, Irene blinked and took his hand.

She was happy now, Hermann thought with a shock. For the first time since he had known her, she was happy. There was no need for him to worry about her any more. She would be all right.

"May I come again?" he said. "I mean--may I call on you? That is, from time to time?"

He stopped, out of breath, the pulse in his finger wavering.

A smile flickered at the corner of Irene's lips, then smoothed itself into a dignified line.

"I suppose," she said, grasping his hand firmly and then letting it go. "If that is what you want."

Slowly Hermann walked down the stairs and let himself out into the street, his footsteps echoing behind him on the cobblestones of the walk. It was late, but the sun was still shining. He would have to hurry now if he was to get to the market before it closed. Hopefully he would be able to buy a sprig or two of baby's breath for Fraulein Spaetz. He had given her three bushels of apples earlier in the week, together with some recipes his mother had especially liked. Would she make any of them? Hermann hoped so, but he was not sure.

Ahead of him, a swarthy man in a cleaner's uniform--Italian? Turkish?--was sweeping the street. He had an impulse to cross to the other side but it was too late. Then he was past.

Behind them, down the narrow alley, the cathedral held its door open, welcoming passersby with darkness and cooler air. In the little alcove, there was now a photograph of the Bishop and a brief narrative of his life: the dates of his birth and death; a quotation from the last sermon he had been allowed to give, the one that had

brought out the crowds on the Ringstrasse that one and only time; the name of the place to which his deputy had been taken and from which he had not returned. The photograph looked out on the alcove to the great church which, as it happened, at that moment was empty. Light from the street penetrated the lightly stained glass and illuminated the photograph, fading it imperceptibly. Inside the sanctuary, all was cold and still.

Suddenly, far above, the astronomical clock signaled that another marker in the silent passage of time had been reached. Once more the stone figures bent and shuddered under the stress of the ancient mechanism. Death, with his arrow in one hand and a hammer in the other. Chronos, with his scythe and his turning hourglass. An ancient horn raised to his lips, the small statue of a man blew the note of the present quarter hour; at once the equally small statue of a woman rang in answer a small metal bell.

A cloud passed over the sun, giving the Ringstrasse a momentary impression of gray. Then it skittered on--why was it, this made Hermann think of the soft brush of a feather, or a feather earring, against his skin? A pain as big as his heart--no, bigger than his heart could contain--rose up from nowhere and then receded.

Soon, all too soon, the sky would cloud over again and remain so for many months. At first, one would still rush to the window each morning, hoping to catch a glimpse of the sun as soon as the blinds were up. Then, little by little, the grayness would grow familiar, even expected. One would not even know the moment in which one became entirely used to it. But then, one morning, after a restless sleep, as one slowly cranked open the dark wooden exterior blinds purely out of habit--then and only then on that far-off day would come the smell of spring--of spring with its soft, tentative greenings; its fragrant air; its hints of happiness; its tantalizing promises of universal bliss.

Yes: then something would happen. As he reached the end of the walk, Hermann began, very softly, to whistle. Surely even in a little life such as his, something would happen.

Of that he was almost entirely sure.

