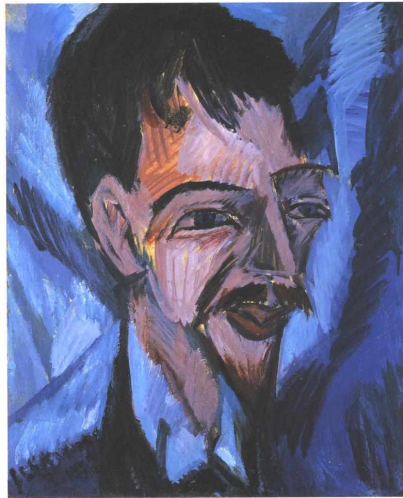


Alfred Doebelin



Beyond Alexanderplatz

ALFRED DÖBLIN

EXPECT NO MERCY

Parts 1 Poverty

Part 2. Boomtime

Translated by C.D. Godwin

www.beyondalexanderplatz.com

Deny yourself! You must yourself deny!

Goethe: *Faust* Part 1, sc. 4

No mercy shall be shown! No prisoners shall be taken!

Kaiser Wilhelm II, 27 July 1900,
seeing off a German expeditionary
force to help suppress the Boxer
rebellion in China

This novel, written in exile in 1934, was first translated in 1937 by T and P Blewitt as *Men without Mercy* – the only one of Döblin's fictions (apart from *Berlin Alexanderplatz*) to appear in English in his lifetime. That translation has never been reprinted, and is almost unobtainable.

Now that other Döblin titles are making their belated way to an Anglophone readership, it is fitting that this *other* Berlin novel should be presented in a completely new translation by C. D. Godwin.

Within the frame of a standard “realist” novel rather than an epic, *Expect No Mercy* once again reveals Döblin's mastery of vivid, economical word-portraiture of scenes and people. Drawing in heavily fictionalised form on Döblin's own family history during half a century of tumultuous change in Germany, the novel explores the interplay between private psychologies (the individual, the family) and the social pathologies that culminated in the disaster of 1933.

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INTRODUCTION

Pardon wird nicht gegeben (translated here as *Expect No Mercy*) is a seeming oddity among Alfred Döblin's extensive output of fictions: no "epic", but a social-realist novel in the 19th century tradition. A closer look throws into doubt such a slick genre-label.

In 1934 Döblin was settled with his wife and three of his four sons in the outskirts of Paris, a more stable exile location than Zurich – two years later, Döblin, his wife and the three younger sons would become naturalised French citizens – although the loss of German-speaking surroundings added to other wrenching losses: his medical profession, his German readership, and the sustaining milieu of working-class Berlin. The critic Hermann Kesten, reviewing the first post-War edition of the novel, recalls:

...we would meet three or four times a week in a café, mostly with our wives, and he was happy as a sandlark, laughing and chatting, making jokes and pranks, owlish eyes twinkling behind the heavy spectacles, heartily cursing the dismal literary crew inside [Germany] and outside ...

His conversation was like his novels: full of quirky notions and magnificent fantasies, replete with wordplay and absurd humour, with the startling naïveté of a cheeky child or a spiritually homeless medical man. He had the virtues of the shortsighted: exaggeration and absurd over-precision, he was ready with imagery, sharp-tongued, he was at the high point of his life and his polytheism ... For the first time he had money in his hands ... He berlinerised jauntily in French.¹

But "beneath the tough Berliner cheerfulness lay a deeper stratum: something gentle, nested in itself, the mystical core around which his most essential being revolved."²

His compulsion to write ("He could never turn off the spigot," noted Günther Anders³), and a nagging unease about the failings of German society and character – his own family not excluded – that had led to the catastrophe of 1933,⁴ caused him to spend six months "skirmishing around" on this "little Berlin novel. Family history with autobiographical component."⁵ A letter of August 1934 mentions "a very real big city novel, deals with marriage, I write very simply (at least I think so), narrate what I know".⁶ It was the first novel in more than 20 years to require no long hours in libraries and museums: "...it should be a personal experience. What experience? My family."⁷

Expect No Mercy is no quirky outlier, unconnected to what came before or after:

I thought of Berlin, of the distant world now lost to me, and examined in spirit ... how it had all come about. I had to ... draw into this landscape a person, a Manas and a Franz Biberkopf, so that he (and I) might be tested and undergo experiences."⁸

¹ *Die Zeit*, 15 Sept 1961. The gatherings included, for example, Manas Sperber, Joseph Roth, Arthur Koestler.

² Robert Minder, in *Text & Kritik* 13/14, (1972) p.60.

³ Introduction to *Mensch ohne Welt* (Beck 1984) p. xxx.

⁴ Two substantial non-fiction works had already gnawed away at this problem: *Wissen und Verändern!* (Know, and Change!) in 1931, and *Unser Dasein* (Our Existence) in 1933; the latter at once burned and banned by the Nazi regime.

⁵ Döblin: *Epilog* (1948).

⁶ *Briefe*, p. 197.

⁷ Robert Minder, op. cit. p.61.

⁸ *Epilog*.

There followed three more epic novels,⁹ as well as some major essays,¹⁰ pursuing the question of “how it all came about”; the “all” now expanded to encompass not just the German calamity, but the wider canvas of Europe’s half-millennium of global conquest and “progress”.

*

Expect No Mercy contains not a single place name – yet we are clearly in Berlin. Not a single date – yet we are clearly presented with a history of Germany (condensed to about three decades) from unification in 1871 to the economic and political collapse that began in 1929. Not a single surname; many characters have not even a forename, merely an occupation. Yet each is clearly delineated. One of the few contemporary reviews makes an astute observation:

What distinguishes this book as something special is the writer’s *gaze*, his particular way of seeing – one which is no mere receptive process but which itself *emits light*, a curious kind of light in which people and things stand and appear in a particular way. In a remarkable fashion the writer becomes an explorer: the object is one among many, the style is of secondary importance, but the gaze, the direction of the gaze, is decisive. ... The light of this gaze sharply distinguishes things and people, their actions, their behaviour, their relationship to the ‘real’ and the ‘unreal’. ... here the palpable and the impalpable together are real ... People, place, time are all real, but lack all specificity.¹¹

The Big City is never named, yet it’s real: the *essence* of big city. Not an abstraction, not a collection of commonalities, or a phantasmagorical Utopia, but “it’s enormously, more strongly real in every detail” than any particular city with local colouring; drawn from an internal perspective, not an external gaze. The time is clearly the early 20th century, it’s no alternative history, rather the *essence* of an age:

Precisely this skill – of turning the concrete into something like the essential and in so doing still making it alive – gives the representation of temporality an incredible power, an enormous inner truth. It’s a very new and very great creative act, this manner of allowing essences of people, places and times to appear as realities.

*

The structure is linear, presented in three simply labelled parts: Poverty, Boomtime, Crisis. These summarise the recent history of Germany, although the First World War is left quite out. For all the traumas the War had caused, Döblin believed it had made little impact on the 1920s: underlying pre-War attitudes and political structures had survived the superficial change from Reich to Republic.

In **Part One**, a widow (referred to throughout as “the mother”) brings her three children from the provinces to the Big City. Her husband has died suddenly after sinking her dowry into an extravagant development project, leaving a mountain of debts. She has to throw herself on the mercy of a brother, a furniture manufacturer, who provides a bare minimum of support.

In 1888, when Döblin was 10 years old and the family seemed well on the way to a prosperous middle class status, his father eloped to America with an employee half his age, leaving the

⁹ *Land without Death* (Amazonas Trilogy); *November 1918 – a German Revolution*; *Tales of a Long Night*.

¹⁰ E.g. *The historical novel and us*; and *Prometheus and the Primitive*. Both are included in *German Masquerade: writings on politics, life and literature in chaotic times*, at <https://beyond-alexanderplatz.com>.

¹¹ Heinrich Schütz, in *Die Sammlung* 2 (1935).

mother with a pile of debts. She had to take herself and her five children to Berlin, where relatives provided grudging support.

The unpayable debts plunge the mother into despair; she attempts suicide but is saved by the elder son Karl. He is fascinated by the city and desperate to start earning, but falls in with bad company: a group of semi-feral youths who become involved in a terrorist bombing. With the police hot on their tail, Karl's older friend Paul (a political cynic, also a father substitute?) invites Karl to run away with him. But the mother locks Karl in, for he is now her only hope for a breadwinner. Karl's spirit is broken, his capacity for love destroyed. For the rest of his life he is to be "roasted slowly over a fire."

Part Two begins by jumping forward fifteen years to Karl's wedding day – a delicious set-piece of satirical observation comparable to the opening banquet scene in *Wallenstein*.¹² We then retrace the intervening years, in which Karl is apprenticed to the uncle's furniture factory, and is advised by a wise master craftsman not to kick too hard against the traces. Karl's only attempt to resist the path his mother has set him on ends with her slapping his face – he now a grown man! All resistance crumbles; he will now work doggedly at the prescribed career.

The mother, meanwhile, discovers how to blossom among city society. Karl is promoted from the shop floor to the executive suite, and it's time he found a wife. "And so Karl surrendered to love, that most terrible, most implacable of forces. Love had never yet looked into his heart and put it to the test."

In order to support the family, Alfred's eldest brother, 15 year old Ludwig, became apprenticed, first at a linen goods and furniture wholesaler, then at his uncle's timber business. Well aware of their mother's severely practical view of life, Alfred and his brother Hugo had to hide their artistic leanings: Alfred concealed his juvenile writings, Hugo enrolled secretly in acting school.

The marriage becomes a prison for the wife, Julie. Karl institutes a stern regime: weekly inspections for housekeeping derelictions, and as for the intimate side of marriage – an occasional performance, with nothing of the revolting libido of the lower classes. Their evening chats revolve around inconsequential matters; out of the question that they should exchange confidences. She is a status symbol, as are the two children placed in the care of a nanny.

Alfred's marriage to Erna, like his father's marriage to his mother, was urged by the two families, despite wide divergences in the couple's personalities. Alfred's mother came from an ambitious commercial family; but the father was a talented feckless man, who played the violin, taught his children piano, and even composed some songs, but was forced into a business career. Erna, one of the first female medical students in Germany, should have been a good companion to Alfred – but he (already in the fourth year of an affair with a young nurse, which started when she was just 16) was appalled to learn that Erna too had experienced pre-marital "adventures". She apparently showed little understanding of literary matters, but insisted on typing up Alfred's copious manuscripts.

Little sister, Marie, who was handed over to the childless Uncle and Aunt, dies a few years later. (Alfred's elder sister Meta was killed by shrapnel in March 1919 as she fetched milk for her children during the Spartacist uprising.) The younger brother, Erich, is a delicate boy, prone to fits when there is any excitement. He studies pharmacy, and is provided by Karl with a corner chemist's shop. He develops a philosophy of human relations which sees the family and its mutual

¹² That scene, coincidentally written some 15 years earlier, is the opening excerpt in *The Epic Worlds of Alfred Döblin – an Adventurous Readers' Guide*. Galileo 2024.

obligations as a cause of much unhappiness. This proves disastrous when he marries: he cannot understand why his young wife wants permanence, and babies:

The wonderful outcomes of his educational methods melted away before his eyes as tempest followed tempest. He no longer dared even hint that the time for them to part was drawing near. He felt squeezed into a situation he found unnatural. She felt life was at last following its normal course ... the cheerful fat man was ... entangled in a snare.

Part Three is longer than the first two parts combined. It brings to the fore the wider context of the 20th century, as the global economic downturn spreads its tentacles into every corner.

When his uncle dies and the aunt cashes in her share of the firm (at considerable risk to its stability), Karl becomes sole owner, and a leading figure, respected but not well liked, in the manufacturers' association. Debates constantly focus on how they might influence government responses to increasing bankruptcies and unemployment, but heaven forbid they should become involved in politics!

As his shoulders start to sag under the weight of responsibilities, Karl wonders whether to engage Julie in discussion about the business. But – impossible! Instead he starts a conversation representing their home as a sacrosanct space, with strong walls against the outside world. Julie responds by calling it a fortress, and him Herr Kommandant. Her suppressed emotions break loose, and she bites his lip – hard. An affair with a young diplomat follows; eventually she leaves Karl, and manages to abduct the two children.

Karl undergoes a breakdown. He trashes the “Museum”, his cabinet of curiosities that includes a suit of armour and an elaborately inlaid antique cabinet, and takes a room in a shabby suburban hotel on a street frequented by prostitutes. He allows his suppressed libido free rein.

In February 1922, at a Lenten ball, Alfred made the acquaintance of a young photographer, Charlotte (Yolla) Niclas. They talked deep into the night – she had read his Wang Lun and could ask intelligent questions about it. They quickly became lovers. At first Alfred could introduce her to the family as an admirer of his works (what we nowadays would call “a groupie”), and she took many delightful photos of the children. Erna even welcomed her on a houseboat holiday. But the nature of the liaison could not be concealed; difficult scenes ensued. Yolla was sure Alfred would leave the family to marry her; but Alfred refused to follow his father's bad example. They were soulmates until Alfred's death, despite obstacles to their meeting, or even letter-writing.

The influence of Yolla can be seen in Mountains Oceans Giants (1924), where for the first time Döblin created a credible rounded female character, Venaska. (But the lit. crit. industry does not like to talk about this.)

To keep afloat, Karl embezzles the savings of Julie's uncle, and breaks the law by sending idle machinery abroad where it can be put to productive use. Eventually an arrest warrant is issued. At this point, Karl's old friend Paul turns up out of the blue; he has spent his life travelling and agitating – Karl's lost alternative history – and is back to foment insurrection. As battle lines are drawn between the government and insurgent factions, Karl plans to go over to the insurgents. The plan goes ironically awry. The end.

Ludwig, now owner of a timber business, suffered financial disaster as the Crisis took hold; his marriage was on the rocks, a former flame he approached turned him down, and he blew his brains out in a Berlin station toilet.

*

Lastly, some comments on style.

The reader is encouraged to stay alert for the *sound* of words and phrases and sentences. Döblin had an acute ear, and never put pen to paper until “the ideas had clothed themselves in words”.¹³ Take the third paragraph at the start of the novel:

... the boys came running, they'd spotted a growing black speck down along the rails, it drew nearer rumbling and jouncing, the locomotive's iron scutcheon loomed bigger and bigger, *the rails juddered in time to its pounding, it rolled mightily in, belching steam, its breathing slowed, it lumbered, panting heavily, to a squealing halt.*

Plain words, but they provide a soundtrack to the scene's rhythm. Equally important is Döblin's *visualisation*, e.g.

...[she] leaned both elbows on the kitchen table where a stump of candle flickered in a beer bottle. The lad stared at her, frightened. *Her dark shadow climbed brokenly over the wall with the water pipe, up to the ceiling. The sinister apparition squatted over the room, listening, demanding talk.*

As the critic quoted above said: “Here the palpable and the impalpable together are real.”

But the most notable and pervasive element of style is the blurring of the boundary between (objective) narrative and (subjective) interior monolog. Something like this goes back as far as Jane Austen, e.g.

The hair was curled, and the maid sent away, and Emma sat down to think and be miserable. – *It was a wretched business, indeed! – Such an overthrow of everything she had been wishing for!*

The German concept of “erlebte Rede” (“experienced speech”) partly covers it, as does the more modern English concept of “free indirect speech”. It begins on the very first pages (italics added for clarity):

Now and then they took a break to consider the crates piled like a little bulwark behind the women, *here's crockery, here's more crockery, Mother's stuff, little Marie's stuff, here's the old clock.*

Along with the three children she brought with her a shrivelled heart, and poverty. *The first round was lost, would there be a second.*

...in the end she had no option but to press her inheritance into his hands, her money, she was trembling, *no, he must take it, what else is it good for.*

He had helped with the mowing, *by now they must have begun stacking, that lovely big farm, now we have nothing.* He stood outside the street door, *what shall I do, Mother's at her wits' end, she's out of her mind, who can I turn to.* He forced himself to move, trudged on. *On to somewhere.* He studied the passers-by, *how does this one earn a living, where does this one get it from, or that one, how do they come by it? How did Father come by it. If I was in the country now I could hire myself out, this is the busiest time, whyever did Mother bring us here.*

Theory talks of transitions between 1st person and 3rd person; but Döblin can achieve the effect entirely using 3rd person:

He was startled, *he was looking for work and the mother knew it, but she was staring at him and enticing him to stay home and she seemed to think it not so important, she was*

¹³ *Schicksalsreise* (Destiny's Journey), 1949.

so fickle, so strange. He picked up his cap, brushed his jacket and followed her out to the stairs.

The reader will find further examples on almost every page.

*

Expect No Mercy now shares with *Berlin Alexanderplatz* the distinction of two translations into English. The first version of the latter title (by Eugene Jolas, 1931) has legs: it was still being republished in 2004. The 2015 translation by Michael Hofmann is a welcome addition, rather than a substitute.

The first translation of *Pardon wird nicht gegeben* (*Men without Mercy*, T & P Blewitt, Gollancz 1937) was never reprinted and is now hard to find. The title is inaccurate, since one of the most merciless characters is The Mother. The English text is workmanlike, but to me seems rather ponderous. I hope this new translation will be found enjoyably readable – a worthy addition to other Döblin titles that have recently, at long last, found their way into English.

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Stroud, UK

January 2025

Part One

Poverty

DEPARTURE

They waited in their black clothes on the little station's open platform, the mother motionless in the hot sun between two peasant women, who kept pulling their bright headscarves low over the forehead and swatted at flies buzzing around their bare shins. They shaded their eyes squinting for the train, but there was no sign of it yet, still no sign, they'd set off far too early, on their way since early morning in order to leave all the wailing and leave-taking behind.

There the mother stood in her heavy widow's veil, her left hand clutched flowers and a handkerchief, in the right was a small handbag with the money and the documents. The infant girl with the little black bonnet, scrubbed and in her Sunday best, held tight to her mother's skirt-tail, sucked her thumb and kept an eye on the two brothers, the big one and the younger, as they patrolled doggedly up and down the track in cheap new jackets and over-tight long trousers, unaccustomed straw hat with the mourning-band on each round head. Now and then they took a break to consider the crates piled like a little bulwark behind the women, here's crockery, here's more crockery, Mother's stuff, little Marie's stuff, here's the old clock.

Then the rails hummed, the mother reached for the child, two men with official caps, cigarettes dangling from their lips, strolled from the little building, one grabbed an empty trolley and pushed it behind the crates, the boys came running, they'd spotted a growing black speck down along the rails, it drew nearer rumbling and jouncing, the locomotive's iron shield loomed bigger and bigger, the rails juddered in time to its pounding, it rolled mightily in, belching steam, its breathing slowed, it lumbered, panting heavily, to a squealing halt.

The peasants scratched at their legs, the ancient weathered faces twisted in expressions of grief. One of the men called out the station's name, waved to them, pulled open a door at the front of the train, the crates were trolleyed to the rear, behind the woman the peasants came dragging a heavy trunk wrapped in black oilcloth. The boys clambered aboard first, the jubilant younger was already kneeling on the bench to gaze out of the window. The mother proceeded slowly with the little girl. The child was passed up to her in the carriage, everyone pushed and heaved at the trunk, the boys shouted "The crates!" – but they'd already been stowed in the baggage car. Then a whistle, the door slammed, the two peasants on the platform stepped back, dabbing at eyes with a corner of headscarf.

The heavy iron contraption began to move, snorted past. They saw the little boy's delighted face, above it the older lad's, solemn and withdrawn. The widow was in the middle seat, silent, arm about the little daughter, flowers and handkerchief in her lap.

The shining rails were clear again. The two peasants left the hot platform, plodded through the noon-quiet village, then a long trek down the winding road until they turned off into fields. They trudged past a small birch grove, a meadow, farmyard with wide-

open gate. Ducks swam on a pond, from the yard came the lowing of cattle, hammering, and men's voices. Flanking the farm towards the road was the two-storey inn with the high red roof. It was clad in scaffolding, loomed newly whitewashed over the birches. A blue signboard had just been suspended from the eaves, its gleaming gold lettering sparkled onto the road: *MEADOWLAND Bar and Restaurant*. A canvas banner flapped below: *Under New Management*.

*

The last owners of the farm were already well away, speeding past endless grain-tall fields.

They had left the father behind in his grave in the village cemetery. There he lay as blissful as he had lived – the delight of his friends, though not often of his family. The man from whom they were pulling free, whose lifetime account was now theirs to pay, was a tyrant, and everyone's favourite. A portly jovial bright-eyed fellow, only a tenant farmer on his bit of land, but a kind of cavalier, a restless spirit, a fantasist with big ideas. Over two days and nights he snuffed out a life that consisted, in essence, of working a modest tenant plot, marrying an austere woman and her money, siring three children, buying an extravagantly large farm, and dying whilst renovations were still in progress. He took his wife's inheritance, threatened to go his own way if she objected, paid little attention to his plot, spent his time on unproductive fads, wood-turning, inventions. With his wife's money he blithely took the plunge into the derelict manor farm, rode about the fields with friends, there were stables to demolish and rebuild, an inn attached to the estate to be renovated; he watched as scaffolding was erected. He acquired debt after debt. Then one morning the merry schemer was carried in from the field, his kidney problem had played a nasty trick, they found him in the potato field face down under his horse, one foot still in the stirrup, the horse kept whinnying and bending its neck to look.

He lay unconscious until morning, then smiled at his wife in his affectionate way and asked about the painters. He faded over two days and nights, his cheery expression always attentive, as if overhearing a funny story. On the second day the expression was even more sly and merry. So if you entered the room unsuspecting, you'd think the man was play-acting, just wait a moment and he'll have had enough and burst out laughing. He never moved, lay exactly so on the third morning, only cold and pallid now and not even breathing. Who would think such a man could be laid in his coffin, almost alive. He died in his own way, a bird that could never be caged.

The widow sat in the jolting carriage as the train snorted past yellow fields of grain, taking her away from the native soil where her whole life had played out. Along with the three children she brought with her a shrivelled heart, and poverty. The first round was lost, would there be a second. She had loved her husband, and at first the marriage was like living in another world. Then he showed his true character. Running the tenant farm was to be on her shoulders, she had to take it on, she wouldn't make things hard for him. She strove to keep him. He was to give her the joy she had never known. But in vain. She had to live on the crumbs he threw to her in intervals between his crazes and his pleasure

trips. And in the end she had no option but to press her inheritance into his hands, her money, she was trembling, no, he must take it, what else is it good for.

Life – what for her counted as life – threatened to rush past for good. After a few wonderful almost dreamlike months of excursions into town, visits to farms, all the inspecting and calculating, terminating the tenancy, moving house – there he lay. A stroke of Fate. Now life really had rushed past. As she stood at the graveside the situation was still not quite clear. She could think only of her own stifled heart. But there was the farm, that horrible scaffolding, foundations for the new stables, bricklayers, painters, new machinery. People appeared, she had seen them months before with their eager faces, now for a few terse moments they muttered commiserations, then the mask dropped and they were implacable creditors pulling invoices from pockets. Debts, debts, debts. Every doorbell another creditor.

That night she lay sleepless and alone in the big bedroom, reproached herself for wanting to be happy, gnawed her fingers, felt ashamed, no one to talk to, it's all my fault, now I must pay. Farm and inn passed into other hands, she held on like grim death to a meagre sum, but the fight was far from over. Even without the contemptuous looks and the impertinent allegations against her husband, she would not have stayed. She wanted no more of this place, this landscape, this air. They – she admitted this only to herself – they were the scene of her fall from grace. And the train bore her away, in her widow's weeds she fled this land of her birth where she had sought love and happiness, on to a strange city, into a desert waste.

In the corner, head against the window frame, the older lad, Karl, was asleep, straw hat in his lap. Already as tall as the woman, he had just turned sixteen, ruddy cheeks, brown-blond like the father with the same soft round face, he was breathing through his mouth, she could see the gap in his upper teeth – two were knocked out by the father when the boy tried to run away. During the fight the woman grabbed her husband by the shoulders and gave him a shake to bring him to his senses, he threw her off, and all at once there in the room was the son, this young man who seemed never to notice his parents' quarrels, deathly pale with an utterly demented look, and without a word he planted himself in front of the father. Who stared nonplussed for a moment at the unfamiliar face, then knocked it aside with his fist. On that same day, when she made it up with the father, she knew she was betraying her son. But he saw the matter differently: he rejoiced when the mother came into his room, bandaged his face, helped him rinse out his mouth, commiserated, wept over him. Ever since that day the boy was a gleam of hope in her mind, a pillar of support. They were linked by an invisible thread.

Now his head was propped against the window frame, wobbling to the carriage's jolting, their common enemy was dead, but how strange, no one at the father's graveside had wept as bitterly as this lad. In the other corner, close to her, seven year old Erich was asleep. On the bench opposite, covered by her mother's cloak, three year old Marie. She was taking all three with her, away from the shipwreck.

ARRIVAL

It was night when they reached the big city.

They were met on the platform by one of her brother's clerks, a grey, taciturn, shabby-looking man who silently lifted his stiff bowler as soon as he saw the four persons extricating themselves from the carriage, a porter set to, the grey man took the lead with not a single friendly word or question to the children, straight out to steps and a cab. The heavy luggage, the crates, the big trunk – he'll fetch those in the morning. The children, woken from sleep, cowed by the enormous terminus, the noise, the crowds, were reluctant to descend the steps, the man turned and whistled as one might whistle to a dog. They rattled down streets now bright, now dark, the boys' noses pressed to the window, only the little girl lay grizzling in the mother's lap.

They stopped in a wide street outside a building with a red lamp, the man unlocked the door, they climbed four narrow flights of stairs, the children had never climbed such steep stairs, in the hallway were several narrow doors with letterboxes, he opened one, it was a tiny bare apartment, kitchen right by the entrance, then one more room. The clerk, hat still on his head, lit a candle on the kitchen table, then sniffing the musty air he opened a window, placed the keys on the table, without a word tipped his hat and left. The two boys, wide awake, wanted to go out to the dark staircase and see how many storeys the building had, the mother chased them into the other room, they had to undress in the dark and lie on mattresses on the floor. But as soon as the mother disappeared with the little girl into the kitchen, they stood in their shirts and pressed excited faces to the window. The huge mass of buildings with their multitude of silent windows, closed shutters, were like a single enormous wall. It was a gigantic castle. A few streetlamps gleamed, no lights in any of the buildings, yet they must all be chock full of people. That's the street, oh what a huge mysterious city.

In the kitchen the mother had put the child to bed at her feet. When the girl fell asleep and she let go of the little hand, she sat quietly on the floor. She sat for a long while. Slowly the contours of the stove emerged, the chair legs beside her, the towel stretched crooked across the window. That roundness on the stove, it's the handle of the small suitcase, I'll have to cook here in the morning, for the children. She surveyed it all as flotsam from the shipwreck, without emotion. She had expected so much; now she was numb.

*

A week later the little apartment was furnished, bedsteads put together, curtains hung, chairs and a table grouped in the other room in a semblance of cosiness, a two-armed gas lamp hung from the ceiling, but the kitchen was still cluttered with unopened crates.

One evening the mother returned late. Erich, the kid brother, already enrolled in primary school, lay in bed in the other room, the mother came in still wearing her hat, turned out the light and went with the older boy, Karl, back into the kitchen. At once he asked, "Where's Marie?" The woman looked around the kitchen, yes, there are the crates the little girl liked to drum on, they come from the country, from Meadowland. She had to sit down. She removed her hat and veil, placed them on the table, sat, robust woman

with dark-brown parted hair, leaned both elbows on the kitchen table where a stump of candle flickered in a beer bottle. The lad stared at her, frightened. Her dark shadow climbed brokenly over the wall with the water pipe, up to the ceiling. The sinister apparition squatted over the room, listening, demanding talk.

“I’ve left our Marie at Auntie’s. They have no children of their own, they took a liking to Marie.” She gazed impassively into the candle.

The lad didn’t understand at first, then his chin dropped, his face contorted, he sat without a word, buried his face in his arms, and wept.

“She was happy to stay. All the things they gave her – she never had so many back home with us. And for sure not here. What were we supposed to do with her. None of us have the time. Made her quite pale, being dragged around the streets all day, poor little thing.” The lad’s head stayed down. The woman went on: “No point bawling, Karl. We won’t get on that way. For sure not here. You’ll soon learn. Nothing gets handed to you on a plate, you’re lucky if you can just sit where you are and they let you live.” She leaned across to knock his elbows away: “Stop crying, you hear me, Karl. Just don’t start, it’s what they’d like. When you cry you’re a nice ripe prize for them. Follow my example. I don’t cry. No, not I, no fear. Clear the table, smartly now, pile them all on the stove.”

He set to work, head down between his shoulders, face scarlet. Any moment he might start blubbing. Meanwhile she subjected the brown beer bottle to a cold intense stare.

“Marie’s gone and now it’s your turn, my lad. There’s nothing for it, you boys have to start earning. No time to lose. If you like you can count what I still have in my purse. Enough for half a year, but they’ve already sniffed it out, half a year is too much for them, they’re ready to pounce and take it off us. We’re not to have a pfennig, we’re only to beg and cry. If it suits them, they’ll let it go at that. They show no mercy. They want their pound of flesh. Look about you, Karl, aren’t we in a bad enough way already, when did we ever sit in such a dump. A place like this, no light, factory smoke blowing in the window, they know it, I tell them every day, so sorry dear madam, oh yes, they call me dear madam, those dear sirs, but business is business, and we have to see how we stand, and they call in their debts, strip the skin off your back and curse you for a cheat because you’ve nothing left. Just today I sat in an office and told them everything and showed them, and I wept and howled until they threw me out, and they demanded full settlement, and next time they’ll fetch the police.”

“Who did, Mother?”

“For them you’re nothing but a bone. And they all take turns gnawing at it.”

He was piling things neatly on the stovetop. She waited, stared at the candle. It was a long while before she started up again: “I have nobody else now, Karl, come, sit down, you’re a big boy, you know the situation, I can’t just keep it bottled up inside, and you saw everything that happened back home, with Father and the auction” (and I could never say a word to him, but I can’t bear it any longer, and I shall scream, even if it’s only to the wall). “Someone has to help, it can’t go on like this.” She stared at her clenched fist: he

left me in the lurch, he ruined me, he was never there for me, never, never, and now he's hung all this around my neck.

And what grief had not achieved was now achieved by fury: without shifting position she broke into a storm of sobs. The boy came over and held her arm, she showed no surprise, tolerated it. For the first time she vented her spleen. "Nothing's any use," she stammered amid the sobs. "No one lends a helping hand" (the villain, left me here with all the children, if there's a Hell he'll surely pay), "and people are criminals, get that into your head, Karl. What the preacher tells you in church, none of it is true, he only says it because they pay him, it comes out of his greasy mouth, you can't afford a crust but his table's well laden, he sits down to it as soon as he's slammed the door behind you. And they give you bits of paper, advice, pass you on to someone else, and everyone says a nice word, or they're not at home, and you have to run about the hot streets and they say Madam, just look at you, you must take better care of yourself. Slavedrivers, sharks. And lies, lies. Pah."

Frightened, filled with foreboding, the lad stood at her side with a dishcloth, straining to hear. "When will I be 'prenticed, Mother?"

"Money, money, boy, nothing but money. He ran through all of mine. They'll seize it all from under our feet."

"So where am I to go?"

"Money, money. It's a big city. Don't be shy. Set about it. I don't know, really." She lifted her head and saw the menacing black broken shadow on wall and ceiling.

He laid her mattress out on the kitchen floor. Then he paced uncertainly back and forth, and did what he had never done: put his arms about the mother's neck. "Will we go to prison, Mother?" He saw her hunted look, worse than when she put the drunken father to bed. "Mother, I think it will be all right. If they don't stick us in prison I shall find work, I'll take anything on. And Uncle will surely give us a little?"

"Nothing from Uncle. Money, money." She stared at the boy with manic eyes, she was drowning, then she gave a sob, her face again quite stony. Her vacant stare scared him.

THE BIG CITY

Next morning he was to take kid brother to school. When he came into the kitchen the mother was sitting pale and drawn by the gas stove, the mattress already stacked against the wall. The mother's face was so grey and miserable, she sat so awfully still, that as soon as he'd delivered the boy to school he ran straight back, rushed up the four flights on trembling legs, what shall I tell her, oh, forgot my handkerchief, forgot my hat.

She wasn't in the kitchen, she was lying in the other room on the younger boy's unmade bed. When she heard Karl she shoved the pillow aside, whispered: "What is it?"

"I forgot my hat." It was on a chair. Karl made no move to pick it up.

“Why are you hanging about?”

“Get up, mother, please.”

“You’d better go, I’m telling you.”

He, quietly, not looking at her: “No, I’m not going, you have to get up.”

She sat up, her face had its old stern look.

“If you don’t get up, I’m not leaving.”

Her feet dropped to the floor, she grabbed him by the shoulders, picked the hat up in passing and steered the lad past the kitchen to the door. She opened it, shoved him out, jammed the hat firmly on his head, touched his hand. He gave her a pleading look. When she forced a sickly smile, he overcame his terror, and left.

*

Outside it was still as hot as last week, when they set out. He had helped with the mowing, by now they must have begun stacking, that lovely big farm, now we have nothing. He stood outside the street door, what shall I do, Mother’s at her wits’ end, she’s out of her mind, who can I turn to. He forced himself to move, trudged on. On to somewhere. He studied the passers-by, how does this one earn a living, where does this one get it from, or that one, how do they come by it? How did Father come by it. If I was in the country now I could hire myself out, this is the busiest time, whyever did Mother bring us here.

Sometime later the cramped impoverished district where his street lay was behind him, here a different kind of humanity went about. Many streets were treelined, there were avenues with actual big trees, and squares with stone statues where children played. He gazed about, looked here, looked there, kept thinking: I must get a grip, I must find something, how do they do it here? But oh how nice it all is! There’s everything. Loaves laid out in the shops, coarse bread, fine bread, cakes, rolls, all with a weary trail of work behind it, all the work already done, weeding, ploughing, sowing, reaping, garnering, and the threshing and the mill and negotiating with the cooperative, and sacks of flour and the hauling. All they have to do is bake, make it sweet and fine, sprinkle it and display it in the window. Some bakeries had put out chairs and marble-topped tables, and smart people sat there and girls in white aprons set cakes and whipped cream down in front of them, takes a lot of muscle and sweat to make smooth cream, tending the cows, carting fodder, milking, hauling churns, removing dung, and then all the aggravation with the dairy. They have no idea, here it’s all handed them on a plate, they sit in a cool shady shop, sip from shiny spoons, and then they pull out a purse, and pay.

He stood, the boy, a long while outside a patisserie. Back home their baker too had sold goods on a modest scale, but he was just a kind of craftsman relieving them of a chore. Nearby was a green space with trees, the boy sat on a bench keeping an eye on the patisserie. Down in the country people toil so hard, and suffer drought and hail and weeds, nobody here gives two hoots. Maybe they don’t even know what country people do. How can I put my muscles to work here? “Set about it.” But how? A man pushed a

two-wheeled barrow past the bench on the little square, called out ice cream. People came and he handed them little wafer cones. Karl had no appetite for ice cream, he just observed how everything was handed over to anyone, ready-made. A huge beech tree spread its foliage overhead, the leaves were covered in street dust, it's like the road from the station to the fields, we scrape our hands raw and here they have it good and Mother's keeping to her bed and I must earn some money.

And terror gnawed at him again. He walked on. But where do they come by it. Then suddenly the street opened up like a river emerging from a mountain gorge. It doubled its width and was lined left and right by huge department stores, in between were restaurants with bunting. Farther along a monument with lots of statues rose white in a square offset to the side, the wide pillared building behind the monument was a theatre. But what mesmerised Karl were the two department stores on the corners. They were the first in the city, their appearance on the scene had aroused enormous excitement across the entire commercial sector.

They were planted at the corners like beefy sentinels in gleaming uniforms. They occupied an enormous stretch of street front, were kitted out with flags, garlands, and gold trimming as if for an annual carnival. Music blasted from some of the windows. Karl had meant to pursue his thoughts about how people in the city came by money, but he was drawn into the dizzying extravagance of these establishments, and gaped and stared and walked about. Crowds carried him along. All the voices, music, tills ringing. Things in their thousands from floor to ceiling, spilling across the floor to the very doorways.

When the peasant boy left the second store, straw hat with the mourning-band in his hand, red-faced and sweaty, it was already past noon. He exited onto a narrow lane clogged with barrows. With difficulty he weaved his way past. Newfangled trams coursed down the main street, they were electric, the cars ran on rails beneath long cables, unbelievable how they move without horses, the driver stands at the front, hand on a crank, seems to be standing on thin air as he twists it, he looks so funny, but the car keeps rolling. But here in the side street the dear old creatures were still in harness, horses brown and black, the good kind with their calm eyes. He stroked one on the nose as he passed, so you're here too.

And the young man accustomed to setting all his muscles to work ten hours a day leaned against the wall of a building beside a loud paperboy, felt tired and weary, wanted to close his eyes and ears and slide down onto the paving. When the paperboy's cries became too much, he crept on a few streets until the din from the avenues and department stores sounded like a distant battle. Never mind the smell, the shade is pleasant. He was confused, his brain as clogged as the main street where twenty vehicles had become tangled. He dusted his hat, put it on, the reproachful black band, and somewhere far far away in this city Mother's lying in a dingy room, I took the kid to school, and then came out to earn some money, money.

The boy sauntered along by the kerb, eyes cast down, already he had the same slack drooping shoulders as many others loitering and walking about here, his gaze as dull as

many others on the search here. At the corner was an iron fountain, he drank tepid water from his hollowed palm to ward off thirst. Then he noticed he was hungry, the bread in his pocket was squashed, he chewed as he walked, nobody looked at him, no one notices anyone, he squared his shoulders, his feet stepped out towards the dull roar. Once again he took in the marvellous parade, thinner in this after-lunch time, then kept going for more than an hour until he found himself back among the bare blackened walls of the wretched street where they lived. So this is our home now, this city with electricity and department stores. The little shops and coal dealers took on a more familiar aspect. Yes, all are poor, all are part of the same family. He pushed open the door to the building's dark dingy entrance passage. His first city outing was over.

Neighbours on the same floor smiled and chatted when he fetched the key, your mum's gone out, Erich's locked in.

As evening drew on she came through the door in her black clothes, face impassive as ever, and shut the door behind her. He wanted to tell her what he'd just told his brother, who had sat open-mouthed and pleaded to be taken along next time. But the mother, dreadfully silent, her face grey, began tidying up almost before she'd taken off hat and veil, the boy sprang to help, she waved him icily into the kitchen along with the kid. Then when she came in she stood with her back to them, busy at the stove. Both were struck at once with the same awful thought: she's going to give us away, like Marie.

Eric, at the table practising his handwriting, was the first to break into convulsive sobs, then Karl's cheeks began to quiver. The mother turned off the gas, put down the ladle, and turned to face them. She pushed the homework aside, wiped the boy's tears with a dishcloth, and when he wouldn't stop she took him onto her lap, asked him about school. He calmed down. And when it grew dark the little boy experienced something quite new: the mother laid him carefully down on the bed, plumped the pillows and stayed by the bed holding his hand, told him about Marie, we'll soon go to visit her, and all her new toys, and in two weeks' time little Marie will go with Uncle and Auntie to the seaside, and she'll have a lovely beach costume and she'll even bring something back for you. Then Erich told her what he'd heard from Karl, he yawned, the mother stayed at his side just as she used to stay until the little girl fell asleep. Then she slipped quietly into the kitchen.

Karl had already cleared up, had even laid out her mattress, the long story he had planned to tell her came out only as: "I'll go down again in the morning." She rested her head in her hands at the table, made no reply.

*

What Karl experienced next morning, after a night of wonderful dreams, overtopped even the previous day. Today his anxious imperative to earn money, quick, hunt down opportunities, faded as he ran down the stairs. Today, after depositing his brother at school, he set off on a walking tour, at first back to the district with the big department stores, then on to – where? There's lots to explore. Curiosity wrestled with trepidation.

The city was enchanting! God, how wonderful that we came here. If only I can earn a living, even just hauling coal! Today he was drawn deeper into the centre of the city, an enormous clamour pulled him towards a broad low building, crowds of people on the stone steps yelling, gesticulating, some scribbling, some chatting, above the entrance was the word "Exchange". Not far off, gangs of street-sweepers were at work, when you followed them you came to a jumble of dark halls, the surroundings thick with discarded fruit and vegetables and pages of newsprint. Traders were loading wagons with empty baskets and crates. Karl peered through wide-open entrances into vast vaulted spaces smelling of many things. These must be markets. Then he walked on for more than an hour until he came to wide quiet streets with elegant fenced-off houses, everything seems asleep here, you see only delivery boys and messengers, you can peer through the fences at immaculate gardens with gravel paths.

And then the district of palaces, museums, monuments opened up. Pictures he'd seen had not prepared him for such marvels. These great big palaces with sentries marching to and fro out front – they're where the King lives, the Queen, the Princes. Annexed to them were plain grey buildings with engraved lettering over the door-arches – so they're where ministers and generals toil for the country. Generals, statesmen, appointed by the King, they serve him, dedicate their lives to him, win victories, keep an eye on it all, and when they die they're coffined in stone or bronze, and you learn about them at school.

An enormously wide avenue planted with wonderful elm trees cut through the middle of this district selected by the State. When you came along one of the main roads and reached this avenue, you had to pass a big marble bridge, a plaza and then an enormous triumphal arch engraved with names and reliefs of figures from the latest wars. In front of the triumphal arch a huge stone lion lay, jutting far out into the plaza on its plinth, directing its solitary dangerous gaze at the city.

Karl stood a long while outside the Hall of Victory as groups of schoolchildren trailed past behind their teachers, then he gathered his courage and followed them in. A wide vaulted entrance hall with cannon and flags, and then staircases soared to left and right, framed by marble balustrades, carpeted with purple runners. They led up to the grandest picture gallery. Silence reigned. An old man, a uniformed invalid with a crutch, served as guide. Grownups and children clustered awestruck in front of huge pictures of battles and victories.

Karl stands before a battle picture and is overwhelmed by the dazzling colours and what's happening there. He sees a king with a long beard on a noble white steed, he's surrounded by generals and princes, all covered in dust. They've stopped on a hill, a royal banner streams out behind them. Up the hill comes a solitary man, bareheaded, you can see the sorrow in his face, he's a king too, he's walking up in little shiny shoes with silver spurs at the heel. He's the loser. You can see what's left of his stuff, overturned cannon to the side, burning buildings behind. All that was his, he brought all that and the defeated army (which they don't show) onto the field. He's going to hand his sword to the victor on the white steed.

The picture, wide as anything, takes up the whole long wall. People stand mute before it, hardly breathing, the picture jumps out at them. They crawl up the hill with the solitary loser, humbled.

When Karl turns away, he spies in the middle of the hall a slender marble plinth, on it a stone statue holding a marshal's baton. It's the great king again, the victor, he's everywhere, it's in *his* realm that everything lives, it stretches from sea to sea, he's made everyone his subjects.

Karl paces shyly around the plinth. He peeps for a moment into the next hall, where the king's favourite horse stands stuffed in a glass case. His peasant eye is no use here, this horse is a mighty being, it belongs to generals and princes and is not to be compared to some nag.

Shaken and awed, our wanderer leaves this expansive quarter of palaces set like an island and a fortress smack in the middle of the city. On the other side are big parks. Today he hardly recalls the mundane activity of yesterday's business district. And when he returns in late afternoon, the mother has stayed home, she's helping the kid with his homework. She put food in front of him and regarded him with a strange unsettling smile. "And where have you been, boy?"

Although the words stuck in his throat – he thought, I'll get through it – he began to talk about the palaces in this city, Erich pricked up his ears, the mother smiled, tell us more then. But it went badly. If he'd been alone with Erich he could have told him everything. And the mother – always with that disconcerting look – began to quiz him bit by bit about the palaces, she'd never yet found time for a visit, and so he spoke of the triumphal arch with the chariot on it, and the Hall of Victory and the enormous staircase. But none of it sounded right. Nodding her head and now openly mocking, she asked about the pictures.

"Did they charge for entry?" He denied it. She laughed: "Oh, I can believe it! They let you in all right. So you can worship it! If we're here long enough, we'll pay with our taxes."

He put down his spoon. "Eat up now, Karl, from me you get soup, from them you get nothing, only fine words or pictures, I know that. Now then, did you manage to find a crust of bread today, I wonder?"

"But – they were palaces."

"Just try and beg a crust of bread off them, they'll shoo you away."

"There weren't any beggars there, Mother."

"I believe you. They'd never even get close. Well now, did you by chance find out anything useful today?"

Tears came to his eyes. "But I don't know how I'm supposed to go about it!"

"That's exactly my problem too, boy. We are completely surplus to requirements here. They have no use for us. They do business, and all a poor person can do is go on his way."

He held her hands tight. "I'll earn something soon, Mother."

"Gawping at pictures."

He gathered his courage: "Come with me, Mother, do."

A BAD NIGHT

And he actually persuaded the mother to make an excursion into the city. She was already dressed as he prepared Erich for school, she said nothing, cleared the table, was about to take the black hat and veil from the closet when he turned back, Erich's hand in his, and asked her if she wouldn't come with them today. "We'll drop Erich off at school, then go into the city."

"Why," she asked, pulling the veil over her implacable face. Never since the husband died had that face looked in a mirror. It had grown old and lifeless, behind the veil she was a living grave. He had grown bolder since that moment when she confided in him. "Come with us, Mother, then we'll walk into the city, and I'll show you things."

She stood there, squeezed his hand. She stuffed papers into her handbag: "I'll manage." Karl let go of the kid's hand, stepped closer: "Do come with us, Mother, you can allow yourself one day off."

Now her hands hung slack, she dropped the bag, bills scattered on the table. Tonelessly, face hidden by the veil, she said: "One day? Every day. Today will be the same old waste of time." She sank onto a chair.

He tugged at her: "Come, Erich will be late."

"Go."

"Come." He stroked her hand, stuffed the papers firmly back in the bag, and then – what's come over the boy – he took her by the shoulders – when did I grab someone by the shoulders like that, it was so long ago; she was amazed to recall it – and tried to haul her to her feet. And when he couldn't he called to Erich: "Come and help, Mother's coming with us."

And so, pulled and pushed from both sides by a sturdy arm around her shoulders – it crumpled the stiff veil – and two childish hands at her hips, she had to acquiesce, half falling off the chair, sitting straight, finally standing up. "Oh God," she said, fending off the little boy who was still pushing at her, "you call this getting ready?"

Karl, the handbag firmly under his arm, took her by the elbow, the kid clung happily to her other side, and in this manner the great ship was manoeuvred through the narrow doorway. She wanted to go back, put the potatoes in water, but her willpower was gone, she just stood on the stairs. Karl locked up. She thought – but no clear thoughts actually came: here I stand, and why not, good to be pushed and pulled.

They walked down bright morning streets. The city was a remarkable clockwork; at a particular signal at a particular hour, one component after another began to thrum, to set

itself in motion each in turn. The streetcleaners were first, then tramway workers cleared stretches of track, then vegetable carts came, and beggars in doorways and entries turned over and saw: it's day again and we'll soon be chivvied on.

Now trams come clanging their bells, full of people off to work. But these three want only to stroll. And once Erich was delivered to the school, the woman retrieved her handbag from Karl, I won't make the rounds today, there'll be no begging and grovelling for mercy, we're strolling, yes, strolling. And as if to underline this change, at a tram stop she spotted a man and had to take a step back: he was employed at a construction firm that was owed a small sum, he recognised her, said good morning: "If you were thinking of calling on us today, it occurs to me the appointment was made in error, the boss is about to travel." She stood – Karl was horrified to see this – unable to breathe, a red flush spread up from her throat, her cheeks reddened, she stammered something, begged his pardon. But really, madam, there's nothing to apologise for!

Karl quickly took her arm and they walked on, she's so distraught, how can she make such missteps in front of these people, is it really that bad, can't possibly be that bad, the man was so polite, and she behaved like a criminal, an accused person. He was dismayed, hurried his mother away from the scene, she has to see the cheerful bustling streets.

We know these streets and department stores. Often the woman had unavoidably passed through this district. For God's sake, what am I doing here, why show me this? Was that man a scoundrel, a villain, piling on the mockery? She couldn't feel her feet on the ground, observed everything from the clouds, the happy rushing throng, the shiny displays. All in one place: the earthly realm and its wonders. Years ago she'd gone on those happy-unhappy trips with the man who now lay dead, torn from her life by an ice-cold verdict, he was here with her even now, the boy leading her on by the arm has the same bright merry look, that's how he used to smile so jovially out into the world. She listened to the boy's voice, forced herself to hear what she so wanted, it had tones of the other one. She clutched his arm tight, he took it for a heartfelt contact and stroked her hand, said softly: "Mother." Oh yes, mother, he's long past needing a mother, there's nothing more for me in your world, it'll go better for you without me. I'm done with begging.

And as he led her through the lively streets – he was determined to distract her – it became clearer than back in the apartment: I can't go on! I can't carry the weight that's fallen on me! It's crazy that I'm even moving about here still. I will not bear it any longer.

I want – rid of it all.

It's stronger than me. I've held up these long months, I held up for years and years with that man, I'm damaged through and through, lord knows, surely I can put an end to it.

Her hand relaxed, the decision did her good, she lifted the veil from her eyes, she could feel her feet again. And here's Karl chattering away, straw hat on his head, at her side, and she looked at him, a cool distant survey, same way her husband would look at her, the scoundrel, returning from one of his rotten escapades. Karl here, yes, he's a chip off the

old block, a manchild, always bees in his bonnet, who will he make unhappy one day, some woman, kids.

She pulled free of his arm, went with him across to a display window. I must be hard and blunt with him, have to make him feel who he really is. "What's so lovely about those boys' suits? What d'you think of them, hey? Mark my words, they're rubbish. Rubbish. So expensive. Shoddy goods, like everything here. And people fall for it. It's all to deceive the eyes, they fool the people, suck in the ninnies. You understand?" He did not understand; the mother's irritable. They went on for a while, pushed through the throng. It was noisy. She nodded: "You hear that? How they shout themselves hoarse just to earn a few pfennigs." He stared helplessly at her, what did the mother want from him, he only meant to distract her. He tried to steer her away from the crush, but in her passionate loathing she planted herself to the spot, breathed heavily.

Then they came to a wide square, no more big stores, there was a big old grey church with an enormous tower. Sounds came from inside just then, for some reason the doors were open, people were going in.

"Don't you want to go in, Karl?"

"Why?"

"You have to offer him thanks for our life, don't you? He made everything as it is, and it's good, that's what you told me."

He mumbled. A gust of wind tried to remove his hat: "Mother." He thought of the father, and his own helplessness, what was he to do with the mother?

They wandered back down side streets. Once the mother whispered: "Don't be cross," slipped her arm in his. He guided her home. By this time, overcome with weariness, she could hardly put one foot in front of the other. "I'm almost asleep," she smiled at the lad.

And in this cotton-wool weariness that clung to her all day long, she said goodnight to the children, she'd been friendly with them all evening, retreated yawning to the kitchen. She sat, her face benign, in the light of a fresh white candle, kept yawning, seemed drugged. At last, as if in a dream, she took a pencil and notebook down from the cutlery shelf and wrote at the table, yawning and with an unaccustomed sense of well-being:

Dear Oskar (this was her brother),
Since I am no longer here, you will no doubt take on the two boys. I thank
you and Auntie for being so good to Marie.
Your grateful sister.

She tore the page out, folded it with tender care, and wrote the brother's address on the outside. Then she snuffed the candle, scraped her chair over to the stove, pulled the hose free of the gas pipe, and turned on the gas. Gas blew into her face, it smelled horrible, she let it flow into her mouth, swallowed, she felt sick, her ears rang, her head swelled, bigger, ever bigger, monstrously big, choking she tried to push the hose aside with hands that were now limp and giant-sized.

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In the second half of the night (the day had been hot, dawn was coming) there was a thunderstorm. The boys whispered from bed to bed. Back in the countryside the kid had been taught to fear thunderstorms, so he began to cry. The older one got up, tried to comfort him, the kid wanted Mother. Karl whispered: it's too early, we can't wake her yet. The kid kept whimpering. So Karl pulled on trousers and socks, waited a while to see if Erich would calm down or the storm would fade, and he went down the passage and put an ear to the kitchen door, maybe the thunder woke her as well, maybe she's already heard him crying. He left the door to the other room open so she would hear the kid sobbing. But – he hadn't noticed at first, what's this, what's the strange smell, he sniffed gas. He ran back into the room, no smell here, ignoring the kid's alarmed yells he pushed the window open, the storm blew the curtain in. He ran agitated into the passage, quietly opened the front door, sniffed the corridor, the staircase where stairs were emerging in dawn dimness, it's not coming from there. Then horror! The smell's coming from our kitchen! The mother left the gas on! Why's the mother not awake?

He banged on the kitchen door: "Mother!" He banged with both fists, screamed: "Mother, wake up!" The boy in the next room was frightened into silence. Karl battered at the door, roared: "Open up! Mother, it's gas, Mother." Doors were opening in the corridor, there was banging on walls. Like a madman crying, screaming, raging, the boy belaboured the door, ran into the corridor: "Help! Come, the door won't open, Mother left the gas on." The woman from next door, in shirt and petticoat, cross at first, fetched her husband, a man came down from the fifth floor with a candle, he had his trousers on, the braces were only buttoned at the back, he clutched them in the other hand, swore as he came down the stairs: "What's this bloody nonsense, it'll cost you a pretty penny, trying to poison us." And woozy as he was he tried to explain how he'd passed the night, vomited twice but nothing came up, nothing at all, he just felt sick, and he noticed the smell last evening on the stroke of nine, even though he opened the windows wide as they would go, of course the floorboards here aren't tight, but now, instead of relating his own troubles, he was drawn into a different crisis. Someone quickly blew out his candle, are you stupid, blow us all to smithereens, can't you tell there's a leak here. They crowded, three of them, five, into the tiny passage, down below people pushed staircase windows open, amid the whispers and comments they could hear the battering at the door and the big lad's sobbing screams that matched the wailing of the little kid in the other room.

Then a large elderly man pushed through, a workman with a cap, already dressed and about to head for the factory, he had a kitchen chopper, he shoved the lad aside, tried to shoulder the door open, then said: "Everybody out," swung the chopper and smashed panel after panel, with a press of the knee and a kick the cross-pieces cracked apart, and he stepped into the kitchen while everyone shrank back from the smell of gas.

Not a sound in there. Then they heard the man cross the room, fling the window open, he moved about but didn't emerge. They heard his voice: "Hey there." But only him, nothing in response. The neighbour woman held Karl back, he had both fists at his mouth, whimpered, groaned: "You stay here, boy, it's not for you." The workman called

from the kitchen: "One man in here, now, help me lift her." The same man who'd been swearing and was still clutching his braces buttoned them up, pushed through the corridor, what're you all doing standing about, they worked slowly in there, dragged something across the floor, water gushed, the old workman called out: "Fire brigade or emergency services, but quick!" Several started down the stairs. At last there was light in the kitchen, candles had been lit, the two men appeared in the door frame and the older one said: "The gas tap was on, but the window was open at the top." Karl lifted his hands, pleading: "What about my mother, what about ...?"

"I'm no doctor, sonny. But she's in no state to talk. Well now, lying there hour after hour, this gentleman already had a headache, and he's on the next floor."

Karl, pleading: "Has ... nothing happened?"

"Young man, you must have been fast asleep not to notice the smell."

The gas light on the staircase came on, dreadful minutes passed, then a rattle of wheels, two men came running up the stairs, firemen crowded into the room, one quickly ran back down, a black oxygen cylinder was hauled in, the apartment door remained open, the stairs were jammed by bodies conversing in whispers. Half an hour later a doctor arrived, he spent a couple of minutes in the kitchen, then a woman's shrill scream, at first only "Ah, ah," then "I don't want to, don't want." The screams echoed through the building, the boys on the staircase stared trembling at the adults. "I don't want to, I've had enough, leave me in peace." Women dabbed their eyes, nodded sadly.

They made way for the two firemen, they were back with a stretcher, the neighbours pulled Karl into their apartment as the woman was carried downstairs. A blanket covered her, even her head, and she groaned under it: "Don't want to, can't go on," always the same. It dismayed the people crowding the doorway. "She can't be right in the head. It's the gas, see if they don't take her to the bin."

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Meanwhile the neighbours had taken little Erich in. When it grew light, Karl ran to Uncle's with his mother's note. He lived not far from them, his furniture factory was in one of the rear courtyards, the family occupied a second-floor apartment in the grand front block. When Karl saw the name on the shiny brass plate, his mother's maiden name, he burst into tears, asked sobbing for his uncle, the maid left him standing on the stairs, then someone looked through the peephole, set the chain, the door opened a crack, a fat woman with uncombed hair in a flowery morning gown looked out and asked what he wanted. Unable to speak he thrust the note through the crack. Then the door was shut. The woman moved away.

Suddenly a door within opened with a bang, someone scolded, roared, approached at a hobbling gallop, slid back the chain, flung open the door, a little man with one short leg, in shirtsleeves, stood facing Karl, his face was blue-red, square, the moustache was uncombed, his left hand grabbed Karl's arm: "Who gave you this note?"

Karl stammered: "But I'm Karl. On the table."

The man swung the lad into the passage, where the fat woman and the maid stood side by side. The door banged shut. "Where is Mother? What's happened to her?" The crooked man glared at Karl, he made the strangest gesture, left hand raised as if he was about to grab Karl by the throat. Brown head drooping to his chest, Karl wept bitterly, let tears drip down his face: "Hospital."

"She's alive?"

Karl sobbed, and nodded. The man lowered his hand. "Well then, well then. A warning shot. I'm really shocked." The woman by the door: "Thank God. Thank God. I'm shocked too." The maid wept into her apron.

"Well then, in you come," and the uncle – hairless rolls of fat at the back of his head – hobbled down the long carpeted corridor. The maid glanced shyly at Karl as he walked past. In the narrow dining room crammed with heavy furniture they all sat down under a gas light, places had been set for two, the maid brought a cup for Karl. And there he sat, wiped his face, and it was morning after the nocturnal storm, after the mother had – done that. He had to drink coffee, they spoke to him, praised the coffee, the woman asked for toast. "All's well with the toasting now, the girl has got the hang of it," she told her husband, and to the lad she declared: "I must have toast, neither of us can digest fresh bread. I wonder why the bread here upsets one, you're half a peasant, you must know."

The man chewed: "Leave him in peace, he can talk about that another time."

Then they ate and drank in silence, very slowly, very intently, kept encouraging Karl, praised the jam. The woman stared at Karl: "How it affects you, something like that. I'm still not over it." The man nodded. The woman wiped her mouth. "Did you notice, Oskar, Anna was crying, that maid's a good girl."

Karl drank. When can I be excused. Suddenly, after chewing pensively for a while, the man exclaimed: "Should be possible to make enquiries at the hospital, see how she is."

The woman bristled: "I think she must be all right?"

"No, no, we'd better make enquiries." He limped from the room, still chewing. Karl and the woman, left alone, looked at one another across coffee cups, waited, exchanged not a word. Soon they heard the man stomp back down the corridor, and his soothing: "Well then, well then." He came into the room. "Well then. Not half so bad. The doctor's not there. The nurse said we shouldn't fret, no need for worry, it's a mild case of coal-gas poisoning – she said coal-gas – it'll soon pass." But his expression was anything but friendly, he stood behind his wife's chair, whispered with her, Karl caught some of it: "Someone had better go there, find out more, the police will want to know." He turned testily to Karl: "Where's the other one, I thought there were two of you?"

"No, there's three. Mother gave our Marie away." It had completely slipped his mind that his little sister now lived in this very apartment.

"We know that. But I thought there's one more, a boy."

"He's with the neighbours."

“So. I’m busy this morning. Well then, Lippa, you’d better go to the hospital, Karl can go with you.” He was fuming, sat down without thinking to his squares of toast. Lippa warned: “Chew slowly, Oskar, don’t gobble, it won’t agree with you.” She gazed accusingly at Karl. The big grandfather clock struck a metallic full-toned eight. Karl remembered there was no one to take the kid to school this morning, and he hadn’t slept a wink last night. The man stood, wiped his mouth with a serviette, considered: “Well now, write down your exact address, and as for the police, I’ll handle that. Did any of them see my address on the note?”

The lad had stood up, only the woman was still drinking, pouring a fresh cup. Karl shook his head: “There weren’t any police, only the fire brigade.”

“Well then.” He stomped glowering from the room, leaving Karl and the woman alone. She sipped, and glared ever more accusingly at Karl. When the old man banged the door behind him, the woman said: “Uncle really can’t stand excitement early in the morning. It goes straight to his stomach. And then the police!”

Anna came in to clear the table, and the wife at once urged Karl: “Tell us again what happened. Later we’ll go to the hospital, bring some flowers with us.”

He felt tears in his eyes. The woman explained to the maid: “They’ve all come from the country, his mother is master’s sister, when country people come to the city and there’s no husband, it’s not easy for them.”

“Oh, how I kept getting lost, that first time,” the maid said sympathetically. She made the lad sit down again, madam will take a while to get ready.

And so Karl sat alone in the strange apartment, on a big chair at the table now cleared and covered with a plush cloth, and waited. He heard a little voice, it’s our Marie, they’re dressing her, if they bring her in, God help me I’ll start bawling again. But they didn’t bring her. When Anna asked, madam curled a dismissive lip, gave her head a little shake.

What am I doing here, Karl asked himself, what’s Mother doing, I have to go. He stood at the dining room door, could hear the little girl’s chatter. But in the corridor madam was standing at a mirror. He flushed red when she turned and looked at him. She smiled: “Just a moment, child, a very little moment.” But he could not hold back, no, he would not, he stuttered, nonplussed she came towards him, and if he has to shove her out of the way, he stammered: “I, I, I can ...” His face was wild and pale, his gaze directed to the front door. The woman called out in shock: “Anna, Anna, come here!” Anna kept looking as he stepped past her, he couldn’t open the door, she helped him, he stammered something, then he was outside, dashed down the stairs and ran, ran along the street, seeing nothing.

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Meanwhile the respectable furniture manufacturer was explaining to officers at the police station – it covered both addresses – what had happened, showed them the note. These people came from the provinces, heavily in debt, husband died suddenly, such a shock, actually he’d manoeuvred himself into a desperate situation with his schemes, the muddlehead not only squandered the wife’s money, she’s my sister, but other people’s

money too, totally uneconomical enterprise, would never have turned a profit, I warned them, of course I put in not one red pfennig. And now the wife is here, with the children, we've taken one of them off her hands, but her nerves are all shot.

"So, economic hardship," the inspector noted.

"Worries, of course, she has good reason to worry, but nerves are the main thing. Other people have it even worse. The woman never stops crying any time she comes to visit. I've already sent my wife to the hospital, she'll cover the costs, transport included."

"And there's the doctor they fetched, and the fire brigade."

The man's eyes bulged, he goggled: "Of course."

The constable at the inspector's side bent down to report: "They had to smash the kitchen door in."

The factory owner gasped. He struggled for words. Then he snarled: "An expensive suicide attempt! What do you say to that? I'll have to take a look at that door. One panel is not a door."

"For sure. The door's totally smashed, a hole."

"What," the furniture factory owner goggled, "panels and cross-pieces?"

"As far as I recall. Just hanging by the frame."

"That's outrageous. There's people for you. It's a scandal! Those people deserve –"

"But they had to get in."

"Firstly, the window was open."

"But sir, they couldn't know that beforehand, take it from me."

"All right. But to smash the cross-pieces, maybe with a kick, when the panels are already out. That's just crazy."

The inspector laughed: "Perhaps the man was too fat, couldn't get through the panels."

The factory owner raged: "You laugh, and it's me that has to fork out. We're taxed enough as it is. Next that man will show up, the one who smashed the door in, and demand his wages."

The inspector sat straight and gave a hearty laugh: "But of course he'll come! Saved a life! The man will demand what he fully earned."

The man with the limp fired away: "But, but, the window was open, you confirmed that yourself, inspector. This suicide, this attempted suicide, it's attempted extortion! Since her wailing hasn't worked, she tries this on. These people with their disorderly lives, just let them come at me, and there'll be an end to it."

The officials became reserved, exchanged glances. "Well now, we won't go into that. As far as we're concerned, the matter's closed."

The man limped out, fuming. He clambered cursing up the four flights to his sister's apartment. At each landing he spat: "Vermin!" He had the neighbour open up for him – no asking after Erich – stared a long while at the remains of the kitchen door. The hinges still worked, sad symbol of an existence, frame without content. He told the woman he would send a man around to remove the wreckage. "Did they really have to smash the cross-pieces? They could have crawled through the panel spaces, surely."

"It was an emergency, the man from upstairs had to get in quickly."

"But that's not how to go about things, he must have gone berserk."

The woman held her tongue. Then he inspected the other room, looked out of the window, stroked his moustache. "Nice, nice. Good place to live. Quite adequate."

When the neighbour asked softly if she should fetch the little boy, he's playing next door, he waved her away: "Another time." And stomped off with not a word of thanks.

Late in the afternoon – all this activity happened while he was dithering indecisively in the vicinity of the hospital – Karl, who felt neither hunger nor thirst, bought a bunch of violets and stood at the closed iron gates. A nurse came out, black cloak over white uniform, book under an arm. She caught an uncertain glance from the lad with the violets, walked on past, then turned and asked what he wanted. He wanted to find out about his mother. He gave her name. She suggested it was really too late, but went back to the gatehouse, and very soon a porter came out and beckoned to Karl.

In the wide entrance lobby the black-cloaked nurse who had spoken to Karl was speaking with another who had a basket of medicine bottles on her arm. She was very friendly, asked Karl who he was, and of course he can take the violets to his mother. As they passed across a wide green space with many strolling patients, the nurse told Karl his mother was doing well, she was quite lucid (Karl started: what's that, lucid? Mother's not crazy) but he mustn't excite her, and had she perhaps been especially sad lately (he answered none of her questions, just listened, where is Mother), and had anything else happened out of the ordinary. Karl understood none of it, - until there he was in the four-bed ward at his mother's bedside.

The nurse left him, two more patients were sitting by the window. There was a big bunch of flowers on the little stand beside the bed, that's from Auntie, he kept the violets in his hand, she had pulled the blanket over her face. When he had stood there baffled for a while and she made no response to his "Mother, it's me", one of the women at the window came across and with some force snatched the blanket away: "But you can't just lie there! The nurse will scold you again, stop being so stupid. Here, it's your son, look at the lovely violets."

She lay there, eyes squeezed shut, Karl could hear whispering, he bent down, the same words she had cried out that morning as the firemen carried her down the stairs: "I can't go on, can't go on."

With a disgusted expression on her face the woman went back to her companion at the window. "Calls herself a mother, she has two kids, and the boy's here."

The other woman, older, thinner, threw the window open. Distant church bells floated into the room with the rigid white iron beds. She whispered: "Only thing for that sort, the pastor will back me up: a good hiding. She won't keep on much longer with the playacting. She doesn't stop soon, I'll give her one myself."

As the mother lay there, her face tight and withdrawn, rejecting the world and all of them, Karl's head drooped, then he turned about, tearful again, facing the door. He turned back towards her, laid the violets forlornly on the blanket, pleaded: "Mother." Her eyelids twitched, opened a little, slowly she directed her gaze up at him, turned her head towards him and clamped both her hands around his right hand. Tenderly he asked: "Well, Mother?" and lowered himself to the edge of the bed. She fought, squeezed, clutched at his hand, felt his forearm, squeezed it, pressed his hand to her throat.

"Look at her," the old lady at the window whispered, "at her playacting again. And with the boy too. And that's supposed to be a parent."

All that this visit achieved – it lasted only a few minutes – was that Karl whispered several times, as the mother clutched his hand, that he would be back in the morning to fetch her. She said nothing. Then, ashamed in front of those women, he hurried away. For half the night he lay sleepless, too much had happened that day, he was in over his head, couldn't think straight, only: help the mother.

When he met her at noon with a nurse in the hospital garden, he ran across in happy expectation that she would be coming away with him. He was having great trouble with Erich, who was still at the neighbours', he couldn't get over the terrors of that night, kept screaming and bawling, horror-struck that they'd taken his mother away, beaten her, he had no idea what the smashed kitchen door signified. Mother was calm today, took his arm once the nurse moved off, strolled slowly with him past the lovely rose bushes. She said she wouldn't be back until tomorrow, she wanted to rest one more day. What's happening at home? When he told her about Erich she smiled, not at all alarmed: "I'll bring him something." He wondered that she felt no sense of urgency. He told about his visit to Uncle, worried she might be angry with the man. Instead she frowned, said it wasn't right to go rushing off there, Auntie would have told him already, you have to keep a grip on yourself, keep something up your sleeve if you want to get on. He set off homeward, perplexed by her coolness.

HOME AGAIN

Then the afternoon came when he fetched the mother home. She climbed the steep stairs, this is where they carried her down, the dreadful night-time commotion still rang in his ears and constricted his heart. They held on to one another, they made it up there, knocked on the neighbour's door, a relieved "Ah!" from the man who opened it, then his wife's footsteps, and a dirty boyish face stared at his mother from a distance, all disbelief and doubt. Then – a yell from the kid, the mother takes him in her arms, lifts him up, hugs him – but the kid keeps screaming! Upset, dismayed, the mother gives him a shake.

They carry him into the living room. He won't let go of the mother. On the sofa he calms down at last, the blue-red swelling of his face abates, in the end he can stammer and smile, so glad Mother's back, I was so scared. She sits on a chair beside the sofa, she'd turned white as a sheet at the little boy's dreadful screaming. And when it's all quiet again, she buries her face in her hands.

She feeds the kid like she did when he was three, on her lap, lays him slowly and very tenderly down to sleep. He basks in it all. And next morning he doesn't have to go to school, the mother will stay with him the whole day.

Before she turned off the light in the other room and pinned the curtains together, she went about the room with a clouded face, studied the tabletop, passed a hand over it, placed the chairs one by one neatly against the table, glanced at the ancient lantern. Karl thought she was checking to see it was all clean. But – she was merely taking possession, striving to make it once again all hers.

Then the moment came that Karl had feared – sitting alone with her in the silent kitchen. The replacement door gave off a powerful smell of fresh paint, they sat mutely in the light of a newly arrived paraffin table lamp, the reservoir was heavy ironwork with extravagant flourishes, four curly feet sat stolidly on the tabletop. The frosted glass chimney cast a misty white light. Uncle had had it sent up together with the door, it was delivered a few hours ago, and the frame of an old iron bedstead lay against the window wall, but where does Uncle think the bed can fit?

After they had listened a while to the hiss of the paraffin wick, and the gentle glow of the frosted glass chimney had warmed them enough, the mother looked at Karl, her expression still clouded. "So, here I am back again, Karl. Do you want me back? Am I any use to you?" (His head drooped.) "Erich needs me, I can see that ... Who was it that found me, actually?"

"We couldn't sleep. Erich was crying, there was a thunderstorm, I went to fetch you."

"And I wouldn't open the door. And you raised the alarm."

He pleaded: "Don't, Mother."

"You know, Karl, I brought you into the world, and I've blamed myself for it, bringing you into this world. Why did you fetch me back? It's all so hard, so hard, if you only knew."

"Oh, I'll help, Mother, I promise, I'll do anything you want, for you and Erich."

"I'll give Erich away as well."

In his fear he assailed her: "Don't do that, Mother, who'll you give him to, we'll make it through with him, I'll do whatever I can."

"He's sick, Karl, can't you see. The way he screamed. He has to go somewhere quiet."

"No, he has to stay, he'll get better, that bit of screaming, it was just that you appeared so all of a sudden."

"He told me he thought they'd beaten me to death that night."

“It was the door. Oh, he’ll forget it all soon enough. Just keep him close, do.”

She spoke in the same curiously dull enfeebled way that Karl had noticed at the hospital: “We’ll see. I never knew what poverty was. You know how we used to live, Karl. I don’t think I can go any farther down the beggar’s road. What we still have, I shan’t give a pfennig more of it away. I meant to stuff their mouths full, out of honesty, decency. Today, while I was still at the hospital, I wrote them a letter, they can take every last farthing I still have, and then for all I care they can come and cut the ribs from my body, because that’s what they’re entitled to. But – I won’t post it! They must have the answer they deserve. Karl, I never knew what people are really like. When you live quietly like we did, you never see their true face. So really you know nothing. Merciful God, what have I learned these past few months. Only when you’re poor can you know what people are, Karl, they’re lower than animals. When an animal eats its fill, it’s had enough and lets others have their turn. A person hogs it all and snaps at anything near. He sits on his marble throne with a sword in his hand and slashes down. Nobody knows anybody else.”

When she lay there breathing poison gas, she had thought: yes, that’s what they’re like.

The boy sat at her side hardly breathing, his face tried to mirror her expression.

“I shan’t post the letter. I have nothing. I’ll pay nothing. They’ll get nothing more from me. I hate them. They shall know how I cheat them. They think they’re the only ones who can do that. But I can too. In the morning I’ll go to the bank and withdraw all that’s left. Not enough for life, too much for death.”

“And when they catch on, Mother?”

“I hope they’ll catch on. They’ll tell themselves: it wasn’t for nothing and again nothing that the woman ran here and ran there begging for deferments. I’ll treat them like the criminals they are. Oh how happy I am now, swear the Affidavit of Means, I can live with that.” She stretched, moved her head like a cat in the sun, slow and proud. He caught the tone she was practising here, he felt: it’s doing her good. For the first time he saw at his side not the mother, but rather – in a strange kind of haze – a woman.

“But if they do catch on, Mother,” he said, looking intently at her. “Do we really still have a lot?”

“For half a year, or even a year,” she said with a mocking smile. “Maybe even longer. I’ll be happy if what they don’t get is even more.”

“Oh Mother, I don’t know if it’s a good idea.”

“Dishonest, isn’t it? I’m taking the dishonest path. Swear the Affidavit. That I can live with.” She felt the son’s bright startled eyes bore into her. Truly, those bright brown eyes were fixed on her as on that trip through the department stores. Again she relished having another person close, this is not the child I raised, a commonplace family item, but someone with his own existence. It was a delight to be in the company of this newly developing person. How lovely to meet no opposition!

No, he offered no resistance, no objections, listened to her, she's intriguing, admirable. She felt her health return just by noticing this. A solid crust within her seemed to dissolve.

Proudly, even boastfully, she spoke again of the Affidavit, she knew he wouldn't understand what it was, only that it was something awful. The vengeful feelings did her good – and his shy admiration. How long had she gone without. Had she actually ever known it? The husband had always slipped away from her. Quite unexpectedly, during these bad hours I've received this gift: someone clings to me, looks up to me. She felt it in speaking, repeating, she let the conversation take no new turn, so as not to scare away this feeling that had struck her like the beat of a butterfly's wing.

She yawned. Again, as on that evening when she pulled the gas hose free, she withdrew into a protective torpor. During her marriage she had learned to make use of torpor when left alone with her bitterness. Lassitude shaped itself to her. Like an animal that sees itself observed, she crept into her nest to lie undisturbed with her trove.

"Oh, last night I tossed and turned and couldn't lie comfortably. Now the sleeping pill starting to work, what have they put into me."

As she stood up, a knock came at the door, so late, they looked at one another. Karl hurried out, there was whispering at the door, he came back in with the woman from next door, the mother went to meet her.

"Sit down, please, and pardon the intrusion. How nice and cosy it is here! I mentioned to your Karl, because he's a young man and a man never knows with a woman, maybe I can be of help tonight. You being a bit frail still. First night out of hospital."

The mother glanced uncertainly between Karl and the friendly old woman. She forced a smile, thanked her, tried to make her sit down, but they chatted standing a bit more, the mother stopped listening, the neighbour withdrew.

"Wherever would she sleep here, in the kitchen," the mother asked once she had gone. She mused: "But they're good people." Gently, with a shake of the head, she asked Karl: "Did you ask her to come to us?" She laughed: "I sleep like a rat." Content to be on her own, she took his head and stroked it. As she laid out the mattress he asked if she'd meant what she said about the money. She liked that, it sounded good, she nodded: he's concerned for me.

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She slept. Yes, she was able to sleep.

But those she had alarmed by her behaviour, the two boys, slept badly. This first night after the Mistress of the House's return, the other room was restless. Her two protégés tossed and turned. Twice the kid cried out, but Karl was at once at his side – amazing, Mother didn't hear – whispered to him, pressed a pillow to his mouth.

Karl wracked his brains. What can I do to help the mother. Once he'd comforted Erich, it occurred to him: walking through the hospital, the nurse asked if something was wrong with the mother, thought she was mad. What's the mother up to with the money? What

does she mean with the Affidavit? He didn't understand. Has the calamity really ruined her? There's no one to stand by us, just look at that Uncle and Auntie! They took away our little Marie, they live in the next street but they're miles away. At the same moment the hustle and bustle in the department stores flashed before his eyes, the huge staircase, king on his steed, generals on every side. What a strange world!

Dark silent room. Sleeping mother. Little Erich, ailing. In the dark he was suddenly struck by fear, no sound from the kitchen. He got out of bed, stood in the little passage, listened. Nothing. He put an ear to the door. Nothing. Sudden horror struck him, he was about to open the door when the mattress rustled, a sigh, a couple of deep breaths. He crept back to bed.

THE HUNT FOR MONEY

All next day he spent hunting in the city. First in the department store district, then the market halls. Oh how different the stores look now! No longer huge clouds radiating bright colours. They've acquired a definite shape, with hidden corners, spikes, edges everywhere, directed at you! You're invisible to them. The bread, the rows of cakes, tarts recall nothing of meadows, cornfields, windmills. You see people, all on the prowl like you, checking prices, dipping into their pockets. Around the market halls you see the barrow-stockades, the heaps of straw, piles of crates, you sniff strong odours of fish, of fruit. You see mountains of fruit carried rattling into the gloomy expanse, no thought enters your head of pear trees, apple trees drooping under their burden, green ranks of tomato vines, what you observe is people pushing barrows, fat men in leather and their big fat wives with hitched-up skirts, they all hold a list and count out loud and shout and suddenly start a quarrel. How did their faces get so fat, why on Earth is there such a din.

But others too prowl about, these are not so fat, red-cheeked, large-hipped. They look – this occurs to you – more like you, they move sharp-eyed, some nonchalant, hands in pockets, some with a grey sack over the shoulder, some pull a little cart, man and wife or two men or two women, one pulls, the other picks up. Picks what up? Anything that's fallen off a barrow, anything squashed, anything they find in a crate that they upend, anything swept up in the big refuse heaps everywhere. All on the off-chance. But what do they look like, these men and women, and youngsters as well! You look on in horror and dread. You feel: I am one of them, my clothes are still clean and unpatched, soon I'll look like them, dirty, grey-faced, I'll be sharp-eyed and quick-fingered like them. Despite your horror you observe how they go about it. At least they're alive.

He loitered through the halls. Around noon – he went without food and drink, he knew how to cope with hunger and thirst – around noon he found himself, he didn't know how, in the sacred, now quite silent, alien dead district of marble bridges, marble steps, pillared museums, gardens and gardeners, broad avenues, palaces, the Hall of Victory.

It was dark when he came back home. Meanwhile an older boy he'd stopped to ask the way had taken him far to the north, to a weekly market, he'd spent an hour helping a

butcher's wife who was just setting up her stall to unload her cart, had worn a butcher's apron, and received a sandwich and a few pfennigs for his efforts, he'd chatted with youngsters bigger and smaller than him, strays like himself, and they all went off together, and he'd walked about for an hour to rid his jacket of the smell. He told his mother, who stared in amazement, that he'd been looking around, and showed her the coins. She dropped aghast onto a chair: "Where have you been, Karl?" She stared at him: "God, just look at you, Karl, I've been so worried all afternoon."

"Mother, what's happened to you?"

She fended him off: "I took Erich to see Marie. Auntie was there. I thanked her for the flowers. And the door and the doctor."

She set before him a plate of little sausages with potatoes. She stood arms crossed at the stove, tall and upright, her face open, features lively, the brown hair streaked grey as if a harrow had passed through it, and he was glad, she's alive, and I saved her. She won't hand over a pfennig of what little she has left to the creditors. Her strong cheek muscles were jowls that framed the lower jaw left and right, the chin in between jutted almost to a point. Nothing about her of sweetness and love. But standing there now she showed, almost artlessly, that her face with its hardness and strength had not formed itself. Who could not see, as she threw back her head, that she was a prisoner grown hard in struggles and escape attempts, and these were the marks of struggle, the bitterness of setbacks, but also of unquenchable human yearning. Her face was perhaps a stony slope, but one where flowers pushed through.

Karl dreamed: when I have money ...!

A NEW FRIEND

He and the tall older boy he met at the market had agreed to meet again today at eleven. Today the market was empty, the older boy was late. Karl wandered aimlessly about nearby, and waited.

Some streets looked like ordinary streets with buildings, but they were castles exposing only the outer bastion. Passing through the gateway you found yourself in a first narrow courtyard, people lived storey piled on storey, flowerpots on windowsills, washing blowing in the breeze, big refuse bin at the corner, crates lying about, cellar openings, people going down, they live under the walls. Women shouted from window to window. A wide gateway led to a second courtyard, and again sheer walls confronted each other narrowly on all four sides. Windows stood open, people everywhere, they climbed down dark winding staircases, sat on stools in the yard. Packs of children scampered like frightened rabbits from one courtyard to the next. In the rear courtyard were stables and storerooms. Carts big and small drove from the street entry into every courtyard, the drivers yelled at children who failed to get out of the way. And there was a church squeezed in among these buildings. No greenery around, it stood wall to wall with the gloomy human habitations. It was locked. Hard to imagine people here sitting in pews

and lifting up their voices in praise of God. They would make every seat dirty, windows would have to be flung open once they left. But probably they never went in.

Now the older boy turned up loose-limbed and cheerful, he admired Karl's "work clothes". Karl explained: I come from the country, want to earn some money, but don't know how to go about it here. He was a gangly fellow, eighteen already, smoked cigarettes that he rolled on his knee, was blond and brisk, seemed bold and sarcastic. His name was Paul. He seemed to like Karl. Karl coming from the country and wanting to earn, that amused him. Karl spoke of his uncle, and Father's dead and we have nothing. The older boy suggested they find ways to fleece the uncle. Karl shrugged.

Paul was crier and sales assistant at a very busy fruit stall, and a star performer. He warbled remarkable sequences of trilled notes that caused passers-by to stop and laugh in admiration. The boss was happy with him, sales were good, but whenever Paul had had enough he went off to another market, or if the boss scolded him he hired himself out to the competition across the gangway and slung barbs at the boss. Karl was useless but sturdy, and several stalls run by women employed him to clear rubbish. The pickings were meagre, he wasn't satisfied, how to earn more.

So much happened at the market.

One afternoon Karl came away from the market along with a bunch of other boys by a corner exit onto a suburban plaza. Apparently they were off to a council of war. They were a gang of youths, they didn't mind Karl tagging along. We're off, they said, to see Ma Bertha. They proceeded a quarter hour down big streets, and came to open ground where on the far side new houses were being built. The site was partly fenced, parts were overgrown by grass, parts even pegged off and planted with vegetables and sunflowers. But close by the construction site a row of sheds and hovels stretched away. It seethed with people. Booths of lath and crate slats had been slapped together, stovepipes stretched black tin throats through roofs. Some of these sheds were nothing but old wagons, the wheels buried in the debris that formed the ground.

The boys, and a couple of girls their own age who had attached themselves to the gang, marched through unchallenged until they reached a rather secluded fantastical structure proclaimed by a tin sign to be a "Hotel" promising "Fresh Beer and Tea". Wooden steps led to the entrance; at the top was a vicious shaggy hound. One youth collected a few pfennigs from the others at the foot of the steps, walked slowly up whistling, and fondled the beast's neck as he passed. He soon reappeared in the doorway, the hound was held back by a slatternly woman who emerged from the depths. All eight of them (counting the two girls) passed through the "restaurant" – a bare low-ceilinged space with two tables and some stools – across a duckboard that spanned a foul-smelling chasm, into another narrow space that was the interior of a second wagon wedged close to the first. A wide window opening was covered by paper. They remained standing, or squatted on stools and the table edge. The rickety iron bedstead was reserved for the two girls and the captain of the gang. They all lit up. The proprietress set mugs of beer on the table, which they paid for on the spot. Karl couldn't stay for long at this remarkable gathering, they

gossiped about business, sang rude songs, some whispered together, the captain had important matters to discuss with his ladies, one of whom piggybacked on him for a while until down she went, legs in the air, and bickered with the other girl.

On the second occasion – his mother was most reluctant to let him go – Karl sat quietly, again he has earned only pfennigs, maybe he'll hear something. Someone had hung a jacket over the "window", a kitchen lamp burned on the table, altogether ten youths and the girls.

Then Karl realised he was attending a formal club meeting. A debate strewn with objections dragged on endlessly, on a topic broached by one of the bigger boys. He was to be inducted into the society today, and had to demonstrate extraordinary strengths. Karl – they tolerated him as a country bumpkin – understood little of it. What was that thickset boy with the puffy lips and big bulging stupid-looking eyes talking about? About an old woman who had once been rich but then she lost it all, probably because she lost her looks – "She couldn't do it any more," one of the girls shrieked – and then of course she fell ill, but she still had rich relatives, and now she takes morphine, injects it. The band of young smokers nodded sagely. Now no one will give her enough morphine, she doesn't know any pharmacists, but she steals, she knows how, not morphine but clothes, books. So now someone has to sell them for her. A general "Aha!", whispered discussions, similar stories, then a test of strength, a wrestling match with the leader that in the end none of them was able to witness, the lamp had to be carried to the entrance for safety, and the table had already been dumped on the bed. Then the fury of battle drove them all from the entrance back across the duckboard, and most of the council of war found itself in the restaurant between the two tables, which were now fully occupied by rather elderly women, fat and thin, made up as young ladies. Crashing sounds from the meeting wagon; the proprietress listened unfazed as she squatted in the doorway beside a locked cupboard from which now and then she removed glasses and colourful schnaps bottles. Then the noises abated, they all crowded back, the lamp was carried in over all the heads, the owner came shuffling, and without a glance at any of them checked the inventory: bedding, chairs, table. The two warriors, sweating, wearing only shirt and trousers, bowed: no damage, we were careful, whereat she shuffled back over the chasm to her trusty cupboard. And now at a signal from the president – he had reclaimed the bed along with his two girls – the candidate stripped off shirt and trousers in two swift moves, and as he postured there naked as a boxer – two lads watching the door – one of the girls minced up to him, he leered, sweat dripped down his bronzed body. Karl, appalled, wriggled his way out on the excuse of fetching a beer.

That was his first night out in the big city. He could only breathe easy again when after a disturbed sleep he found lanky Paul at his vegetable stand, and could hardly wait for noon and close of business when they could sit on a bench devouring the lunch they'd brought. Paul quizzed him humorously about the participants at the meeting, you bump into some of them at the market, it turned out he actually knew them one and all, and Paul laughed at Karl's angry face. "You should have your picture taken, kid!"

But as they went on their way he railed vigorously against the gang, and warned Karl: "They need a bumpkin like you. First one caught, that'll be you." But strange to say, when Karl mentioned the old woman and how she needed to sell the laundry she'd stolen, Paul became tight-lipped. He said: "That's how they make a living." But when Karl called the business by its proper name and proudly uttered law-book words like "theft" and "fence", Paul flushed red to the hairline, spat, then ordered Karl (who shrank back) to shut his gob, and strode on a few paces in a rage. He started up again with the threats: "For example, you could easily run off and blow the whistle on the gang."

"What?" Karl stammered.

"Well, we must be grateful that Sir shows us such mercy. Lad, lad. Tell me, how about I turn the tables on you?" Karl blanched. "For example, if I were to blab to one of those girls or boys what you just said and what kind of kid you are? Those fellows accepted a posh boy like you no questions asked, that's just the way they are."

Karl stumbled helplessly along at his side, I won't breathe another word.

"Why do you want my company, actually, Mister Posh?" Paul strode on, Karl stood there, his eyes filled with tears. The lanky youth whistled. "You being nothing but a donkey, let me explain to you: when they have nothing to eat and nowhere to stay, what are they supposed to do? Play at blind, and beg all day for pfennigs? Or stick their head in a noose? What are they supposed to do?"

Karl had no idea what to say, where do I stand right now?

"You can't answer. No one can, and that's why no one can have anything to say even if they are a bunch of hoodlums. You least of all, mummy's boy."

Karl walked beside him in a turmoil. If only Paul won't send me packing. They trotted along in silence for quite a while, and arrived at a noisome crooked lane where a commotion was in progress. It was almost all women and children, directing their fury at a building where the entrance was blocked by two burly men. From the confusion of shouts, curses and threats, it emerged that the low wretched hovel with ramshackle walls was occupied by two parties: on the first floor a family with four children, while the ground floor had two children. The two parties were in a state of perpetual strife regarding the use and cleaning of the only latrine, the storing of fuel supplies, stair washing, and a thousand ever-changing daily irritations. Both husbands were factory workers, they spent little time with their families, went drinking together to moan about home life, now and then even exchanged curses on the stair.

Today, something out of the ordinary had happened. The men blocking the entrance were not the resident husbands, but strangers summoned by the first-floor wife to forestall a lynching. It was high summer, unhappy holiday season, that cruel invention of the well-to-do who send the children of the poor back to their hovels, courtyards and dusty streets. Today a fight between the upstairs and downstairs children had brought both parties out onto the stair. It began with the rickety landing; one of the bigger upstairs children had managed to pull a railing post free. Being in possession of this

round wooden weapon, the upstairs children had an undoubted advantage all morning. The unfortunate downstairs children tried to minimise the victory by threats and insults. Then one of the upstairs children carelessly dropped the broken post, the jagged end hit a downstairs child on the leg, drawing blood. This led to enormous outrage downstairs, and a nervous retreat up above.

The children were now substituted by the mothers, who met halfway – one to retrieve her children, the other to brandish the broken post and bawl invective. As always in such disputes, the original cause rapidly strayed onto the fertile ground of older contentions – trivial incidents arising from a wretched existence. They couldn't hold their position for long, the wounded downstairs child needed bandaging, so the downstairs mother withdrew, threatening doctor's bills, a police complaint, the landlord – no doubt she held all the trumps.

Then, upstairs, a tragedy was set in train. The mother began by giving her offspring a good thrashing one after the other – the threat of doctor's bills and the heartless landlord had brought her temper to a boil – and then locked them in. The downstairs children listened in vengeful glee, but then came a particularly loud scream from the mother and terrified shrieks from the children, followed by a dull thud. The youngest upstairs child, a four year old girl, had wet the floor in her terror, her mother had given her a kick from behind. When the indignant child squatted down again, the mother delivered another kick from the side, which took the girl full in the stomach. She tumbled over and lay still. The other children stood around. The woman flung the door open to vent her anger down the stair. Then she was alerted by cries from her other children. The little girl lay there, whimpered, turned over, and vomited. She didn't respond. The mortified mother laid the child on the bed, dashed head over heels in stark horror through the utterly silent building, past the now ownerless broken post, and out into the lane to find a doctor, a doctor. One soon came, the bowel had been ruptured. The girl's situation was hopeless; she had been taken away in an ambulance an hour ago. The whole street was in uproar, the upstairs children themselves declared, as they stood with their mother by the ambulance: "Mummy kicked her, Mimi wet the floor." The mother had to flee indoors.

So now they knew it too, Karl and Paul. Now and then the women seemed ready to overwhelm the men who guarded the door with such grim determination. Paul turned away. As he went he rolled himself a cigarette, sniffled and sighed. Karl spoke out what he felt: "What a beastly woman. And those men there, guarding her. But her husband will be back this evening, if the police don't come first. Back home that woman would no longer be alive, and no man would have got in the way."

Paul puffed and stared ahead. "So what would they have done?"

"Well, Paul, kicking a little nipper that hasn't learned manners yet in the belly, and it lies there."

"These people have enough children, they can't take a step without tripping over some brat." He came to a stop and yelled at Karl: "Kick in the belly, kick in the backside, kick

on the nose. Dumbass! And I spent a whole hour listening to that nonsense! Isn't the woman a human being, are you allowed to kick a woman?"

What's this now. "Then who? The little girl wet the floor."

"A mess, and the woman had had enough, that and everything else. The others attacked the woman, and she took it out on someone else."

"Who?"

"The brat crossed her. Could have been anyone. You, maybe." He took the cigarette from his mouth, spat on the ground, tapped Karl on the forehead: "Dumbass! Go take a train back to where you belong." Turned about and left Karl standing.

It took Karl a weary day to find him again. When he told his mother the story, she was beside herself – what a coarse common woman! – and wouldn't believe it until she read about it in the newspaper.

(She did not want to believe. But not many weeks shall pass before this year, filled for them all with such grave events, is enriched by yet one more: she herself shall deliver, coolly and as a matter of course, to this eldest child with whom she now chats so amicably, a blow – an invisible blow – against his heart, from which he shall never recover to the end of his days.)

Karl bumped into Paul unexpectedly next evening, not far from the apartment. It was cooling down after a hot dusty day, everyone was relaxing outside, and Karl was about to go back and fetch his mother, maybe take her to sit in one of the bigger squares where the lower classes squat around statues and stunted beeches, and beggars make music. But before he reached home, the crowd jostled him towards the lanky figure. Karl felt like turning aside, but then took courage and joined him. They marched down the street saying little. It was lovely to march aimlessly along in the cool of evening beside the bigger boy, wonderful, he didn't know why, though he felt uneasy at abandoning his mother. Both had hands in their pockets, groups of people wandered past; these two now, they belonged to the city and the evening and the crowds.

After a while Paul led them zigzagging down narrow side streets, he seemed to be heading somewhere, and now they landed up outside a big grey building that stretched back like some sort of hall; the gloomy first impression was of a coffin. There was a low doorway, it was locked, a doorkeeper stood outside, a few steps away a plain elderly man wearing an official cap stood in the street. Both were keeping watch over the big silent building, for behind the old man in the cap a long line of silent people stretched all the way down the street and around the corner. Many were old, all were poor and beggarly, some wore a hat. Patiently they hugged the wall of the building, waited for the signal to enter. It was a night shelter for the homeless. Men, women and children in the entries opposite, children playing with hoops, nobody was taking any notice of the glum men queuing for the doorkeeper and the man in the official cap.

Paul and Karl strode all the way down the line. Paul was looking for someone; they were almost at the corner when a hand reached out. Paul held a whispered conversation

with a man, no longer young, wearing a heavy cape; the men behind shuffled closer to prevent Paul inserting himself in the queue. After a few minutes Paul came away, the man had given him a note, pointed across the street. The two boys crossed over. Paul scouted in one of the big multi-courtyard complexes, came upon a woman in a stairwell who eyed them warily, but after whispered words from Paul she started in shock; he showed her the note, she gave a puzzled happy smile, looked about, they entered the courtyard. Karl held back. Finally the young woman – she seemed to be a tired factory worker – gave Paul’s hand a squeeze, and as she swept past even glanced brightly at Karl.

Now Paul was very calm, and for the first time on this outing looked at Karl and pointed out the whole big courtyard. They were back at the main entry gazing across at the queue. Paul started up: “Anyway, that woman from yesterday is now in prison, so I’ve heard, the children have been taken to the orphanage because the husband has no time. These days they’re so concerned about people.” He grinned.

Karl had never seen a homeless shelter; he asked: “Do they get something to eat?”

“Oh yes, for a few pfennigs. You can even take a shower. They’re particularly hard on lice. Not one louse is permitted in the building, else it’ll be arrested. They’re building a huge new shelter, this one’s no longer enough, an actual palace. I believe the new one will have marble tiles and flagstones, splendid stuff, people will positively want to be homeless.”

How ambivalent Karl’s feelings were in the older boy’s company. He thought the shelter must be a good thing, but dared not say it out loud. “I’ve never been inside,” he ventured.

“Oh, it’s not so bad inside. I’ve slept in worse places. It’s clean, and no rowdiness is allowed.”

Karl nodded. Paul laughed: “Those over there think the same, you can ask, or most of them. If they didn’t think so, they wouldn’t be here and that whole big building wouldn’t exist. Most of that lot are even more stupid than the women yesterday ... Have you ever looked into one of those big refuse bins? Once you’ve looked long enough you know what a homeless shelter is. Just take a good look, Karl! And take a good sniff! Lift the lid!”

He marched laughing back into the courtyard. Karl had to follow, clearly Paul intends to bring him to a refuse bin in the yard, and it’s already gloomy enough. But Karl balked, this is really an insult.

“Now Karl, you just need to understand why they build homeless shelters. They want to clear the streets of rubbish. And the rubbish piously declares: I’m not pretty, and flows down the gutters they’ve made.”

He stood, screwed up his eyes, and pondered. Before them in the wide expanse of yard, where a single orange lantern combatted the gathering dusk, two girls about ten years of age were hopping with fanatical concentration in squares chalked on the flagstones. Paul whistled, one came running, the other kept guard over the squares, he held her by the

pigtail, whispered something in her ear, she nodded and ran into the building, at which the other girl shouted: "Come right back, just bring some grub."

They strolled at a leisurely pace down deep dark evening streets. And when – Paul's expression clear as ice – they arrived amid a growing throng of people in a secluded part of the big city, something appeared in the sky that Karl had never seen before. Many passers-by were gazing up at it. Far in the background, in front of a bright pink sky, was a dark silhouette. It outlined the proud palaces of the great city, those structures of rulers and victories on their exalted hilltop. For several moments silence fell on the crowds looking on from the teeming streets. Paul's arm was around Karl's neck: "Fata morgana. Mirage. The parched traveller in the desert sees an oasis with palm trees in the clouds. There they sit on their hill, and here we lie in the swamp. We'll still be a swamp for a little while, then they'll do slum clearance and we shall die out. Because as you have seen, they don't do anything to us, they just let us go on living."

Karl listened, thrilled.

"Now and then they come down with torches and burn us out, when we've become too much of a nuisance and too disgusting. They have to, because the homeless shelters can't cope and the rubbish heaps won't keep to the walls, but spill out onto the street." The meaning of Paul's expression was now clear: cold hostility. He kept his arm on Karl's shoulder.

A NEW WORLD

They had one more such evening stroll. Karl never found out how Paul spent his days; at least, he never showed his face in the market halls or the streets round about. Karl exercised his usual beast-of-burden function for the butcher woman and two vegetable hawkers. They missed Paul, he could have lots of work, but he never turned up. His vegetable dealer said in all seriousness: "As long as the lad hasn't gone and set up his own stall." The youths and girls of the gang that Karl mixed with for research purposes – he even spent an evening at their "hotel" – ignored his presence, they already thought him suspect for running away that time. As for Paul – a figure of most awesome respect, they would never say a word to disparage him – they reckoned: he'll have found a girl, he's having fun with her, he'll turn up soon.

How Karl searched. He had never known a friendship like this. Or what to call it, this feeling that was so exciting, and yet downright scary? But Paul was a particularly remarkable specimen, others too noticed him, considered him their equal. He had a matchless way of handling people. Being at his side was a privilege, you never saw him without some boy or girl coming on to him. His ability to attract people was obvious. But you could never accuse him of warm feelings, for he always held himself aloof.

Karl was nagged by a sense that caring for the mother was now taking second place. Was earning money really his goal when he set off each morning? At home nothing had changed, just that, ever since that terrible night and the hospital, the mother was calmer

and kinder, but nothing's coming in, we're eating through her little store of savings, no help anywhere, and she sets all her hopes on me. And instead – what am I doing?!

One evening Paul turned up at their rendezvous spot, and there Karl met him, his same old self in clean clothes and a light cap worn rather askew. Karl was dismayed and ashamed that Paul thought so little of him, never confided where he had been. Karl never dared ask. When Paul saw Karl approach, he raised a hand: "Here's our toff!" After they'd stood about a while under the trees, he took Karl's arm and off they went down the street, across squares, away from the familiar zone of markets and home.

A broad avenue fringed by factories and residential blocks led north into open country. Trams and automobiles hissed over the tarmac, tree after tree marched down deserted dimly lit sidewalks.

Once they turned around to look back at the city. There was sky, but not the big black close-mouthed sky of night, heavy solemn night that flaunted garlands and gazed down in lofty bliss onto the land, its child. This sky had been flung high above the earth, it was lacerated by the glow from myriad upon myriad of lights. The night-time city had thrown over itself a flame-vault of ruddy light in order, by night as well, to set itself apart from the sky and its secrets, to be city, city, nothing but city. The great growling rumbling city loomed out of the darkness like a carcase from which all life has departed, and the remains are now phosphorescent.

"Do you understand yet," Paul asked, "why that woman kicked the child? The woman knows about life. You can ask the sparrows in these trees, every one of them knows about life, and wants to keep it. And if it can't, it lashes out. It flaps about, injures itself, and dies. And a person. The woman won't let anyone tell her she has it good, or this is just how things are. Sometimes she half-believes them, but then she shakes it off. And now she's the depraved mother, paying for the crimes of others."

They proceeded arm in arm down the broad avenue. The character of the buildings changed, the streetlights were brighter now, there were gardens and villas. Then Karl was thrown into the greatest confusion. There in open country, in a landscape of gardens, facing a pretty suburban station, was a bright-lit café with cars parked outside. Well-dressed men and women – housemaids, too, walking dogs – strolled up and down, gazed around chatting, emerged into a circle of light and vanished again into leafy darkness. Paul's expression relaxed: "It's nice here. So peaceful." And as if it was the most natural thing in the world, he gestured to Karl and went on ahead across the sand-scrunching café forecourt and up steps to the garden pavilion. When they were inside he turned to Karl: "Shame there's no music tonight." Here they are, after all their talks, in a carpeted restaurant filled with whispering, spoons clinking, and the gentle chink of glasses. Waitresses in black skirts with coquettish white aprons served the guests, they carried shiny nickel trays with little china teapots and cups and tall slim glasses filled with ice or some dark red liquid. The two young men sat side by side at a small round table with a little flowery tablecloth, settled into the wide cushioned chairs and gazed along with all the other visitors through the open windows at the trees and the blaze of lights, the

harshly lit ladies and gentlemen, maids with the dogs. Karl sipped cautiously at the hot tea – ceremoniously poured and deliciously scented; late evening already, what's the mother doing – and spooned cream. Paul was miles away from any cares. He sprawled in his seat. "This place is new, not many customers, afternoons are the time."

Karl chimed in, but clumsily: "My father had a restaurant, it was almost ready, but of course it didn't work out."

Paul regarded him benignly: "Hey, you never told me anything about that. So the peasants wouldn't pay, or there weren't any tourists?"

Karl seized up. But Paul, not waiting for an answer, asked a waitress to light his cigarette. She stood very close, beaming as if dazzled by this bold cheeky young man with the saucy look.

"You're wondering how I can be sitting here. It's a nice place. Well then. That's why I'm sitting here. I won't leave all the fine things to them. It's no more theirs than it is ours. You have to see that. Don't fall for their la-di-da chicanery. We must share in all of it, fresh air, music, entertainment, dancing, women. But no jealousy just because the others have it. We simply take what's ours. Just now they keep all the nice things to themselves. But the nice things don't belong to them. One day we'll have everything they have, not just sitting here one evening as a guest, but off to the seaside. I want to travel. If I have to, I'll volunteer for the colonies. – I suppose you know nothing about women?"

Karl flushed deep red.

"Just don't do anything foolish in our shack. Kid, you do know. It's stupid, there's no need for it. These people, they watch over their girls like pieces of gold, as if they belong to them, but the girls have a different idea. These people fear nothing so much as someone acting the way they do, simply taking, with no sense of shame. Haha." He drew smoke in through his nose. "Karl, these people have no shame. Not even before their God, and yet they still believe in him. Otherwise their cities would look a lot different."

They sat silent a long while. Paul seemed at home in the café, he gazed confidently around, stared at people. To Karl it seemed a fairytale, worse, he was an intruder. If only he could feel like Paul. Paul paid, the waitress appeared at their table blushing madly. "Let's take the tram back, and sell some mangelwurzels!" They left, laughing.

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How Karl loved this young man! To the mother he spoke only vaguely of his companion. He had a notion she wouldn't wholly approve of what she heard, and anyway it was very difficult to speak to her about Paul. The mother kept an eye on him. He couldn't always slip out. He sat across from her, daydreaming, now excited, now downcast. He spoke only of trivialities: about work, who he'd bumped into, the names meant nothing to her, but somehow she caught onto the name Paul. And what did she hear about this Paul? Karl gave little away. Is he being led astray? But that wouldn't be nearly as bad as him slipping free of her, becoming something in this big city where she wouldn't be able to follow him.

Having followed the play of his emotions for some time, she could see that something was bothering him, she had to find out what it was. She rationalised it: I owe it to him.

One morning he told her in passing that he wouldn't be back for supper, he'd be meeting his friend Paul at the market. At noon she quickly took little Erich to Auntie's and set off, heart pounding, to look for the boy.

She told herself: of course he won't be on the big fenced square with the statue of the mounted knight that he's mentioned so often. But lo and behold, here's the square, there's the statue, so many benches and people, poor people, and there, her heart jolted with joy, the shock was almost a blessing, there he is, her Karl, calm, grave, and at his side an older boy, a sturdy blond young man smoking a cigarette and gazing into the blue yonder. So there they are, both of them. These two. She observed from a distance, sat on a bench, and watched. This is who I've been so anxious about. She gazed tenderly on them, on her Karl and his friend, the boy's almost an adult, really. And overcome by joy and thankfulness, berating herself for having fretted so, she stood up, and before she had formed a clear idea of what she was doing she set off at full sail towards them. She was almost upon them before Karl noticed her. He leaped to his feet with a start, turned deathly pale. Eyes wide with fear he reached for her hand. What's he up to now, he's like Erich when he screams. But she found a smile. His face regained its colour, she was agitated too, the father, the suicide attempt, the hospital – it all came floating up and was swiftly consumed by the joy of being there and holding hands. "I only came looking for you," she said, with a pleasant smile at Paul, who had stood up, "because I have to go away for a while, and didn't want to leave Erich so long with Uncle." Karl wanted to rush off with her, but she sat down calmly between the two boys.

And it was quite a new feeling for her to sit in a square in this big brutal city, and today a working day, enjoying peace and quiet in warm air, nothing to do, no desires, two young people at her side. Karl sees how well the mother looks, how pretty, yes, she's pretty, prettiest of all the women he's ever seen, to think he's been granted this, his mother, how happy he is.

As they chatted, Paul studied the woman at his side. She thought Paul very mature, grown up beyond his years, seems from a good family, so why does he hang around the markets, why doesn't he mention his family? But she was relieved to meet him. And so that Karl would sit more with her and not spend so much time in the street and because Erich wanted to see more of his brother, she invited Paul to come and visit any time. Paul made a polite reply; Karl thought: he'll never come, the mother really shouldn't be here, why did she come. He felt she wanted to keep a tight hold on him. But was he distancing himself from his mother? Oh, I'm so glad she understands! He went home with her.

When he turned to look back at the square, Paul was sitting upright on the bench gazing intently after them.

COURT ORDER

Nothing much had changed in the mother. Ever since the suicide attempt she had stopped making the rounds of creditors, which had been a kind of compulsion pressing her to feel guilt for the old fall from grace. That was over now. She had done her utmost, and survived – the husk, this face, this flesh, this hair; her daily habits had survived, she'll wait and see what comes, what's still alive under the skin. No, she called no more on the creditors. The children are here, it's like the comforting daily sunrise and sunset, and then an apartment to live in, taking care of the cooking, shopping; a good daily round where you can bed yourself in even if the roots never go deep. But there is no deeper soil.

The creditors took no action, her brother had guessed correctly, twice a bailiff came to the door, went through the kitchen and the other room, a calm elderly man, he chatted with the woman, the second time he told her it was a pure formality, and then never returned. She left unopened the official papers delivered to the address, and see, nothing happened! She shoved them into the kitchen-table drawer alongside the knives and spoons, and opened them only weeks later before throwing them out half-read, noticed some name, all dead matters, let them lie.

“Will you always leave me on my own like this?” she asked the big boy one morning as she fastened Erich's satchel and took his hand. “You have enough time for Paul, afternoons and evenings.” He was startled, he was looking for work and the mother knew it, but she's staring at him and trying to lure him to stay home and she seems to think that's not so important, she's so fickle, so strange. He picked up his cap, brushed his jacket and followed her out to the stairs.

Once she had deposited Erich behind the grim school railings and the little boy had disappeared with a cheerful wave along with the other little satchel-bearers into the dour barracks that was the school, the mother remarked how quickly the year was going by, you hardly remember what a meadow or a wood looks like, but we can't afford an outing, so let's just stroll down the street. Karl could only say yes, it was her first stroll since that terrible night, and, though neither of them said it out loud, it really was a celebratory stroll, like going to church for a thanksgiving after a severe illness. Karl noted nervously that she was directing their steps towards the city centre.

Streets, squares, crowds. These were her old dreadful hunting-grounds. Now they were different, she had someone with her. As the woman went along she felt only doubt, disbelief: I'm strolling here and there's another person strolling with me, showing me things, he's happy when I say something nice.

They mingled with a crowd outside a waffle house watching how the batter was pressed; she inhaled the pleasant smell. Standing there she closed her eyes. The awful bitterness of those past months flooded through her, her lips grew cold, but he's at my side, one is dead now, he left me this one. And again her distant hatred for the dead husband shuddered in her and made her move on. She pulled the boy along, he's my inheritance, my life hasn't ended, I can have my revenge, you just stay there in your grave, all is not lost. Karl was as tall and sturdy as her, broad-shouldered. She kept firm hold of his arm, he was proud and looked sideways, could just see her eyes behind the thick veil,

eyes that look so hard and fierce, he knows them from those quarrels with the father, but he responded with a tender look. She strolled along at her son's side, just once it had been like this with the father, good that life goes on, she still has this son, there'll be no repetition of that night. And then she paid close attention, listened carefully, tried to understand what he was thinking, see through his eyes.

The shops in the city centre were coming alive. They were girding themselves in the manner of a lover emerging from sleep, who sees the hours of the day stretch away before her, a blank sheet. And she fills them with dreams of one who is not there, where is he, who's he talking to, what's he wearing, what it was like yesterday evening with him, will he call today. And she begins to spin out new threads in his direction, the new day's net is spread while she takes a long bath, bathes the limbs that give him pleasure and so give her pleasure, that are to lure him and trap him, and while she sits at her dressing table and studies her face and hands – those two visiting cards of her Ego – in her reflection on every side. She thinks of him, fills herself with yearning, falls on him from afar. She begins to offer herself to him, whispers and kisses as she makes herself ready, lotions, makeup.

These luxury boutiques and department stores that had lowered their heavy shutters and grilles once night fell now behaved no differently. Life was injected into the sleepy spaces and across the tables and displays, in the form of proprietors and staff and the hundreds of young men and women who crowded the aisles. Sunlight wormed its way through the plate glass wall and bestirred the fabrics, curtains, carpets, furnishings, lamps, clothes, hats to reveal their shapes and colours. The day was fine. The big stores opened wide, there must be no division between inside and street, everything must be street. If you stroll there you can stroll here too, you do not walk alone, your solitude, melancholy friend, shall be lifted from you.

As the woman sauntered with her son through this awakening quarter, she neither saw the shops nor heard their buzz. She heard his hearing, saw his seeing. Her yearning for a person, this person, so young, so filled with strength and future, her desire to keep him for herself as her protector and shield-bearer – it all stormed suddenly through her. She flitted like a bee in a newfound flowerbed, bemused by the many open calyxes. What a thrilling path. The veil over her face became an irritation, she told Karl she would remove it, it's too hot in these crowds, and having found a quiet doorway she flung the heavy fabric back over her left shoulder. Her flushed round face became visible, she could smile and breathe freely. She could see her companion – up till now merely her son – more clearly. She listened to his meandering commentary. He steered her from floor to floor in a big department store. The rows of sausages, battalions of hams reminded her of their cowstall, the lowing cattle. And because she wanted to align her thoughts with his and ferret out his nature – I gave birth to this, it's flesh of my flesh, the dead man had to leave him behind for me – she allowed herself to feel flattered by his notion: we live in this city, we belong with these crowds, all this is meant for us as well. (Karl recalling Paul's words in the garden café.) How the mother bloomed. Again and again: how long is it since I went strolling with someone.

They whiled away a whole morning. They drank a lemonade in the square where Karl had watched the bakery, they shared a sandwich, then made their way back home in time to collect Erich from school. A cheerful afternoon passed in excited reports and chatter among the three of them. The whole situation was unreal. After such a turn the mother was thoroughly worn out. She lay tired and happy in the dark on her mattress on the floor. She has a home, she can't believe it, she's here with her children. And on into her dreams: arm in arm with her husband about their property, she hangs on his every word, he shall be her master (but that he never was).

Next morning, still affected by the change that had come over her, she stayed in all day. She let Karl take his little brother to school, and then he can "drift around", as he put it, and won't be back until noon. As she kept busy with her little bit of housekeeping, cleaning, rearranging, she struggled with herself, but why, forcibly suppressed something, but what – her old longing for the husband. When the two sons came back at noon, she wasn't nearly ready, and sent Karl away with the little one, they can go where they like. And resumed the struggle, tried to shake it off; once, suddenly determined to go out, she put on her hat and took hold of the veil, but her hand slid from the door handle, she had to stand by the stove again and reveal her cards, but nothing came, nothing revealed itself in her. She was held fast as if by a polyp in an underwater cleft that stretches forth its smooth white writhing tendril, it tugged at her and wouldn't let her pull free. During all this murky wrestling and standing about she realised only one thing: she hated the husband. It's over. Yes, now I am on my own.

The afternoon, which she spent alone in the two rooms, took a turn for the worse. She wept in torment, sobbed whispering on the little one's bed: I'm so alone. If she had died along with the husband, people would surely have taken the children in, now here she is, alone in the big city, just turned forty, and for her whole life she has been nothing but a stranger. And her old talent in bad times of taking refuge in sleep did not desert her now. As she crouched in the half-dark bent over her knees – soon she must pick Erich up from Auntie's – sleep draped itself over her and she sank into a dream. The dream showed her something black, alive, bristled and hairy from top to toe like an ugly man-beast, it came at her like a gorilla, hugged her, it was horrible, sinister to a point that must not be overstepped. And then she had to succumb to a dreadful raging lust. She came to herself drenched in sweat on the chair in the dark room. She felt comforted, calmed. She must stand up, someone's knocking. Erich coming home, Karl just behind him.

*

What Karl does not know when he awakes next morning and helps in the kitchen is that during the night a decision was reached that will remain in effect and valid for the rest of his life. And later, as he struggles with forces he cannot name, he never thinks of this quiet night that was no different from any other. During that night a sentence was pronounced over the sleeping boy from which he will never escape. The room next door was a kitchen; but it had acquired in stealth a domed ceiling higher than a cathedral. And there a sleepless wilful person pronounced sentence over the rest of his life and thereby over many other lives whose paths will cross with his. And there was no appeal against

this sentence. And now there is a person, older, stronger, more experienced than this Karl and his brother, who will carry the sentence around like a sword and regard and accept this sentence as a fact.

This other person is his mother.

She has rejected the blandishments of despair. She has swum across the icy waters of despair. All that is over now. Hour after hour she stared into the darkness, until dawn began to reveal the dismal kitchen, outline the stove. She means to stay alive. There are still possibilities. I strolled with Karl, I shall keep hold of him. Tight hold. The husband, dead now, was mistaken. I still have someone, and he shall stay with me. This I say. And it shall be. The night was filled with vengeful images. There the woman sat, calm and strong, presiding over a court of law. Her life can resume, her former life.

But in the next room Karl and Erich emerged from sleep, and Karl, a happy young man fresh as a daisy, looked on contentedly as his pale delicate brother let himself be cosseted and washed by the mother.

*

Sooner than the mother had expected, Paul turned up at the apartment one noontime when Karl was not there. Karl found out later that Paul had arranged this deliberately. He sat for over an hour in the kitchen with the mother and Erich and drank coffee with them, then let Erich show him the other room and his schoolwork. The mother was particularly moved by the attentive way Paul engaged with Erich, she had never seen an adult take such an interest in a child. He took the boy completely seriously, never fobbed him off with an evasion. She was unable to glean any details of Paul's family, he said he'd come here on his own aged fourteen from a mid-sized town, there were too many of them at home, he'd quickly found his feet here, as far as that goes. She asked him several times about his plans, because surely he should be aiming at something solid, lasting, secure, a proper profession; he'll soon be eighteen, so he's been drifting around like this for four years already, she can't understand it. No, he said, as for making plans, every profession is already too hard and over-full, and he's never learned anything formal, substantial, and can she really imagine him squeezing into a school desk again. He laughed: no, he won't compete with anyone, he can help out here and there, and anyway, he said, looking down at the floor and then fixing her with a quick sharp gaze, it's good that people out there scurry about so, you see more, hear more, you can form better judgements, there's more to the world than serving in a shoe shop or a furniture maker's, and taking a stroll on Sundays with the pram.

Where had she heard this sort of thing before? The young man sat slim and calm, little Erich between his knees, on the chair in the other room. Ah yes, her husband often spoke like that, and then she lost everything. Anxiety sharpened her perceptions, what Paul had said was not good, she became more reserved. He was off on another topic, she stopped listening. (In her mind she saw their farm, a horse standing in grass bending its neck to the dead man under it, he was carried through the wide open door into his den, laid down on the sofa. The images flew up from within her and hung about her throat.) She said

while he was still speaking, her voice tight, so low that he didn't catch it the first time: Karl will not follow Paul's example, she has already taken steps, soon – she thought the beginning of October – he'll be taken on by his uncle as an apprentice. (This was as yet by no means certain, but after what she had just heard she would make it so, and soon.)

Her eyes and ears must have been sharpened by this turn of the conversation, for when Paul calmly remarked how nice that sounds, for sure the best thing for Karl, she thought she detected an undertone of mockery. Or was she just being over-sensitive, making assumptions? He kept the conversation going on the excuse of waiting for Karl. Then he stood up, after Erich had ridden on his shoulders and been deposited back down, and she marvelled at this big strong person with the open, friendly, winning face. Perhaps she misjudged him, and was robbing Karl of a good friend? "Come again soon," she invited. But sitting alone with Erich she was still troubled, and Erich chided her for the gloomy frown; her chin was pointed again.

TERRORIST ACTS

Twenty years earlier the old king had entered the big city at the head of his troops after a mighty victory. Since then it had developed enormously, adding year by year to the number of inhabitants and the accumulation of buildings and infrastructure. The ancient monarch sat splendid and menacing as if on an island, secluded in the quarter that boasted the Hall of Victory, surrounded by his sons and generals and chief officials, all housed by him in palaces nearby. The obedient populace, having in recognition of its manly virtue in war been granted a few liberties, put these to the best possible use with its customary moral rectitude: it toiled and toiled, and – one might say from the loftiest to the meanest – adopted as its first concern the increase of the State's power and wealth, thereby reciprocating the State's recognition, and showing itself in every respect a monarchical people. Factory after factory sprang up all around the city, they pulled in huge numbers from the countryside, and competed alongside the new scientific institutions, the museums, the academies, the Army General Staff to polish the State's coat of arms to an ever more splendid shine, even in times of peace.

But as the years rolled by, something strange happened. Just as a newcomer walking down the clean-swept avenues of the city had no idea what went on behind the façades of the residential blocks (even though the newspapers reported some of it), neither could he see the sinister shadows that had latterly begun to sully its confident beauty. The country of which the big city was the capital had, naturally enough, some political parties, one of which, this being an industrial nation, was a Workers' Party. The Workers' Party had been founded long ago, like the others it was tightly organised, it had its well-known demands that it announced and publicised, and as a loyal party in a militarised State, it drilled its youth. During the previous decade especially, with the expansion of industry and the long period of peace in the world, it had a notion to embed itself ever more strongly in the general population, to which it ought really be in opposition. Of course, no one dared to set aside the lovely ardent heart-lifting ideals, but these were

mentioned in a conciliatory tone, given the equally heart-lifting ideals, undoubtedly not to be disdained, of a victorious monarchical State in which everything prospered and everyone wished valiantly to prosper along with it.

But then elements emerged in the country, especially in the big city, which were not in accord with this development. Ever more headstrong undisciplined persons appeared, who resurrected slogans from long defunct Party doctrine, and spoke for example of “actions” or, even worse, undertook “actions”. Such elements, rejected by every placid well-schooled worker, ran about the country, slandered and heaped shame on the great unified mass organisations which could be the only natural representatives of a movement, and unleashed their criminal mischief. The problem of wealth and poverty could of course always be debated ad infinitum. But what people had was the old age pension, sickness benefit, unemployment benefit. Shelters were built for the absolutely homeless; the children of the poor (not all, naturally) were sent to holiday camps; the populace was given a limited right to participate in government, according to income.

Now, despite all such conspicuous efforts, a tiny number of persons, at first mistaken for mere criminals, took it into their heads to wreak destruction. They declared that no accommodation was possible with the established State of the victorious king and his soldiers; and the so-called liberties granted by this despot – latest in a long line of despots – should be employed only to bring the State into turmoil. They insultingly included in the State the venerable tried-and-true workers’ organisation that they scorned. They also scorned every other organisation in the land as “playing at soldiers”, and were themselves a secret clique of terrorists and nihilists, alien bodies within the State so calmly nurtured and paternally cared for under firm-fisted governments.

Now once again came an outbreak of this plague. Once again there occurred one of those senseless attacks that roused even the calm and the sensible to a blind rage. A very rich man, in recent years outstandingly philanthropic, had interrupted a summer excursion and returned to his villa in the city in order to attend the opening of an old folk’s home. The building stood ready, officials were all set to conduct the ceremony with congratulatory speeches, bestowal of medals, when one morning half the front of the philanthropist’s villa was blasted by an explosion, attributed at first to a gas leak. The man himself was severely injured by falling masonry. By a stroke of luck, two men who had been seen acting suspiciously near the villa were arrested that same day. The newspapers began sniffing out details of a far-reaching conspiracy, even, in time-honoured fashion, casting blame on organised labour, which was forced onto the defensive. It was refreshing on these tedious summer days to be diverted from bank scandals, forgeries, debates about tax increases, towards a juicy Wild West incident, to which moral observations and lurid scenes from the criminal underworld effortlessly accrued.

At the time Karl often came across his good friend in the markets, but he was not very talkative. Karl dearly wanted to know what impression the mother had made, and whether she had perhaps depicted him as immature compared to Paul. He feared she had done exactly that, and that was why Paul avoided him, and yet day after day he felt a great longing. Being together with him was the happiest time of the day. It was already a joy to

spot him in the same market hall, even when no words were exchanged. But what a tormenting embarrassment it was to see him stroll past as if they weren't friends linked heart to heart. Oh if I only knew what Paul really thinks.

One noontime, after the market closed, Paul unexpectedly crept up singing behind Karl, who was just pulling on his jacket. They sat in a big eatery close by, patronised by lots of market people. This morning Karl had never imagined that today would be his lucky day. Karl sat facing Paul, and was able to study the low forehead, the blond locks that fell across it, the long pale eyelashes, the pale silky-soft line of the eyebrows, and the stern straight pretty lips with a line of fluff above. They ate, drank, exchanged a few words. After half an hour they left the noisy grease-joint, which had not a trace of visual beauty and seemed enveloped in a harsh glare.

"So what shall we do now, kiddo?" Paul asked, another cigarette already at his lips.

Karl's response was more than an answer: "Whatever you like. I'm free all afternoon."

Paul smiled: "And if an afternoon's not enough? What if I need the evening, and the next day?"

Karl – they had already slowed to a dawdle – looked up at Paul, he was moved: so Paul does know me. "Well, what should I do? What's the plan now?"

"Let me take care of that. There's plenty enough to do. But first, you have to want to."

Karl mumbled, he couldn't restrain his heart: "Of course I want to."

The other boy laughed and shook him by the shoulder: "Want to, would like to, oh Karl, what a hero you are. Of course you want to, why wouldn't you. But can you. That's the big trick – whether you can."

Karl stammered and held Paul's arm: "Why couldn't I? You've never given me a chance." The words slipped out before he could stop them.

Paul strode ahead on his long legs, so Karl had to hurry after him. The big boy spoke into the air, Karl wasn't sure at first who he was addressing: "God holds you daily in His sight, And guards you well by night." As Paul repeated this he glanced at Karl, who didn't understand: "What do you mean?"

"Don't you go to sleep every night under that motto?"

Now Karl recognised the words of the blessing that had hung above his bed ever since infancy, a plain board with pokerwork, the mother had nailed it over his present bed, so Paul had seen it there. "Oh, that's my old house blessing," said Karl, sheepishly defiant. "And why shouldn't it hang there. Mother's used to it."

"Your mother is a clever lady, and capable. What, actually, is she planning for you? The family has no income, the uncle keeps a tight purse, you have to help out."

"That's what I'm doing."

Paul laughed: "You're going about it entirely the wrong way, my lad."

“So how then?”

“I can’t advise you. You have your guardian by day and night. Was it any different before, at home?”

“How am I supposed to answer that?”

“Tell me everything, we have time.”

Karl saw that Paul wanted to know, and so street after street, square after square, hesitantly, as if in Confession, he began to talk about home, at first with an undertone of plaintive apology, and then immersed in his memories. Carried away, he told what he knew of his father, how he had loved him without ever being allowed to say it, how the father paid them so little heed, turned up at home only spasmodically, and the fist fights between him and the mother, his own front teeth were knocked out when he intervened in one of those, he’d had to protect the mother, but she never complained about the father, everything at home always revolved around the father, even though he wasn’t there most of the time. “And then I was growing up, we moved onto the farm he’d bought, he wanted to make it something splendid, we had horses, cows, pigs, a hundred hens, and then the inn. Father was busy every day, he stayed with us all the time, I went riding with him, but mostly he was out with his friends, oh those were good times. And then birthdays, what parties we had, little Marie’s and Erich’s, even mine.”

There were tears in his eyes, he was swept up in these old memories, and now he had to tell about the mother, how they left all that behind, and the creditors and that awful night. He had no idea what expression Paul’s face wore. He wanted to know. Paul was half a pace in front. Karl grasped his arm. Paul stared coldly ahead. What have I done wrong, have I annoyed him, I let myself go. Paul said into the air: “And so you must earn money.”

“Yes, I must, Paul, there’s no one else.” Paul cast a brief glance back that chilled him.

“What’s so damnable is, they steal the very thoughts out of you. When you catch a dog and try to tie it up, it bites you, it knows what you’re up to. When you go to tie up a person, he knows nothing. He licks your hand. You sit in squalor, that squalid apartment, you see more clearly than others because you used to have it better, the farm, the inn. So he was a petty exploiter, your father, he never bothered his head about it, and now here you sit, he slipped away from you, and you see the other end of the stick, blows raining down and what do you do? Do you grab at the whip because you feel the blows, you and your mother and that little pale kid and the little girl you had to give away? No! You whimper and moan about your fate and it used to be so nice and it should never have happened.”

He slowed his pace, grasped Karl’s arm, clamped it without looking at Karl, his face was tense, he pulled Karl along like a policeman with a thief: “And you feel no shame, you bad fellow, running your mouth off in my presence. They have you by the ears, you, and you whinge away with your stupid moaning. But you have your room and your kitchen, don’t you, so as far as that goes everything’s hunky-dory, no? You took a look at that refuse bin, are you worth more than those people? Tell me, look me in the eyes: are you worth more?” The expression with which he now transfixed Karl was dreadful, murderous.

Karl whispered: "No."

"More only means knowing more and acting on it. But you go to sleep beneath your house blessing. They'll have all of you, my lad. They'll wrap you up tight together with your mother and your brother and your sister. Oh, they always know how to steal away all your good sense. Those monsters. I tell you this because you're a dummy and yet you understand a little of what I'm saying. Tomorrow you won't understand me at all."

After a while, calmer now, he put his hand under Karl's arm. Karl could breathe again. They strolled along the kerb. "What are they doing to you, Karl? Your family, your so-called family? Have you ever thought about it? You want to help your mother and your brother, fine, but how? Hey? The only thing you can do is grab the stick they hold out to you. So today or tomorrow, hup onto the treadmill until you've become one of them and you're the one wearing the boots. Then you'll have made it. Let me be clear, my lad: we – myself and some others – we're at war with them! Do you understand, or don't you? You have a notion to go along with them, you'll become a traitor. Look me in the eye. Do you want to be my enemy? Do you?"

"No."

"Then give up your stupid daydreams. That's first. They're planted by those others to take you for a ride. Oh those swindlers. If only we could expose their wickedness. Enough to make you weep. When you see how they keep themselves in the saddle with the help of their own enemies whose brains they've ripped out. So tell me where you want to go. Tell me now."

"But I want to stay with you, of course."

"Come then. But you can't stay over there. You can't stay at home. You go with me into the battle, and I tell you: *no mercy will be shown*. Well then. Go now. I've no time."

He squeezed Karl's hand. "We'll meet again soon, Karl. I'll call you."

UNFORGETTABLE DAYS

That conversation took place in broad daylight. It had begun so splendidly in the eatery, they'd never been so close, he'd never before been so happily affected by the sight, by the nearness of another person, not even of the mother. And now – he wandered ice-cold down an unknown street, was oblivious of the street, insensible of the warm gentle breeze. He had no ground beneath his feet. To find himself he said softly the word Mother, Mother. But not even that provided a crutch. A great misfortune had fallen upon him. All thought was blotted out. And when he had carried his distraught body helplessly for an hour down some street or other, he found that, like a bird fallen from the nest, he was close to home, and went up the stairs.

It was good that only Erich was there, chatting to him he could find his voice again. But still he cannot have been entirely himself, for Erich kept giving him indignant smacks: silly, why are you growling, you're not a bear. He groaned. The mother would

surely find him out. And he actually hoped she would, because he wanted to go into battle, wanted something to fight, wanted something to batter himself against so as to feel his feet under him and his head and shoulders in their proper place. And when the mother came home – these days she seldom wears the veil, because of the heat, she says, and it's not so usual in the big city, but now and then she'll put it on anyway even though they tell her it's really unusually hot – Erich welcomed her by saying: "Karl's grumbly like a bear." Which at first she assumed referred to a game they'd been playing. But then when Karl denied it and Erich insisted, she pricked up her ears. And as she sat with Erich in the other room helping with his schoolwork while Karl sat in the kitchen, she too heard Karl groaning. Then he seemed to notice, and sought to camouflage it by clearing his throat.

She went to ask him what was wrong. He mentioned a scratchy throat. After a while he started up again. Erich laughed: "See, Karl's growling!" She fobbed him off: Karl has a sore throat. Not until after supper, when Erich was playing by his bed before going to sleep, did she confront the older boy in the kitchen. As the conversation proceeded, the little boy playing with his broken car and the blanket kept quiet as a mouse; tonight he would go to sleep late. Neither noticed how the delicate child – these days he only occasionally succumbed to terrified fits of screaming – how now and then he ceased his play and listened through the open door. Later that night he screamed again, so dreadfully that the mother kept him with her on her mattress for half an hour until he went back to sleep.

Karl, her son, sat close beside her at the kitchen table, and in incomprehensible agitation presented her with a load of confused nonsense. Paul's my friend, and of course you know him. He told me where all misfortune comes from, including ours. He says it's all the fault of the rich. Karl wandered incoherently with emphatic hints and much repetition, employing turns of phrase that Paul must have used but which sounded alien on his lips, here with the mother, phrases about whips with both ends, and other things. She could tell at once what came from him and what from that other boy, Paul. So I was right about Paul, that's a dangerous fellow. Worse than girls. The phrases themselves she understood well enough.

She bit her tongue as she listened, she needed no reminding of those bad weeks. If anyone had mentioned such things to her before the suicidal night, when she was still running around like a hunted deer, she would have expressed fierce agreement. Giving vent to her despair, she would have denounced the world in much the same terms. She too would have let loose on those others – the hard-hearted, the cruel – with blazing torches. Dreadfully true words, true yesterday, true today, true always. So Paul knows how to take away my Karl. But he must not. What business of Paul's is our poverty, it's my own misfortune, I'll come through well enough. Nervously she pooh-poohed what Karl was saying. She was shaking. She whispered to him, casting off all pretence: "And this is supposed to be my lifesaver?"

He kissed her hand, kept hold of it, squeezed it and said nothing more for a while. Then he spoke up again, but felt he never hit the right note, the mother's right – but then she's not. What she said was good, and yet it failed to soothe him. Something was keeping

itself hidden. Still, he felt better, that awful strange feeling all around his body faded; if only it won't return. What he said sounded so false that in the end they both burst out laughing. "Oh yes," she sang, "the world's full of misery and people are wicked, and we poor devils who think we're lucky just to have a roof over our heads want to bring improvement to Mankind. Others have tried. We'll be content just to stay alive."

He nodded. She went on: "Not a good friend, that, the boy who picked out my eldest son! Putting you in such a state, for nothing and again nothing! Don't you see?"

While he sat beside her, he could see it clearly.

Then it was dark, and they all went to bed. She pondered intently, in fear and loathing, what she might do to that boy. She can't chase him away. She can't constantly monitor her son. But it must not go on like this. A decision must be made about Karl's future. The only option was furniture making, under Uncle. How difficult it always was to deal with her brother. He kept throwing her marriage, her husband, her former way of life in her face. When she complained to him of Karl's activity as a dogsbody in the markets, he expressed hearty approval, in a kind of retaliation. But it must not come to that. After what she'd heard today, it most definitely must not. She herself planned to earn something, maybe rent out a room. But first to make sure of Karl. And always her loathing of Paul, plotting to take her son.

Karl lay with eyes wide open. He felt like a traitor. The mother – she belonged to those others.

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A few days later, as he was climbing back up to the apartment one morning – his vegetable woman wouldn't need him till afternoon – there just ahead of him were two ladies tripping nimbly up the stairs. They were elegantly attired in light summer dresses, high heels, their scent filled the staircase. He was taken aback when they stopped outside his own door, and rang. He stepped closer, hesitated. But he was bewildered and started back when the bigger of the ladies, a strapping person with wonderfully blue eyes and a lovely complexion, rustled towards him as soon as he appeared on the landing, laid a hand on his shoulder, and whispered: "Open up."

"Who – "

She winked. Good God, it's Paul! Karl unlocked with jittery fingers.

The kitchen was on the right, he led them in there straight away, just to get them off the landing. "Lock the door," Paul whispered. Karl did so. When he came back they were both sitting there, one on the stool, the other on the kitchen table, removing shoes and stockings. Gloves and wigs already lay on the table. Neither Paul nor his friend paused their activity. Flimsy stockings slid to the floor.

"Your mother's not here, or -?"

"N-no," Karl stammered, closing the kitchen door. They continued with their business. Paul laughed at Karl from his perch on the table. "Why are you standing there, Karl?"

Never seen a man's legs before? Lucky your mum's not here, she'd smother us in compliments. But why are you here, actually?"

"She doesn't need me till afternoon."

"Meanwhile you're playing nursemaid." Paul turned to his companion, who was already standing there in trousers and jacket – they'd concealed these under their dresses: "Fact is, Karl has a little brother."

"So do I," the other man rumbled, "but childminding's not my profession, not by any means." After a pause he added: "Lord, if we had a place like this!"

In their handbags they had plimsolls, and put them on.

"What you see here, Karl, stays between us. Your mother hasn't seen us, and so you're to say nothing. Just so you know, we haven't murdered anyone, and haven't stolen anything. We've been doing a job for one of our lot, and fingers crossed it's gone well."

"Fingers crossed," rumbled the other with the deep voice, a thickset fellow in his twenties, "shame that my moustache had to believe it."

Rage swept through Karl as he stood there. Already they were carefully wrapping up the flimsy garments and shoes, he had to run around finding paper and string, they wrapped the wigs separately. He stood like a bumpkin, he was nothing, they laughed at him. He watched them at work, heard them speak, they whispered when they wanted to keep something from him. One was his friend, the other had an open honest worker's face that he found likable. And he's not included, and they whisper while he looks on.

Then he felt ashamed. Their work is also his, they can't exclude him.

A jolt went through him. In a flash it was all better. I am not an idiot. I am not a little child, they must not think me one, even if I have my room and still live with Mother. And now, his bewilderment overcome, he plunged into the affair with angry zeal. "But surely you're not going to carry that lot down the street, all those parcels? Leave the parcels here. Then go one by one to the second courtyard, there's a huge cellar, you can't get lost, it leads to the next building, I'll show you, just wait a moment."

They liked this. Eventually Karl had a market bag to hold the parcels and a net for the wigs, and led them down. They separated with mute handshakes.

The two youths had visited an elderly prisoner disguised as his bride and sister, in the same prison that had just received the recently arrested and very vulnerable terror suspects. The prisoner, a trusty, had passed to them a coded message from the conspirators' cell to which the two youths belonged. The game was not yet over, they were to provide him within a few days with the decipherment key.

This brief encounter in Karl's apartment led to a shift in his thinking. The mother never learned of the visit. Now when she observed Karl he was lively, alert. She saw a good son, she can rely on him. Her recent conversation with her brother about Karl's apprenticeship showed good progress: she had managed to make an accomplice of her fat sister in law. But Karl now set aside all doubts; the danger, the actions of the two young

men, were more persuasive than Paul's words. He felt: this is my path. How gladly he would have joined them on their second visit to the prison in some capacity; but they couldn't use him, someone might remember the faces of the first visitors.

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When they learned that the decipherment key had reached the terror suspects and there would be an unavoidable wait, today being Sunday, the three of them took a rowing boat out on a suburban lake. All around were the fancy launches and sailboats of the well-to-do, crowded pleasure steamers with music swished past, they enjoyed the rowing, stretched out on grass. They chatted about all kinds of things. Now at last Karl learned something more. They spoke of the poor, of rich industrialists, of workers. The stocky youth, Gustav, declared: "Let them badmouth us. To join a party you need big brains. And poor devils like us don't have 'em. So you have to go back to school. And you have to know who said this and who wrote that, and when you've learned it all you still know nothing, because the clever dicks don't all agree. Our sort can't get tangled in that. Until they've sorted out what's right, we're as good as dead."

Now Paul – beside him Karl lay unmindful of mother and brother, enjoying the trees, so happy to be with his friends – now Paul flung his arms merrily in the air and mocked in his harshly domineering lieutenant-style voice: "It is no simple matter to be done with the high and mighty. I have had dealings with priests, they are no different. You think you must know your own business better than some priest with his prayers and his rosary and his saints. Easier to waltz in than waltz out. You say the world looks so lousy, some eat until they burst, others go hungry, swindlers, profiteers and men of violence sit in their villas and palaces, and the little person has to pray that it never changes. Yes, he nods, and makes a sad face, that's how it is, it's bad, it's very bad. And then his fat sausage chin droops to his chest and he looks like he's in despair. In fact he's digesting his dinner. Then you say something must be done, something must happen. He nods, nods, keeps nodding, makes a serious face and whispers how right you are, how right, and gives you his hand. But even that's not enough, and you say something, you demand a wider franchise, give workers in their factories and in city government the right to vote. The freedom to run around like puppies is no use to us, we need to sort things out. Even if we can't overturn all that stuff at once, we can at least try to avert the worst."

The stocky youth lifted his head and growled, frowning: "You're a fine one, sitting on the fence."

"It's just to sniff them out."

The stocky youth insisted: "Then best say nothing at all to that sort."

Paul laughed: "Well, how would he respond? He already hates phrases like factory, city government, right to vote. He wrinkles up his nose, shakes his little head and whispers: I know nothing about that, best leave aside such specialised topics. He latches onto the word freedom that you let slip, and says he agrees one hundred percent, more freedom, people must be given much more freedom. He affirms it across the board. Then he starts

to niggle: what sort of freedom do you mean? You say, those in enterprises, or on military service. His face is still friendly, totally one heart and one soul, he waits for you to go on, then he scratches his very learned head and mumbles: Well, that won't be enough. And there, young friend and roof tiler, you find yourself back at the beginning. Once you've gained these freedoms, and there's no doubt they are freedoms, very necessary, he spreads it thick as you like, because it costs him nothing, and loads of new oppressions pop up from the other side, and you soon realise you have to proceed differently, more decisively, on a deeper more extensive scale."

"Decisively?" the stocky youth asked.

"Yes, he says, you have to conduct the struggle against oppression all the way down the line. And for that you have to know where the oppression actually comes from, where's the source of the evil, so as to leap on it right away and put an end to it once and for all."

"I see," the stocky youth yawned, "it's the Fall, Eve giving Adam the apple."

"That's it. And the result is we must all suffer. And that's why we run around like puppy dogs and the big boss has no alternative but to trim seven pfennigs from the worker's pay, and if he really means business – meaning his own – better eight or nine."

"Now listen, youngster," the stocky youth exclaimed, sitting resolutely upright and turning to Karl, "you've only just started sniffing around here, but you need to know right off: we don't engage in big debates. You're either with us or against us. You have to know what class you belong to, and who's the class enemy. Whoever is your enemy, that's the one you fight. By whatever means. Whatever happens you stick by your people."

"And what about the law, Gustav. You tell him."

"They have their law. We have ours. To each his own."

Paul clapped Karl on the back. "So, Karl. And now we'll snooze for half an hour."

The lake spread before them like a badly hemmed ribbon, until it opened out over there where the tower stood. Walkers moved among clusters of reeds along the bushy shore. Did it not look as it always had? No, the leaves had never glowed so green, the green had never revealed itself so frankly as the child of light. Was the sky now spread above the lake the same sky that lay heavily over the city, serving equally the weary plodding of the unemployed, the children at their hopscotch, those with full bellies taking their postprandial constitutional? White clouds chased across it, brisk breezes set them scudding and tore them apart, hurled them into blue depths where they disappeared, welded wisps into a ball to be smoothed and shredded in its turn. It was a dance, a breath, a life, you've seen it a thousand times but never felt it, never like this as if all the chivvying, chasing, gathering, shredding, vanishing was in your own breast, as if it was all happening to you, and it was you – this searing desire and cloud and blue sky and jagged treeline. Empty boats bobbed on the plashing ripples at the shore, bumped one another. This scene and this feeling were all at once so unutterably much. And suddenly trees rustled one after the other, and from bottom to top flickering lights glinted in them speaking to every little leaf, and above them swooping swallows piped.

Simultaneous desire and fulfilment, obscurity and knowing, dream and absolute reality. It was so densely true and at the same time translucent that Karl, as he felt it, could see his wringing hands and hear his complaining voice: Never again! And the hour sensed where he would remember this day by the lake on the grass with his friends, and where he would shudder and feel it a blessing never to have lived this day.

THE CALL

On such days, it seemed to him, he returned home older by years. The world seemed to have woken up. At home the mother regarded him with a mixture of pride and mistrust – was Paul behind it. But Karl denied everything. He mentioned some friend or other. He wasn't lying, he was far beyond the word "lie". For the mother, fine woman, belonged to the other side. She had one law, he another.

At their promenaders' park, Paul fixed Karl with his ironic gaze. Rain had fallen, Paul sat there tall in his yellow mackintosh, high-necked with a leather cap, hands in pockets, legs stretched before him. He wore the refined domineering face that had earned him the sobriquet "the lieutenant". This Paul, in whose footsteps Karl, feeling very close to him, now trod, opined as he studied his friend, who was now also a smoker: "You're a mystery to me. What do you actually know about poverty? Have you ever gone hungry for even a day because you'd earned nothing? Have you ever slept in the street? How long have you been poor, as you see it? Five months, call it a year. But it's poverty with a backstop. So what are you doing mixing with us?"

Karl knew this was coming. Paul turned to face him: "You're on an unsound footing, my friend. If ever you become really poor, you'll vanish in a puff of wind. You're an amateur, an onlooker. Take Gustav now. He's made of stone and iron. He cannot be otherwise. That's the point: when you can't be anything else. Are you sure it's not the same for you as for those others: if they ever really end up hungry, cold and shabbily treated, they forget all their fine words and go back to where they honestly belong, to where they have food and a place to sleep, meaning back to their people at home. They eat humble pie, it's good for the soul, especially for repentant sinners."

For a long time Karl had given no serious thought to home, the apartment was far from his mind even though he saw and spoke with the other two there every day. Something shivered in him as he opened his mouth to object and Paul stood there blinking so ironically. An icy hint of fear rose to his mouth, a memory of the day when Paul had spoken to him and pulled him away from home, conversation with the mother. He gave a brave smile: "No, Paul, that's not me."

Paul, still smiling, uttered the terrifying words: "Let's put it to the test."

So the struggle was still there, confronting him. The inward iciness had not melted. He tucked his feet in, Paul allowed him an arm on his shoulder, he nodded at the pleading in Karl's voice: "Not me, no, I'm not like that."

*

Karl went up the stairs. On the third floor he heard singing. He kept climbing. His mother was singing.

He stood on the empty landing surrounded by the four doors. She must be in the kitchen with Erich. No, the sound was farther away, she was in the other room. It was a nursery rhyme, a folk song she used to sing to Marie, but Erich enjoyed it too. The deep calm voice was hers. But when she sang there was still something severe about it. Karl turned pale, closed his eyes. He could see her sitting there. He felt his way backwards to the banister. Her voice was calm and even. So deep, strong, assured. And as she sang on and he clung to the banister, suddenly a dream from a few nights ago appeared before him: there was a woman, a strong heavy woman with enormous calves, did she have a head, what was her head like, he didn't know, but he could see the strong white shoulders and arms. And then there she stood, an ugly squelching apparition, on enormous pillars, not moving, but – he could see – it was not a woman. It was ... a man.

The voice was still singing. He fled downstairs, what's wrong with me, held tight to the banister, he was half-inclined to let himself fall, it's all coming back to haunt me, he felt sick, his mouth watered. Disgust, horror, shame. At the front door he again felt dizzy. The apparitions vanished as he looked about and breathed. The song still rang in his ears.

Then he clambered back up the stairs, to her. He's standing on the final flight and sad-eyed casts his mind at the door: to think there could be such a thing. He goes in. And she greets him amicably, takes not much notice of him, she's preparing the meal. His smile is twisted, absent. The test, the test, what will it be. He whispers: "The test."

The mother turns to him: "What test?" He asks: "Why?" Then gives a faltering explanation, something he has to try out tomorrow.

"Something to eat?" she asks; no, to haul away, whether he'll be able to haul it. She's puzzled, studies him attentively, put food in front of him. This was like his recent growling. What was he thinking of? She studied him. This is how I studied my husband, wondering what's he up to, what lies there hidden, what is he planning. People! You always have to sit and keep a furtive eye on them. Is it Paul, or a girl? But this one is not her husband. With this one she won't be so defenceless, or – Heaven forbid – throw herself at him. She had everything planned, Karl will find out in good time what he must do, what path he must follow, just let him enjoy his days off, work will come soon enough, then it's goodbye to all those thoughts. To work, my lad.

She sat facing him, and watched as he chewed distractedly. Real life, my boy. She studied him with a kind of cruel resolve.

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Karl had not long to wait for his test.

One night the mother was at home without him. It was a Saturday, he had mentioned a night excursion, a night march. But tonight, at his own insistence, his friends were taking him along to collect three prisoners as they made their escape. Paul had borrowed a vegetable cart, had it half loaded up in a nearby village. They hid the three among the

baskets as they turned out of an alley beside the prison, there were clothes for them to change into, they were carried into the city, to the market hall, where they unloaded.

For Karl, this was the first occasion since he came to the city when he could shine with a skill learned in the countryside. (He never dreamt back on the farm that this wholesome sober skill could be put to such strange use, but today he took pride in it.) He harnessed and fed the horse, and around four in the morning, accompanied only by Paul, returned the cart to the stable. The three fugitives had long since found their way to shelter in the city, where Gustav would look after them.

How proud Karl was of his role in this enterprise. Even the fact that the other two made no comment delighted him: it meant they accepted him as one of their own. The best, the strongest part, was the two brief interactions with the fugitives, first when they tumbled headlong into the cart, and then the way they slipped unnoticed through the bustle at the market. They had turned in the distance to look briefly back at the young carter, those strong plain men, they knew their way, the proper way, and he had helped them. Beneath the harsh glare of lights, the jumble of baskets and porters, they vanished unobserved. So brave. The image remained with him. It was a jolt that penetrated his inmost being.

The end came horribly soon. Warm September was almost over. The streets still had their summer look, crowds were out till late at night, this year the summer seemed never to end. Birdcages still hung at the windows of common folk, fiddlers loitered outside eating places, waited for tables to fill so that something might fall their way too; the sky spread its pink glow over the city; the gable roofs of elegant buildings soared black and challenging; and gazed like Victory Arches menacingly down on the humble crowds below: just you try to rise against us!

Karl now had regular work with his butcher woman. There had been no sign of Paul for days and days, but he noticed something funny about the questions asked by the youths and girls of the gang, who for sure could never fake innocence: what's Paul up to, don't you know where he is, you won't see your darling boy for a long while yet. It seemed he had been arrested. Karl never had a moment's fear for himself. But he was seized by a furious agitation, he would, he must do something, must establish contact with Paul, where can he find out. He had not long to wait.

After waiting in vain in their usual square and the block where Paul lived across from the homeless shelter, he noticed in the dark near his apartment a girl who must be a streetwalker, pacing up and down. At once he had an idea that the police were watching. But the girl had already noticed him, made little head movements at him, turned onto a side alley. Karl stood irresolute, what's happening, suddenly a suspicion, a recent memory, stirred, it swept over him in a wave of heat: can this be Paul? She stood in an entry, he strolled past. Ah, that ironic smile, the graceful inviting hand gesture. He stopped beside her. It was Paul. They had a whispered conversation in the dark entry.

"You already know they're on our tail. I've had to leave my room. They got there too late. No need for you to worry, kiddo. All we did was invite you to our meetings, nobody

knows anything more about you, you can depend on me and Gustav. Gustav is already away. They've arrested two of ours. Who's to blame? Take note: it's always a girl. The one who lent Gustav her clothes. Some other fellow was prettier than Gustav, and earned something for it from the police."

They stood side by side. Karl was trembling. He was trembling for Paul. How can he stand here with me, so calm, his fine slightly mocking face, as if it's nothing to do with him. In a woman's light clothing. Paul, with a simper, offered him an arm, whispered: "People coming, let's play lovers." Two men came out of the building, smoking, loud voices, went past the tenderly embracing couple without a glance. Karl had never embraced a woman. Now he inhaled close up the scent from the clothes, felt the soft fabric, and was holding – Paul. "But what's to be done with you, Paul?"

Paul hammed it up as a woman, whispered: "What's to be done with me, darling? But you know how we fade away so quickly without a man to protect us." Then his tone changed abruptly, he gripped Karl's shoulder and stared onto his eyes: "But you? You'll be staying here, won't you? Or what's your plan?"

Karl stammered: "I? Yes ... what."

"They're hunting for us. They look out for their own skins of course, they have the police, we don't have anyone. That means nothing. They chop off our heads. They'll chop off a thousand heads, one day we'll chop theirs off, not one of those criminals will be left standing. Because I tell you –" he gave Karl a shake, completely forgetting his womanly clothing, "they can't go on, not for ever, the vengeance will be all the greater! What I'll do now I don't know. They'll want to chop the heads off those two, we must see how to spring them. Even if it means blowing up half the city."

Karl hung on every word, was in a fever: "I'll come with you."

"You will find some money by tomorrow, doesn't matter who from, but on the quiet, you have relatives, and your mother has some."

"My God, Paul, she has almost nothing."

Paul squeezed his arm, eyes smouldering, for several moments unable to speak for anger: "You will take it. What's that you said, you'll come with us? Here's the test I told you to expect. Now say no."

"Oh Paul, don't be so harsh. Didn't I come to the prison with you? Didn't I?" His voice failed him.

"You going to blub?"

"Why must you be so rough? I shall come."

Paul let go, breathed out, wiped his brow. "So, tomorrow evening at nine, I'll be outside your building, across the street, I'll be on time. Stroke of nine, I'll wait five minutes. I'm a hiker with pole and rucksack. You be one too, if you can manage it. And the money! Don't forget! He grasped Karl's hand. But when he saw him there so dejected, he pulled him close and hugged him: "I didn't mean to upset you, lad."

“Paul, don’t abandon me. Please Paul, dear Paul, don’t ever do that.”

“Let me go.”

In the street, ten paces away, the young miss waved her white glove, and quickly faded from view.

FLIGHT

Karl, in the dark entry, pulled himself together. The street, the same one Paul had gone down, swallowed him. Paul was no longer in sight. A dull glow came from the occasional street light. And an awful tearing grief engulfed him, a grief that presaged dreadful griefs to come. Paul’s gone, I’ll never see him again, it’s all over now.

But tomorrow. Tomorrow? And although he kept saying to himself tomorrow, tomorrow, and again tomorrow, the dread and the awful grief remained. He was oblivious to the cracked paving underfoot. Tenement blocks, decaying slums cowering in the dark passed by unseen, the last breath of summer air played against his unfeeling throat. He stood outside his building. It was late, eleven already. There’s still one day, one whole day, less two hours, twenty hours, for six or eight of those I’ll be asleep, if I can sleep, twelve hours left. Twelve whole hours to sit and wait for him. Twelve hours left to do it. Then I’ll go with him. I will go with him. I won’t stay here, not ever. If they’re after him and the others, they can come after me as well.

He opened the door quietly and thought: it’s the last time. Up he went. No echo came to his ears of the mother’s cries as she was carried down that time, The stairs were alien, stifling, hot, dark. Upstairs was only silence. He crept silently into bed, fell fast asleep.

Day already. The mother smiled at him, he had slept well, Erich was already washed and dressed, had already drunk his milk, she helped him on with his satchel. She smiled, Erich offered his little hand. Out they went, closed the door behind them.

Good, he told himself, a good day, I have enough time. As he drank his coffee alone in the apartment and the hours stretched out ahead, he grew uneasy. Shall I go to the market, what’s to do at the market, all that’s over now, today’s my last day here. He looked through the windowpane down onto the street, the gloomy tenement blocks opposite, I’m done with you. Up from the street came the sinister reminder: money. Mother’s money, I must look for it, somewhere in this room or the kitchen, she withdrew it all, must have it hidden somewhere. He sat on the unmade bed. I’ll look later, there’s still time, plenty of time. And he brooded: take all her money, how will she manage, and Erich, she’s already lost everything, and I shan’t be giving her anything more. Quickly he dressed, I must hurry, look for it, and then away.

He began to rummage in the room, the washing closet, wardrobe, behind the mirror, on top of the mirror, under the beds, behind the pictures. After her money. After the mother’s money. It was hard work. He was drenched in sweat. Now the kitchen. She sleeps here. There weren’t many things, horrified he saw the possibilities dwindle, he

searched for the money, lifted plates and bowls in the crockery cupboard, emptied the cupboard below, what a mess she keeps here, little boxes, big boxes, letters, Father's handwriting, and these wretched papers she was always dragging around, pictures of Father, of all of us, a little box with Marie written on it, what's this, an old rubber dummy, a lock of blonde hair, and wrapped in tissue paper a silver necklace with a big crucifix, Mother often wore it, more photographs, papers. Where's the money, where does she hide it? Did she take it with her, in her handbag? But surely she won't have it on her as she takes Erich to school. Nothing more in the cupboard. Look under it. Behind it. He struck matches, found a stick, poked around under the cupboard. Nothing. Maybe she's tucked it away behind the curtains, or in the passage. He checked the other room, the passage. How he sweated! It was all so shameful. The money's not just hers alone but for all of us, how come I don't know where she keeps it? If she really had passed away that night in the kitchen, we'd have been left with nothing. Ah, maybe in her mattress, back to the kitchen, inspect the mattress, did she sew it in, maybe in her other clothes.

There in the wardrobe hung her heavy black clothes, the widow's veil a gloomy sight, he was embarrassed, felt them over quickly, quickly closed the wardrobe door, searched under it, then he paced about, brushed himself down, wiped his sweaty neck, washed his hands, his trousers were dirty from kneeling and lying, he dusted them off. What now, no money, how can he find some. I need it, I need it.

He pulled on his jacket and ran down to the street. He sauntered past Uncle's place, returned a couple of times, then he had an idea. He ran to the market, won't steal, I'm too clumsy, but there where the youths gather he met the girl who had indulged in horseplay at the meeting in the "hotel", the captain's girlfriend, she was very haughty; when he asked where he might find him she jabbed a finger at his forehead and stuck out her tongue. I'm out of luck, everything's closing in on me, weather's so nice, people are so happy, this morning it was such a lovely day. Ran to another square, sat on a bench, and whiled away the noon hours among children and unemployed men. He was woken by a tussle in progress nearby, someone accused of stealing from people on the benches. "He was targeting that woman." Karl leapt up alarmed, felt his pockets, no, the purse is still there. On he went. He hurried along for hours, until how late is it, gone three, he noticed his watch chain dangling, but the watch was there, the man had tried to steal from him too. He had tears in his eyes, kept slouching, bought a couple of rolls. And as it began to grow dark he received another jolt, it was his feet, they were cleverer than him, they'd brought him back home. He climbed up dejected. I must have money, must have money. Mother will be there now, I'll tell her, she'll give it to me, not much, as much as she can. Oh if only she'll give me some, if she gives me some how nice it'll be.

The landing, normally so noisy, was quiet. He stood at the door, not ready to unlock. Mother, will you let me go? I'll be so grateful if you do. Let me go. I must get away. I'm going with Paul and the others. What we'll do I don't know, but let me go. We won't do anything bad. All that matters is, you must be strong. Mother, can you do this?

He opened the door. It was dark. He listened. No one there. She's with Erich again, at Marie's. He went into the room, made light. There, what a shock, the wardrobe door's

open. Did I leave it open? But I think, I really think I closed it. Uneasy, doubtful, he closed it. He went into the kitchen, a match flickered in his hand. And there, bent over the table – the mother, head on the table, not moving. He dropped the match, hurried across to her, grabbed her by the shoulders. Now she moved, groaned. He jumped up on the stool, ignited the gaslight, went to her, tried to read her face. She wouldn't sit up, shook her head on the tabletop, amid her groans he made out: "Stolen, Karl, all gone, our money's all gone." She lifted her desolate head, her face was swollen, hair fell over it. "Now that's gone, that too. The last we had, Karl."

He looked around, had no idea what had happened here. "Where was it?" She pointed to the bottom cupboard, where he had searched. "What did it look like?"

"A yellow envelope."

He recalled holding a yellow envelope. The cupboard doors were open, half the contents scattered. Karl knelt and searched, and half a minute later had the yellow envelope in his shaking hands. Her back was turned, he could easily have pocketed it, the thought never entered his head. As soon as he had the envelope he cried: "Is this it?" And she turns around on her chair, looks, stands, takes it from him as he holds it out to her, raises both arms high, her face radiant with joy, and then when he stands up she flings herself at him, hugs and squeezes and kisses him, and laughs and cries: "However did you find it, I searched and searched, your hand must be blessed, oh I'm so happy, so happy." And she presses him to her breast and strokes his hair. Then she draws herself up, stretches as if emerging from a deep sleep: "Karl, I almost believed the good Lord had laid a curse on us for the rest of our lives."

He went to tidy the mess on the floor. But she held him back. She was so cheerful, began to prepare supper, today it must be a hot meal, she's so hungry, Erich's with Marie, maybe she'll fetch him back later, maybe she'll leave him there with Auntie, Marie will be so happy to have Erich sleep in her room, and today's Saturday, so no school tomorrow. She busied herself laying the table for the two of them, he lied about what he'd been doing, she said: "Today you don't give me anything, keep it all for yourself. Alas, Karl, I can't offer a finder's reward." Only after she had cleared the table and was about to attend to the papers and boxes on the floor did she notice his tense distraught face. He had said so little, up till now only she had spoken. In her joy she simply hadn't noticed. Finding the money had not made him happy, maybe she had exposed a weakness with her ridiculous theft nonsense. Then she set up a conversation, and old scars reopened. There in the kitchen, the table lit by the paraffin lamp Uncle had given them to replace the horrible candle-end in a bottle when they had their first serious talk in this room. She listened to the singing of the wick. Tentatively she apologised for the shock she'd given him, she had needed to take out a small amount, the envelope normally lay right at the bottom in the little wooden box and she didn't find it there, really everything was upside down, you really could believe someone tried to steal from us, but maybe I just misplaced it, sometimes your thoughts can be such a jumble.

Be strong now, be strong, no false beginnings, oh why is this happening to me, why did I have to find her here.

“Everything upside down, Mother? I ought to tell you, I had a look in there.” There, I’ve said it. She leaned back. “I was – looking for my papers. I want to go hiking. It’s all over with my market woman. I’m not earning.”

“And?”

“I looked in there. I was in a hurry, really this is no use.”

“What do you mean, Karl? I don’t understand, why were you in such a hurry, you must offer me some explanation, Karl. Are you listening?”

“I have to go away.”

“Where to?” – “Hiking.”

“Alone?” – “No.”

“Who with?” Karl said nothing. “With Paul?” Karl nodded.

“I knew it. And what were your plans, how would you live out on the road, were you going to beg?”

“I was going to ask you for money.”

Now it was out in the open. They stood up. She leaned against the stove. She shook herself, forced a laugh. “You go behind my back, rummage in my things, turn everything upside down, and want to go away. You’re the oldest, aren’t you concerned for what would become of all of us here, Erich, Marie and me, and on top of that you want money from me?” I stood like this once before – anger rose up in her – the other one, the big one, he came in, he raged, he’s going to leave us, I handed over everything, he plunged us into misery, this is his son, how awful, his actual son, in the flesh, I could strangle him.

She screamed: “Answer me! Why are you cringing? Why can’t you look me in the eye? Haven’t you at least enough decency to explain what you really want? You keep running around with that scoundrel, that seducer, I shall set the police on him.”

“It’s no use, Mother, us talking here. I will go away, I must go away, you have to give me something. Give me what you can, give it me, you won’t go under, there’s still Uncle.”

“If it’s no use, my fine fellow, why are you here talking to me? There’s the envelope, why don’t you just steal it, why don’t you just come up here with your partner in crime, the way they do in this city, and whack me on the head, and there, you have your money.”

Such an unlucky day, I had the money in my hand, now I’m caught in the trap.

She berated him from her place by the cupboard: “And what will you get up to on the road? What rascally nonsense. Didn’t you see enough of it back home, how they knocked at the door, frozen, hungry, and were glad to spend a night in our barn, and the policeman moved them on when they wanted to stay? Aren’t you ashamed?”

“I won’t stay here any longer, Mother. Don’t get worked up, I’m not angry with you. Because we’re not at home any more, we lost everything, and you know those few pfennigs we still have aren’t any help. If I go begging, you must as well. But, but – ” (He felt around for weapons, but can I really leave Mother like this, what can I say to her, I’m caught in a trap). “Mother, I’m no longer a child, we’re living in misery here, you’d like to get out, you’d like a nice apartment and a kitchen and everything, and I want no more of this. I’ve seen nice apartments from the other side, you pointed them out to me, lovely streets and gawping at the lovely shops, and you were harried as well with your papers and nobody helped us and you know it and then you knew nothing else. I’m still young and I can try something else, I don’t yet know what, but I don’t want to rot away here.”

She listened, breathless: “So, what do you want?”

From the table he studied her more closely: “I don’t want to be common and a scoundrel, I am a little bit already, I’ve noticed, there’s no help for it, but in the end it’s hard to know any better. Yes, Paul showed me, he’s not bad, he’s the best, the best of everyone I’ve come across out there. And he wants to come with me, he wants to take me with him, Mother, and after what’s happened between us two you say if it’s not better than us sitting here among those villains who show no mercy, the bloodsuckers, and becoming the same as them.”

She wavered: “But this is not you talking, Karl, you’re not like that, it’s your Paul who told you that.”

“You too, Mother.”

She sat down, heaved a sigh. “So that’s why you want to leave me. If only you’d left me lying there, Karl. And you’re my child, my eldest, and you’re supposed to protect us, and you put on your cap and go on your way.”

I’m caught in the trap, in the trap, talking’s no use. “I’m not abandoning you, Mother. I have to go, I know what we’ve been through, you must give me some credit. What I’m going to do I’m doing for you too.”

Oh, how she relished this, so he’s better than the father, he’s not off to seek excitement. She had never noticed how grown up her son was. How much more now she wanted not to lose him! And talking had lifted him out of his sullenness, his feelings for his mother had revived, but so too his love for Paul, and this, he felt, made him indomitable. Indom-it-able.

They talked and talked. She prowled around him like a hunter the prey. Still he sits there, she’s still here, he still hasn’t gone, she hasn’t lost him yet, her hour has come. The conversation proceeded in fits and starts, sometimes fitful progress, and reruns of old arguments. He kept needling: “I need money, Mother.” And she with the same old response: “What will you do with it?” – thinking to divert him onto a track where she can weaken him. But time moves on. Above the stove was a little alarm clock, Karl kept glancing at it, the mother followed his glance, he was growing ever more uneasy, anxious, stood up, and she knew: he means to leave at nine.

“What’s the matter with you, Karl? You’re worrying me, you must be ill.”

“I’m not ill. I must go down soon. Give me something, Mother, just a little, go on, do.”

“And you’ll go right now, not even say bye-bye to Erich and Marie, and in those clothes.”

“They’re all the clothes I need.”

He went from the kitchen into the other room, opened the window, looked down. The dour looming tenement block, pale streetlights, few people about. She’s just behind him, drat, Paul will be waiting down there. She had nothing more to say, her brain was empty, despairing, she was with him in the room and did the first thing that came into her head, she locked the door, slid the key under Erich’s blanket. Now someone came along the street, had a heavy load, she too heard the strong regular footsteps, they stopped. Karl stretched his arm out, waved, stepped back, took his mother’s hands, his face joyful, wild, eager, insistent: “He’s down there, Mother, we’re going. Well?”

She gripped his wrists: “I won’t let you go.”

“Nonsense.”

“No, Karl, I will not let you go.”

“Then I’ll go without the money.” He pulled free, ran to the door, tugged at the handle: “The door’s jammed! The door’s jammed, Mother.”

She stood quietly by the wall. “I know.”

“What? Did you lock it? Give me the key, Mother!”

“No.”

“Where did you put the key, Mother, stop the nonsense, stop playing games.” He went to her, felt in her hands. “Where did you put the key, for God’s sake where is it?”

“I don’t know, my boy.”

He faced her, filled with dread and horror: “I must go away, Mother, I must.” He cried out, ran to the window, a quick glance, he’s there, in the same spot. Karl begged: “Open it, open it.” He pounded on the door, hurled himself at it. The mother, uneasy: “Boy, the neighbours will come.”

“I must leave.” He leaned against the door, whimpered. “It’s not possible, Mother, not letting me leave. You’re not doing right by me, it’s not right, it’s a crime.” So tense, so agitated, will he hit me, will he beat me to death, she felt for his hands as he stood gasping.

Then he dashed across to the window again. He leaned out, looked left, looked right, came back deathly pale, dribble on his chin. “He’s gone.” His eyes were vacant, mad. He snorted like a bull at the door. “Open up, Mother.”

A muffled scream as he flung himself down on the floor. When he leapt up again she had to pull him back from the window, it seemed he might jump. She managed to close the window. She pulled him over to Erich’s bed, he fell onto it face down.

He whimpered, howled, stuffed a fist in his mouth. "He's gone, he's gone."

The mother sat at the foot of the bed. "Yes, my boy, he's gone."

When he turned over and sat up, he said: "It's all your fault."

He flinched when she touched him. "Can't I give you a hug, Karl?"

"It's all your fault."

She stood, limped to the table, sat down. Oh that I was ever born. But as she rested her head on the table and he kept groaning, she grew calmer. Now she can relax. She breathed, now it's good, now it's done. This time, this time, I have won.

END OF PART 1

Part Two

Boom Time

FIFTEEN YEARS LATER

An endless stream of vehicles pulled up, a few private cars, lots of taxis, even the odd humble rattling horse-droshky. A fine drizzle was falling. Outside the modern five-storey block – the open door revealed a staircase with bouquets and a blue carpet – two bareheaded frock-coated lackeys hired for the day held big umbrellas, stood waiting. When a car rolled up and stopped, they leapt from their place of ambush down to the kerb and took under their wing the formally-attired but somewhat crumpled passengers as they extricated themselves from the vehicle: respectable broad-shouldered men behind white fluffy women who carefully smoothed their frocks as they alighted, and despite the rain took time as they stepped along behind the lackeys under the enormous umbrellas to take in the admiring (or critical, as may be) faces of the crowds lining the path. Droshkies rattled up, spilled children – boys in sailor suits, little vain girls – birds whirling from a cage. In the doorway, safe from the rain, they turned and laughed at the crowd. Alighting from an automobile, a hippopotamus rolled along in a black Geneva gown with bands: his Reverence the Pastor. After two paces he gave a massive snort, the side of bacon he employed in lieu of a face flushed red as if his own two colossal legs had pushed the car all the way here. His face twisted to a semblance of a smile, he snatched the lackey's umbrella and stomped towards the flower-decked stairs, and all the onlookers knew he was heading, if not to an altar, then to a well-laden table.

A big brown limousine came to a halt, the chauffeur jumped out, ran around to where the umbrellas awaited their victims. Now here's something special! The crowds had seen lots of families, wedding guests whose jollity showed their determination to relish the occasion purely as passive onlookers. But the trio now emerging ponderously one by one from the coupé's dark interior were grave elderly figures, two women and a man, clearly not here for fun. They exuded an air of gloomy solemnity suggestive of judges, perhaps, or inquisitors come to attend a witch-burning, and the crowds reflexively shrank back to provide wider passage.

As soon as he was out of the car, the gaunt old man in frock coat and top hat offered each of the women a sharp elbow, one right, the other left, and thus armed, chin raised and the back of his head consequently burrowing into his neck, ploughed ahead, glaring daggers at the pathetic building suited for nothing more than living in, and at the inoffensive staircase. He had no need to chivvy the two women he was encumbered with, for they too stepped forth with homicidal resolve, and in this manner the venerable trio passed along the dumbstruck walkway towards the battleground. Given the broad extent of this advancing front, there was no room for servants alongside, so they took up the rear, well placed to catch the precarious stovepipe. Worthy though their intentions might be, the lamentable result was that the shiny topper collected every raindrop falling upon the two umbrellas. Only malice would see, when observing both the vanguard and the rear of this advance, a not unappealing symbol for the earthly progress of an inquisitor – and preferably of the whole bunch. And so, once this bustling trinity was swallowed by the hallway, it was pursued for a long while by laughter from the public, and also (oh Lord) from the hired help; for to them this heartwarming spectacle betokened justice,

reward and punishment in this world; and laughter still sounded as the main players stood despondent at the improvised cloakroom in the entrance lobby of the apartment upstairs, where the cloakroom lady, too busy for niceties, pointed out to the bareheaded gentleman the state of his top hat, for fear of a possible claim for damage. But the gentleman clearly set any such damage at naught, in view of the damage and bad luck he and his female companions were about to wreak upon the world.

Down below they had not long to wait for more entertainment. A fresh stratum of the population arrived, the military and civil service castes. The middle classes, artisans, businessmen had been more punctual. Anything uniformed allowed little time for observation, it leapt from the vehicle, rattled its sabre, adjusted its helmet or cap, and now nothing for it but to march ahead, shoulders back, so as to demonstrate flexibility and determination regardless of years. In such circumstances the attendant ladies had little chance to scoop up admiring glances, they rustled ethereally beneath the umbrellas, and only now and then could it be perceived that these officers and gentlemen too had their tender side, that they too suffered tiresome hours.

Just then came an "Ah!" For after all the freeloaders, spectators and functionaries, now came the victims. Beneath the misty drizzle, which even now had not abated, the wedding carriage rolled up, drawn by two white steeds. The lackeys stood ready for action by the house door – they had given the umbrellas a good shake. There's the carriage, the liveried postilion will allow no one else to display white gloves and with them open the carriage door in person. The opening yawned, the carriage offered up its contents, no sweetly smiling young couple, but first the bridegroom, kitted out in wedding finery, myrtle in the buttonhole, a strong elegant young man with a small brown sincere moustache. There was something blissfully assured in the poor sinner's expression, and the way he helped her out of the carriage – for a long time she was visible only as a white-clad arm – was really touching. It seemed she had a lot to sort out in there, and was adamant that she would not appear before the world until all this obscure business was in perfect order. And here she is, the bride in heavenly white, a being who experiences this state as something quite unnatural. Her face is slightly flushed and a little petulant, her movements those of a spirited creature. She stood peevishly, looked behind her until the liveried fellow had gathered up her train correctly. She glanced at the entrance, where two of the vain girls in white waited eagerly to take up the train. Then she grasped the man's arm, so long held at the ready, and away out of the horrid rain and into the building. The same gimlet eye on the bridesmaids, and as the front door closed and a harmonium sounded from above, they now had the staircase to negotiate, where step by step a boy and a girl were strewing flowers, a nerve-wracking business because the pair with the basket had to proceed backwards, and kept stumbling.

This is not the same staircase, Karl, that fifteen years ago you had to climb up and down every day, four tall flights, until you came to one of the five doors on your landing, a passage, a kitchen, one other room, walls of a tenement block outside the windows. Here now is Uncle's new residence. He does not rush at you in braces and does not fling the door open, still chewing, to find you there, a blubbing peasant lad who has just

handed in a dreadful note: "Dear Oskar, as I am no longer here, you will no doubt take in the two boys. I thank you and Lippchen for being so kind to Marie. Your grateful sister." Uncle stands, frock-coated like all the other gentlemen, at the door of the apartment which he has put at your disposal for your wedding, for today you will become a partner in his business. He stands on the landing with Auntie at his side, and watches as you advance, face glowing beside your bride, behind the two children who, to universal relief, have made it upstairs safely, and the bride has even stopped glaring around at her train. Uncle hobbles a few steps closer, for a moment she rests her face against his old grey visage. Karl and Uncle look each other in the eye, then a firm handshake.

The first hurdle has been surmounted. The harmonium keeps up its grunting grizzling, the bridal couple must now make it past the three personages delivered by the big brown limousine. Here come hugs, and everything that is female weeps. Abruptly, as if out of patience with what she has just had to endure, the bride makes for one of the women, a cosily plump creature who looks not at all like her, and whose smile has a certain commiserating sincerity. This is her mother. The bride spends an inordinate length of time in her arms, on both sides the emotion seems immense. Then the bride is passed along to the gentleman, he of the damaged topper, who has all the while been holding himself available, and this is the father, though she has seldom noticed. As they hug they think: this has never happened before, presumably it will be a while before it happens again, and should we be feeling something? But before they achieve clarity they must part, for social reasons.

Beside him, the embrace between Karl and his mother has taken place. The mother is dressed in grey silk, and around her neck is the old silver chain with the crucifix that came into Karl's hand when he searched for money in the kitchen cupboard. It is a relic of their earliest times, from the period when she was growing sour at home with the sour husband and began to yearn for warmth and freedom. But this fellow here is all her work. With him she has achieved something. Today is her big day. Her dress is sombre, for hardly four years have passed since little Marie's death, which she still mourns. The mother hugs bridegroom Karl tight in her arms, not many tears, she is proud, and feels hard and assured as the arbiter of his fate. Her hair is abundant, though grey, her face is strongly elaborated though not unbenign, her eyes have a masculine gaze, you can see she fights for what is hers. Karl, her adversary, holds himself slightly bowed, he feels the pressure of her arms, he thinks of the ancient unforgettable hatred for her that rattles around in his depths, and how inconceivable, how incredible it is that everything has nevertheless turned out like this. For today he is leaving his mother's house, let us not talk of bygones, we are all sinners. As they unclench and stand hand in hand, her face is dimmed with tears, her head a little bowed. Yes, he thinks, a lot has happened, let us make peace. Then he strokes the hands and back of a pale puffily plump young man standing by himself casting a melancholy eye on the festive goings-on. This is Erich.

In the big salon with candelabra blazing in broad daylight – blinds have been lowered – the blue carpet is thick with twittering wedding guests weighed down with wedding poems, toasts, declamations solo and duo, a wedding newspaper, and an appetite. In their

midst the black hippopotamus rears up, the Pastor, he hasn't gone pop yet, as several of the younger guests have been hoping, he's good for a few more years.

Two camps occupy the salon, one military, one civilian. The weaponry-gleaming relations are from the bride's side, their wives and children are a multitude, with an exceptionally strong contingent of oversized daughters; little notice is taken of the civilian camp. The civilians are clearly of a lower order, mobilised by the Uncle, the Aunt and other family from the bridegroom's side, all beefy persons whose sons big and small cannot goggle enough at the exalted military. As the two glass doors are opened to the vestibule where the closest relatives of the bridal pair await, the Pastor waddles up, some children come forward, over their heads he stretches his paws until they are grasped by the bridal pair, thereby averting a peril to innocent heads. As the harmonium exerts itself to a heroic maximum (because the climax of the event – the taking of places at the festive table – is approaching, and on top of that it must shortly abdicate in favour of a small orchestra), the master of the house leads the way, wife on his arm, the knot of guests untangles itself, forms a line, and the twittering laughing wedding train heads for the mysteriously darkened dining room where scattered candles glow – like stars in a sky down from the smooth white ceiling, all along the mighty oval of the table amid flowers, glasses, plates, napkins, and on the walls between sideboards and pictures.

Framed by Uncle and Aunt the bridal pair takes its seat, parents and brother make camp by the stove, from the twin poles of the table, each occupied by Youth, merriment streams towards the happy couple. Whatever fate they may have suffered or are about to suffer, bridal pair, parents, relations feel liberated from it, and today they render unto the earth what is the earth's. They eat, drink, listen to the music, laugh.

Later, Karl and Julie, a lone couple on the salon's polished parquet, shall swing a leg to jubilant acclaim from the company. Uncle's car has been booked for six o'clock to take them to a hotel to change, and then on to the station for the honeymoon trip.

THE FAMILY GRINDS YOU DOWN

If you compare the Uncle of fifteen years ago to the present day, you can see, despite the new made-to-measure frock coat, what has happened to him in the interim: he has melted. The robust cantankerous man in his fifties has shrunk to a slightly unsteady sexagenarian with dreadfully deep furrows in his face, sores from his nose to the corners of his lips, and a jaundiced pallor. The figure, the cheeks, the uneasy glance behind the insecure pince-nez, show how much life has been hacked out of him.

But the strapping thirty year old who today plays the bridegroom gives nothing away. On the landing he was shocked when he offered his hand to Uncle; he hadn't seen him for several weeks. It led him to no self-reflection. Some things are visible, others invisible, some lie open to the light of day, others are buried away beneath strong muscles and bone, and enveloped in fat.

He is a graduate, to coin a phrase, of the school of life.

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After that calamitous evening, he was allowed to come and go once again. The mother was content to let Karl run off, she was sure of her hold, she just kept the money and his papers close by her. As she suspected, he went looking for Paul. He found none of the gang. All gone from the face of the earth. A girl saw him, held a hand to her mouth, whispered in his ear: "Looking for Paul? Better look out for yourself." Thumbed her nose and vanished.

During the several days Karl spent recklessly searching, behind his back a tragedy unfolded. The relationship between Paul and the gang was one not of friendship, but of cautious respect. Now some of the gang – older members including the leader – had come to the notice of the police following certain events. If they wished to avoid summary arrest, they had good reason to keep in with the authorities. The captain knew how grimly the whole world was hunting down the bombers and their associates; substantial rewards were offered for their capture. And here's Karl bumbling around without a clue – easy prey. The leader, a malicious strong-willed fellow, did now what was all too often done in such circles: he consulted with his confidants how to make the best of a bad business, who has the most damaging material on Karl, how to divide up the reward money. But, others remarked, that plan's pretty damn bold, of course Karl had tagged along with the activists, they've done a runner but might turn up again any day soon, and who can vouch for what would happen then? Their lives would all be on the line.

Tense, filled with longing, deeply wounded inside, Karl wanders here and there, vague reports have already reached the police, they keep the market under surveillance, grab this or that gang member, make sweeps of the casual labour. But suspicions don't coalesce, and then at one stroke the scent is totally lost. This was due to the death of the gang leader, whose body was found in the noisome slum district by a carter who came early one morning to fly-tip the kind of rubbish always strewn about there. The big lad lay surrounded by a bevy of the numerous dogs in the area, they were licking remnants of cake from a paper bag beside the body, and had pulled a big salami sausage from his pocket. Two girls were found who admitted they'd been there that evening with him and another man, who was at once apprehended and admitted to having taken a stroll there; they'd been about to go looking for fun when a group of strangers appeared, so they ran off. Nothing more could be gleaned. The police took no interest in the case, beatings with or without a fatal outcome were no novelty in this district.

In this way the gang, enlisting the help of some older men, had without any second thoughts brought the gang leader to book for endangering them all. This was Karl's salvation, though he never knew it. Before long he too vanished from the markets, there'd been too many whispered warnings: "Hop it, make yourself scarce!" He didn't disappear immediately, in his dark despairing mood he even hoped to be arrested – revenge on his mother. But nothing happened. He was saved for other purposes.

Unlike the gang leader felled by a blow from a cosh, Karl will be roasted slowly over a low fire.

Human lives are not all equally certain. Some, like little Marie, vanish young, like butterflies, others suffer an accident at work. Others have a long life before them, make it through like elephants, and it is their lot to be spared no consequence and to pay in full. However frugally they live, they must fork everything over with their last breath.

There came a day when the mother cursed herself for what she had done. Karl, offering no explanation, that morning paced back and forth for hours in the bedroom, fully dressed and groaning. It was the day when the newspapers reported that at dawn, in the courtyard of the central prison, the two most recently arrested terrorists had been beheaded. One belonged to the pair Karl helped to escape. Oh how they had launched themselves onto Paul's vegetable cart, they melted away unnoticed in the hubbub around the markets, glanced back at Karl from a distance, he saw those calm strapping men who knew their path, the proper path, and he had helped them! Now he's lost them, lost them forever and forever. They had vanished, those brave men, into the jumble of baskets and people, their glance had struck deep into his heart. He had not helped them.

They've lost their heads. And here I sit. Safe at home.

The mother had to flinch back from his savage tearstained snarling face. It was worse than any of the father's rages. The terrible scene aroused in her a dreadful anxiety that this Paul fellow might have been involved in those political matters reported in the newspapers. She kept questioning Karl; got nothing out of him. In the end he growled out a fierce No! Sacrificed!

Now that he was no longer allowed near the markets, it was a blessing for him and the mother when Uncle took him on as an apprentice in his factory. The mother paved the way. She had given little Marie away, the apartment was too small, and by handing the child over she had put her greedy brother under an obligation (the little girl's voice softened the atmosphere in his home, even though for a long time the child cried for her mummy and wouldn't go to sleep in a strange place). She campaigned for a place for Karl in her brother's furniture factory, Karl obtained the place, and his family, allied with the uncle, would rise again.

The mother then manoeuvred to quit the tiny apartment on the fourth floor and move into a three-bedroom second-floor apartment in the same street. Uncle provided the furniture, she used her own money for the rent, managed to let two rooms to sub-tenants, and found herself living in a less cramped space at a small profit. Her brother was one of those hard unsentimental men in her family who needed to be worked on slowly, but seeing the pleasure his wife took in playing with Marie, he did something for the mother. For many more long years they lived in straitened circumstances, reliant always on Uncle's charity.

SO MANY MEMORIES

The days of streets, squares, markets were over. The mother accompanied Karl to the factory on the first day, it wasn't far, and at the gate gave him a small silver ring his father

had worn. He recognised it. She looked at him, pleading: "You've landed on your feet, Karl. The worst is behind us." Without answering, gritting his teeth, he climbed the iron stairs, the ring in his pocket. At six that evening, as he stood at the gate, he remembered it, turned it, shoved it back in his pocket, that's Father, all that's dead now. Sacrificed, dreadfully sacrificed!

As the weeks passed and his eyes grew bright again, it happened that in the evenings after work his feet would unconsciously carry him not homewards but somewhere else, along streets he knew, to squares that greeted him again. When he found himself in these crowded streets – unchanged since he last passed that way – he sensed that an evil spirit had guided him here with malice aforethought. He was under a curse, an outcast, he ran home, fists clenched. But the next evening he was drawn there again. Where else can I go, he asked himself. For only there did he feel at home. And as he went on a little way, there's the market, it's still here, hasn't vanished from the earth, how incredible. The square was empty, he could stroll freely along the footpaths, planks lay about, once he'd helped construct booths. Assailed by a sudden spasm of grief, he sat on a bench beside women and prams, and couldn't believe it was all in the past, the Sunday rowing party, Paul, and now it's all hopeless, hopeless, it's all over! Why did Paul go, why didn't he leave some sign? Oh, if only he turns up one day dressed in girl's clothes, or whatever! Here I sit, waiting for you. You can't push me away. What's to become of me. And he took pity on himself, his young body trembled, he wept furious tears of longing for his friend.

Every evening a trek through the streets to north and east, his home territory. And only now did it open its inmost self to him, to the gloomy distraught creature. They grasp us in their claws, they fling us onto muck, we're all wretched and defenceless. And he curled up inside himself: I'm still here with you, I won't abandon you, I'll carry you with me wherever I go, I'm a bad person, I've been violated, you've been violated, I must do something so we can be free, my freedom comes with yours.

He slunk past the wretched two-storey hovel where two quarrelsome families lived, where a mother had kicked her child. There had been a commotion, uproar, blows, Paul and he had a long discussion afterwards. Now he plodded like a weary tramp down this dark alley ripe for demolition. In half an hour I shall be back home; and like someone with a body that does not belong to him he dragged himself step by step, both hands on the banister, up the four storeys, shuffled to his door, the apartment was dark, the shame, the shame, here I am, I confess I'm a traitor. But – he unlocked the door, tiptoed to the bedroom so as not to wake anyone, and over there, that's what I call my bed. He lay down with an actual physical yearning for Paul, a most intense desire for him, his nights were filled with apparitions from his longing. It was a fever. Almost he was tired of life. And when it passed, he went out among those same people in those same streets in a state of hopeless imploring fervent tension.

Streets and squares are there still, clandestine evening strolls and conversations, but also Mother and Erich and Marie and the factory! The mother, the factory, were always stronger. Year after year he was dragged through the back and forth of gruelling trench warfare.

The deeper they sank into poverty, the more poverty and doing without became second nature to them, and the more his resistance dug in. He won't give in, he won't. Even as an apprentice he sought connection with people from that time. But it was all gone. Whenever he bumped into someone who to his certain knowledge knew the names of the executed men, he was met with puzzlement, no idea what you're talking about. All those unorganised efforts at resistance had evaporated. No more bombings, it was just a wave, the police and passing time had put an end to it. Let Karl search all he wants.

But from the day of Paul's disappearance, for a long time Karl ceased really to exist. He regarded everything as provisional, and because it wasn't real he could never take it seriously. He was waiting for something. One day he would leave this home and go his own way. Whenever he opened the apartment door, the defeated boy imagined how he would slam it behind him one day, and the thought was full of sweetness. Then he went to bed. His whole life took on a floating furtive character. Once he had heard the phrase "living corpse"; it occurred to him he was one.

THE FACTORY

In the factory, another life throbbed. The uncle ran a reputable luxury furniture business, which was already substantial just before or at the start of the huge economic boom. There were massive workshops for woodcutting, and for particular lines of upholstered furniture. Karl learned about processes and materials. The materials were wood, always wood, wood, and the upholstery: horsehair and springs. The wood came from trees, it was transported here from all over the world, grew as oaks, firs, pines in the forests where he had grown up, on mountain slopes. There you found strong men, whole troops who set about the forest with axes, saws, ropes, and brought the felled trunks (the apprentices were shown photographs in their evening theory lessons) down to the valley via slides, sled paths, chutes, floated them down big rivers, dragged them on cables, all to provide people with houses and beds, with tables and chairs. They were stripped of branches, split, sawn, sometimes sawn very thin to produce pretty veneers to conceal the coarser wood, and stacked in depots beneath the factory before being moved to the workshops, where designers waited with their blueprints and master craftsmen, workmen, apprentices. They had crowbars, augers, saws, planes, lathes for turning, lathes for grinding, veneer presses, and then drying rooms, areas for staining, polishing, lacquering, bronzing. The work was richly varied, strong, it demanded attention, eyes and fine muscles wanted instruction, you learned what people are capable of, and what a good thing it is to work.

You learned and worked alongside others. Apprentices, workmen and master craftsmen took the place of Paul and Gustav.

They were workers, a calm tidy species such as the land brought forth and the factory demanded. The words they used recalled Paul's and Gustav's, on many matters they were of similar mind, but tamer. They said: if the owner goes under, we'll be out of work, the workers are nothing without the capitalists, you don't have to like everything about it,

you have to defend your interest against wage reductions, you need accident and sickness insurance, female employees have to be looked after, the insurance bureaus have to guarantee maternity support. Every two weeks, sometimes only once a month, you met in the back room of a pub, craftsmen and workmen and greenhorns, i.e. apprentices, and discussed matters to do with the business, ventilation and hygiene of the workplaces, safety concerns about machinery that apprentices weren't allowed to touch. Then union contributions were collected, in case of a strike should wages be reduced. It might also, they said, come to a political strike, if the government takes things too far. (At this, one or other would prick up his ears, but there was no animus behind it.)

Once Karl, acting dumb, asked about those notorious terrorists, he wanted to know what these men thought of their actions. His question went down well, the foreman himself let rip. He spoke of ignorant puppies, a blot on the whole of society, the working class had nothing in common with them, they were criminals, assuming (and this brought applause) that they were not, or rather had not been, provocateurs and police plants. What's done is done, and better one head less among that lot than the entire working population in a shambles. (Karl's blood began to boil.) The foreman went so far as to declare that the workers were beginning to grow too strong for the ruling class, and so it was starting to send criminals in among them, paid of course, to disrupt worker solidarity and provide an excuse for counter measures. ("That's right!" – "Peace!") The strong serious man with glasses, stroking his shaggy ice-grey moustache, pushed his empty beer glass away: "Such methods will find so success among us. Our worker is educated. Especially the trade union. There sit the men we have elected, we know them all, they have our trust. They know how to put forward demands. What they propose, we carry through with our numbers and our resolve. Because the ruling class is lazy through and through, to its very marrow."

The oldest workman declared: "It's destined to go under."

The foreman concluded: "Should it come to that, we must be ready to take on our inheritance. So unity, unity, cool blood, and no stupid tricks."

Whereupon Karl was despatched to bring another beer for the foreman and a fresh blood sausage for the oldest workman, which drew general acclaim and huzzas such that Karl had to fetch five more orders. At the end, a workman was commissioned to visit the home of a sick apprentice to see if the unreliable fellow really was ill.

One Sunday Karl put on his best clothes, the trade union was celebrating the twentieth anniversary of its founding, everyone was gathering in the biggest hall at Trade Union House, all decked out with bunting. Karl was deeply impressed to see the size of the organisation. Two thousand men in the hall and on the balconies, on the podium a wind ensemble and a mixed choir, women in white dresses with flowers at the breast, behind them men in black. They sang a solemn song of welcome. Then the president of the union gave a speech with the help of a magic lantern. Again and again the lights in the huge hall were dimmed, and the jubilant masses saw how the organisation had grown over two decades, starting from a tiny group of twenty workers fighting against exploitation and

oppression, against terrorism by the industrialists, against despotism, and then our trade union, building the great project of tariff protection which defied the onslaught of the industrialists. So we are armed for any eventuality. And numbers flashed by, headquarters, regional unions, growth in membership, growth in contributions, construction of Trade Union House. A second speaker – someone from the Party, a teacher's face with gold-rimmed spectacles – outlined the international situation of the working class, the inroads it was making into parliaments, the rising number of newspapers and pamphlets, and the major role played by the development of trade unions in the development of the working class as a whole. We stand on firm ground, the working class is sweeping like an irresistible avalanche across the whole world, in every country we arrive at the same reasonable principles of struggle. For the working person, for the oppressed of this Earth, there is only one word: organisation. The world frantically resists, but victory shall be ours.

Followed by performances on the mandolin, and two tempestuous choral songs. The crowds streamed out, stuck a flower in the buttonhole, this afternoon there will be a children's festival in a park, in the evening they will gather in a huge park on the outskirts for lantern-lit dancing and comradeship.

WHEN THE DEAD AWAKEN

Downtrodden member of a downtrodden family, withering away in a half-enslaved country and its provincial caste, a beggar in her marriage, misused and oppressed, the mother convalesced in the big city. She could have dropped like a bitter acorn into faded grass, but she survived.

For the first time in her life she was free to act. She was almost forty. Often as she sat alone – Karl at the factory, Erich at school – amid the furniture in the rooms that she sublet, she lamented: "How I've wasted my life. What have they done to me. How that dead man tormented me, we were neither of us suited, and I bore him three children. Twenty years of my life, the best years, I squandered on that. And now I am alone." She did more than just weep. She was strong. She stood up. It was the late-blooming life of a forty year old.

From the parish pastor she obtained the address of another pastor who had been his fellow student. The note stayed in her pocket, now she remembered it as she sat alone up there, and she took it out. She paid the man a visit. He let her tell him everything, she kept a lot back, but confessed truly enough that she was alone in the big bad city, no one to turn to for support. He understood perfectly, and knew where to find help. He was a down-to-earth type, a pugnacious servant of his church with a nose for good deeds on this Earth. He enjoyed cheerful company, and was not averse to a hearty draught of beer.

He introduced the mother to his wife, and through her she got to know others, some of them a cheerful sort. She regretted not being able to bring Karl along now and then, he being already a big lad, the pastor ran a youth group too, and was keen on young men

like Karl, arrived in the big city from the provinces and now working in a factory. But Karl resisted, she could do nothing with the boy. Gradually the mother's regret at not having him by her side faded, there were lots of times when she preferred to be alone, and only by chance did Karl become aware of her Sunday afternoon visits to the pastor or others, when she dressed Erich up as sprucely as she could, some items had been donated, she was still working the same old business on the uncle (well, they were poor, she was glad to have the overcoat the aunt gave her, it wasn't new, wasn't smart, but it was warm). Off they would go to a coffee afternoon, and Erich would bring cakes back home.

They were respectable people who gathered around the pastor in the north of the city, some elderly officers too, for the pastor's family included officers as well as pastors. "One and the same, really," the pastor said once, "serving God and the Fatherland with words, or with weapons."

"But words don't cause such injuries," a lady objected.

"Oh, my dear lady, don't say that, words can cause a great deal of injury – though one must take care not to flee from words."

Then there were worthy persons from the orphan-care enterprise, and a banker appointed to the boards of foundations, who hoped thereby to gloss over his hardly immaculate origins, and then this one or that one from the parish; and in addition to the pastoral connections were always others who had just been brought along. The pastor also had a poetic streak, which attracted artists, or at least practitioners of the art of elocution; he hoped to inspire them to introduce his own – as he put it "home-baked" – virile ballads to the bosom of their family circle; then critics would gradually take note, followed of course by luminaries from the world of publishing.

Back in the provinces, the mother had naturally never encountered such respectable and even jovial company, and even if there had been any, she would have had neither eyes nor inclination for such. She moved here as in a swimming-pond, these were her first years in the big city as Erich grew and Karl came to maturity at the factory. The mother was appreciated for her reserve, the pastor took her to heart as one worthy of his confidence, being the widow of a good old provincial family, once well-to-do and now reduced to beggary by speculators who after the death of her husband had literally pillaged all her worldly goods, and she had several children – a kind of modern-day Hecuba. They were sympathetic, took her into their circle. Anxious not to over-excite her, they began by taking her to church concerts, then dared some jollier evenings at the symphony. The mother was happy – these people care for me! – she was enchanted. To think that after being harried up and down the streets, now she's accepted! Oh, she would sigh to herself, is it possible that this old stone will soften? But they persisted, they had to succeed in reawakening the tormented woman to life, and she too wanted it so much and – they succeeded! As resolute as an heiress whose property has for too long been denied her, she set to. She was not vengeful; it wasn't too late: she became young.

When the dead awaken it leads mostly to tragedy – but sometimes only to burlesque. Gradually the mother began to reveal talents she had never even imagined during the

gloomy decades of her life: painting, creating fancy dress. Once, on the pastor's wife's birthday, she turned up late – she had waited until Erich was asleep – and they saw her dance so daintily, if in an old-fashioned way, and they thought: Hecuba, the mother, a year ago frozen behind her black widow's veil – now dancing! They suggested dancing lessons, several ladies and gentlemen offered their good services. The mother, delighted by the revelations of that evening – next morning she gave Erich a smacking kiss as she saw him off, and he acquired a new school cap – the mother actually bought a pair of dancing shoes, concealed them from Karl, and had an old but still good colourful dress brought up to date for the big city.

Oh, how she enjoyed chatting with the seamstress she was taken to one early summer morning by an elocutionist lady, such insights into the big city! If only she had been born here! What sort of person would she have become, and she about to turn forty. "But you can make yourself up and dress nicely even when you're older," the seamstress explained as she recommended a hairdresser who would show her all the styles and give good advice; incredible that a woman like her should go about like a peasant (Oh that's what I am, truly). In the city everything is young, she should visit the district theatre, the main attraction, an actress, is sixty years old.

The mother was taken to the play by the elocutionist lady, a classical piece, the lead actress played a trouser role, and was enchanting. The mother was appalled that such things could be shown in public here, but still, the sixty year old did arouse her envy.

At a glittering party in the autumn, hosted by the banker in his villa – it lay far out, in the garden suburb where Paul and Karl had sat in the café near the pretty station – she dared to turn up "dressed to kill", and to dance with the banker and several others. The pastor, also in attendance, almost dropped his cigar when his chosen interpreter, the elocutionist lady, proudly presented to him the striking woman who was her creation, the mother, Hecuba, the broken creature who had appeared before him one day with a note from a colleague. Well, see what some people do for a career! He addressed her unthinkingly as "my dear lady", and kissed her hand. Normally he only gave her hand a lukewarm squeeze. Talking about it back home, the pastor's eyebrows were raised in alarm, and soon the mother noticed that she had taken things too far.

*

Karl often studied her when they were at home. The wardrobe's open doors revealed bright new clothes, sometimes a pleasant scent, she often locked it with a key. But once, during the second year of his apprenticeship, he was sitting one calm winter's day opposite her at the table, the sub-tenant for once wasn't raising a stink, and she persuaded him to tell her what he was up to these days (she needed to know for the pastor, to him she was still "the mother"), and he just stared at her a long while. Her chin was resting on her full bare left arm, her voice was warm and calm with no hidden agenda, the grey in her full fine head of brown hair was becoming noticeable, but the hair lay prettily waved on her large head; her face, strong and musing and expressive, not excessively feminine, had a delicate flush, the wide mouth was visibly no longer as grim

as before. How Mother's changed, she looks good, younger. Just so he could stay a while longer looking at her, he told her what she wanted to know. This happened again the next evening, and during this second conversation he realised: she's doing well, she enjoys company, respectable people, her life is with them, and as for me? That's what this is all about? She understood his tight-lipped face, sat beside him, can't we at last bury the hatchet? He posed a simple question: "What was it all for, Mother?"

Tenderly she replied: "You saved my life, Karl. Will you push me away, when I only ever meant the best for you? And hasn't it turned out well?"

He stammered – inside he was trembling with bitterness (I saved her so she could kill me): "I d-don't know."

"It was for the good, Karl, any other mother would have done the same, and if you can't see that today, you will see it tomorrow."

Such a fine hairstyle, does it bear thinking about? Drown him – just so she can turn out like this?

But she had already noticed his wild look and how he pulled himself together and bared his teeth, and a sense of guilt arose in her; with the same agitated movement with which she had once thrown herself into the father's arms, she clutched his shoulders: "Let go of it, Karl, please! Don't go on treating me so harshly. Did I ever think of myself?" She laid her tearful face on the table. "I could have just let you run away. Please don't punish me like this. I am your mother, after all, and you've been such a support to me, my boy. Forgive me at last, Karl. Karl."

Her tears enraged him even more: they were her confession. Then he swallowed it down, what else can I do, we can't change anything, what's done is done, I was the dupe, the weaker one, I couldn't go through with it, and here I am.

And although the touch of her skin made him flinch in loathing and disgust, he stroked her arm, and suddenly collapsed into her arms, utterly helpless, spat out from himself, he howled and howled and she had to comfort him, it'll be all right, we'll get along. And suddenly, how strange, they were both weeping, sitting hand in hand, over the father and the fate that had cast them down. When they stood up, it was bedtime, she was again the mother, and he the son who would protect her and the family. It was good that he had stayed with her, really all for the best. To complete her triumph she contrived to have him stroll with her to the pastor's, and felt so sure of her situation that she put on her brightest dress and a bit of makeup. She had never before let him see her like this. She brushed and combed his hair, tied a new bowtie on him: "But Karl, why not, you're a cavalier, and must take my arm." He has no idea what he should feel, a smile, but he could sink through the floor for shame.

The pastor turned up late that frosty evening. Karl was introduced to the pastor's kindly inquisitive wife, and observed his mother in this little circle of ladies and gentlemen. How delicate her movements, how they all sip the hot punch, tell each other stories and laugh, how assured she is. And again, as he marvelled at her, the question

arose: what has she made of me, she has made me her toy. It was appallingly clear to him to the point of madness, when he saw her mingling so happily among the others.

ALL IN

He plunged headlong into work. His zeal at the factory doubled. For the first time he took his profession seriously. He studied for vocational school, his energy at work was noticed, up till now they had taken him for a poor relation from the sticks who had to be tolerated at the boss's pleasure. They thought it was just a phase, but the tenacity persisted, it was a life and death matter, he wanted to commit, he was older now, there must be some success (and the struggle over Paul is lost and there's absolutely no other choice, and anyway he wanted – yes really wanted – to exist for this mother who made herself look so nice and put him to shame, wanted to be the son of this mother, the prettiest woman of all). Oppressed by a tormenting fear that the mother was pushing him aside and he would be left all alone (once we've begun to suffer we must go on suffering), he underwent a complete change of direction. He became the most obedient, diligent, and serious apprentice and pupil. The uncle was delighted to see the boy's ambition. He said: "Does no harm to have Fate grab you by the collar and give you a shake."

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His star was rising.

One day the uncle sacked one of his travelling salesmen – the business was being promoted more strongly in various towns, and the first branches were being set up – and in the same fit of rage he challenged Karl, who was now a fully-fledged artisan and happened to find himself in the office at that moment: does he harbour bigger ambitions, maybe in a few years he'll want to set up in competition, a new factory in the next street? Karl understood. The old man was vexed by his monthly contribution to the sister (against a note of debt, of course) for housekeeping and especially for Erich, the younger son, now enrolled by the mother at the high school. The old man roared at Karl: better look lively and earn your pay. The old man cursed the beggarly rabble with ideas above their station – a complaint that covered a lot of ground, including the mother's penchant for social gatherings, about which his (jealous) wife had told him. Karl felt the loathing in him stir, this is too much, I'll spit at his feet and go. Then the matter took a turn, the uncle came out with his real agenda: Karl is to hang up his overalls and help uncle in the office. This was his way of acknowledging his nephew. The mother had achieved her transition into "higher" society, her wishes trickled via the aunt into uncle's ears, and today the old man presented promotion to the office as a tyrannical command.

Karl was stunned. It was so unexpected. The mother, who knew how risky it was to try to influence him, had said not a word, she thought: better let it come as a sign from above. His supervisor, informed by Karl as soon as he was back on the floor, shook his hand and congratulated him, now you've made it, what a stroke of luck, if the old man wants he'll probably cover the costs of your tuition and other stuff. The oldest workman, Otto,

clapped him on the shoulder, I saw it coming, so now we'll have a wonderful leaving party and a formal parade. So lightly did they let him go. Any on the floor who heard came and said admiringly: "Today's the last time you'll be knocking around with us lot." Karl told his mother in just two words about the conversation with the uncle, she understood what it meant to him, and kept quiet. (Maybe he's pleased with the promotion?) Anyway, there was no quarrel. His transfer would take place in a week, he would first sit among the staff just for induction, then come into the presence of the uncle, who will instruct him. The uncle provided an allowance for a new suit.

A bitter week. Suddenly he realised what he was losing. He looked around the factory floor and the workshops, poked about: so this is what I'm giving up, this work I came to when grief over Paul and his friends was still fresh. The smell of glue, the sawdust, the piles of lovely timber, delicate veneers, sounds of splitting, milling, drilling, smoothing, hammering. He had on a white coat, in his hand a chisel, looked across to the model table where the supervisor was entering measurements on a blueprint. No longer would he work with tenon saw, jigsaw, breast drill; always saying goodbye, ever since we came from the country, ever since Father's death. And now he's to go to the snooty upper crust in the office. Is he no longer to work? The old workman comforted him: you'll still have plenty to do. But none of it is right; Karl dreamed, I'll go along with it, it's all only temporary.

And so it happened. Karl's first assignment was in the wages section, and then every evening to "education". He had to carry a briefcase to class, and learn. The Hall of Victory loomed high over the city, palaces grouped around it; these were the visible target of his loathing. Now down to him from its height came the invisible, the soul of this Hall of Victory, to take possession of him.

As he returned home distracted from the city centre, from the grammar school building where the evening classes were held, images of Paul and Gustav rose before him. He had never met them here, rather in the markets, on their nocturnal trip to the prison, at the lake and the rowing party (the lake extended away long and narrow like a badly hemmed ribbon, they tied the boat to a post, lay in grass, and white clouds chased overhead). "The worst thing," Paul said, "is that they steal the thoughts from your head. Soon you'll know nothing at all. They have their poets and scholars and philosophers and religions, and we have nothing. For if you have no power, you have no money and no bread, and if you have no bread you can't pay for scholars and poets and philosophers, and so they don't go along with us, they go along with the others."

Why don't I go to Uncle and tell him I want to keep wearing overalls? Their history that they force us to learn, the poems, the hero with the sword in his hand – as if I'd never slept in the street and don't know how hard and cold they all are. How I hate that Hall of Victory and its blood-red carpet. Now I offer them my head, pin back my ears and let their lies flow in, and tomorrow I shan't know myself, but they'll be disappointed, I won't knuckle under, oh, if only Mother wasn't there, where can I find a friend.

A storm was raging in Karl, all the bad events of the past had awoken in him. But he was a man with a gag already in his mouth, crawling on the ground. The oldest workman,

Otto, a man in his thirties – the stocky body and slow manner reminded him of Gustav – got on well with Karl. To his mother's annoyance Karl would go to him most Sundays, even after his transfer to the office. Here was a man who could offer advice. They sat in Otto's furnished room, Karl, being the guest, on the sofa. "What do you say, Otto? I've done my induction, those fine folk look sideways at me because I worked on the floor, what should I do?"

Otto kept a yellow folding rule in his trouser pocket; automatically, whenever he had to think something over, his right hand would reach into the pocket and pull out the rule, he could think carefully only when it was in his hand. "What I'll say to you, mate – pardon me for calling you mate still: of course you can tell the old man you don't want it. And then there'll be a row. If you're obstinate, and insist, he might fire you. And he'll do it just to keep up his reputation. And then there's the times he just blows up. Every half a year or so he blows up. And then you'd better steer well clear. So, you want to fly away." He smiled at Karl, tapped him on the knee with the rule. "You don't want to do that. Lose the nice suit, and the evening classes."

"I can go to another firm."

"You can, there's a demand for good workers. But whether you'd make as much progress as in our shop, that we'll leave open. Tell me, just by the way, I've no wish to pry into your private affairs – you mentioned that the old man, being your uncle, supports your family, because your dad is dead and you don't earn enough?"

Karl nodded. Otto, after wiping his nose, put the rule on his knee, and as if measuring a piece of wood told off with thumb and index finger a series of ten-centimetre lengths. "That complicates the matter, Karl, not so much whether you stay in the office, but going over to another firm. Because then of course he won't hand over another pfennig. And so you'll have to talk it over first with your mother, or if you have other relatives."

"I don't."

They fell silent. Otto snapped the rule together and put it back in his pocket. "Shall I open a bottle of beer?"

"Oh, better not, it's still morning."

"I quite understand why you don't like sitting with that snooty crowd in the office, Karl. Our work is better than theirs. But you can't do without accounting and correspondence. Maybe accounting is too hard for you, and he'll send you back to us."

Now there's a possibility, maybe try that.

In short, Karl began to engage in sabotage, but no one took it amiss, he's just a beginner. Then at last there came a reckoning – and it was shaming. "Don't let it bother you, Karl," said Otto, "a proper workman doesn't fret over a knock on the head, so long as he gets what he wants." A few times Karl committed such a blatant howler that the chief clerk bawled him out in front of the whole office, weakening Karl's resistance. He couldn't bear the superior grins of that snooty bunch.

"I can't hold out," he declared to Otto, "they scold me, call me nothing but a manual worker. I can do it as well as they can. They insult us."

"Karl, the working man can surely take a scolding from one of those pen-pushers. That never hurts us, Karl. Keep going, I tell you, if it's what you really want. But ..." He gave a loud laugh and clapped Karl on the shoulder: "I don't rightly know what you have against the office crowd. Most are not worth much, we all know that, sons and daughters of the well-to-do, an arrogant pack. But why don't you want to join them – especially on our behalf? After all, they're workers too, and the salary's nothing to boast about. You could do some good work there, maybe open their eyes a little."

Karl thought gloomily: I hear you. I'm being pushed across entirely to that lot.

That evening he posed the question to the mother: does she still need the subvention from Uncle? The mother was shocked. Actually she could make do with Karl's wages and the more recent amounts slipped surreptitiously to her by the aunt, but she had a dark suspicion and replied with a definite Yes. Has he had a falling out with Uncle? "No, but I don't want to be a pen-pusher."

"What sort of word is that. You know exactly what Uncle has planned for you. If you keep your head down, in a few years you'll be his personal assistant."

"I won't keep my head down."

"What are you saying, Karl?"

"I won't keep my head down. I'm a worker. I'm honest. I'm not a criminal. I will not go over to that other lot."

Blood rushed to her face: "Pah, have you no shame? Am I a criminal? You call me a criminal and your uncle a criminal? Have you told him that?"

"No, but ..."

She shouted him down: "No buts here. You still have your old bad thoughts, you still carry your old bad habits around with you. You're a true son of your father, bringing us more misfortune."

"Don't speak badly of Father, Mother."

"Because you're his son. Go to your uncle, call him a criminal, and bring us more bad luck. You ... I'm not going to lock you in, the door's open."

"No, you're not going to lock me in, Mother. Back then you'd have done better to let me run away."

She stared at him, shrank back into the sofa (will he never be done with that?) and burst into such tears you might think her crazed, raving mad. Erich, half undressed, came running from the other room. Karl tried to push him out, but Erich kicked him, and as soon as the boy saw his mother's contorted face emerge from behind her hands, there came from his throat the old ghastly convulsive sobs. The mother jumped up and hugged

him, but his lips were already blue, his eyes vacant, the horrible lacerating screams from his fit filled the air. They carried him to bed.

In the very quiet living room the mother, hair in a mess, the top of her blouse torn by the little boy, stood facing Karl. She cast a wild look at the door, and, still breathless, said tonelessly: "You'll allow me to close the door." He nodded, just stood there. She stepped up to him and slapped his face, right, left. "Well. Now hit back, you scoundrel."

LOVE

The mother toyed with the notion of remarrying. She was now very close with her brother's wife, who was of the same age. The spirit of the times – the great economic boom was in full swing – which dictated that women should be young had wrought a change even in the sister in law. The lazy sluggish creature had all of a sudden become slimmer, fresher and more in love with life, to her husband's bewilderment. She meant to encourage her husband, more successful now year by year, to do something for himself. But she was banging her head against a brick wall. He would remain the stalwart epitome of a bygone age, and he laughed for hours over his newspaper at those ancient females who put on artificial faces and think they're such charmers. If only he could grow a new leg! He said he wouldn't want to be a young man these days, how awful if you fell into the clutches of your own grandmother. And who ends up paying for it all?

But a new person needs new surroundings, she riposted, and if you don't want to be new, at least do something about the furniture, light fixtures, curtains, even carpets. As for those people one would like to associate with, where can we find some?

The sister in law was already well ahead. She introduced to the brother's faded philistine apartment everything she saw at the pastor's and elsewhere. They had to take part in social gatherings, tea evenings, music evenings, even host some themselves. The uncle with the gammy leg, still just a simple cabinet maker, clapped his hands in horror. It was no use, the new age would not be expunged from the world. But he was pleased to observe the growth in purchasing power, everyone was buying, prices were rising, he had to hire more workers and rent an additional floor for his factory.

By now the mother was playing a not insignificant role in her brother's household. She became a kind of housekeeper or matron; her sister in law had always been (and still was) inept. Truly a new age had dawned! So different from that earlier time when she reached for the gas tap.

Timidly, but brimming with pleasure, she accompanied Auntie on a spa vacation, and allowed herself to be drawn into a romantic affair. The man was no younger than she, seemed a studious type, was on his own; at first the aunt had her eye on him but then was relieved to have her sister in law take the liaison off her hands. Those were happy weeks in a valley ringed by mountains, amid glaciers and snow, pastures and waterfalls. Then it was over. The following year, when an experience back in the city came to a painful end, the mother began to think of marriage. But only think. And the thought did not come by

chance. This too must happen: that freely and independently she would choose a man to her own taste. It was enough just to have the option, and to weigh it up. It satisfied her. She did not actually want to go through with it. And her sister in law, now reverting slowly to her fuller figure, advised against it. You never have any joy with the man once you're married. And apart from that, where would the mother stand with her brother, not to mention her sister in law? The husband plays such a large part in these matters. And the money question. The mother understood at once. The notion could be filed away. What she had wanted, now she had. She remained free. And aging gracefully.

Karl still worked in the office, attended more evening classes, no longer made mistakes. He sometimes (ever more seldom) thought: I shall make it through, it's all a matter of making it through, I'm just playing along, but one day, one day – but as he thought this, he knew it was just a daydream.

At the factory everything turned on purchases, sales, new models, new fabrication methods, timbers, moulds, salaries, wages. On every side competitors lurked like savage beasts, all poaching the best salesmen from one another in order to snap up the customers, you had to protect yourself against your own travellers turning cocky and going independent with a list of addresses. So enormous was the market demand, you'd need a thousand heads and arms to supply it all.

In such a whirlwind you got used to another way of thinking. You pressed your lips more tightly together, spoke sparingly and to the point. Thoughts had to cohere, there must be a Will behind the thought. The Will insisted: earn, beat the competition, increase sales. And when you're with people, be on a sharp and constant lookout for the use you can make of them. In the factory, the manual workers are all on the opposing side, you can't mix with them, they too want to earn, earn more, and if you give in you've lost the game. This penetrated deep into Karl month after month, year after year, no mention now of: I don't want this, I just go with the current. And slowly you notice from within what others have already noticed from the outside: the air of the ruling class, the contempt for humanity. Now you breathe it, and lo! how good it tastes! When Columbus and his squadron left familiar waters behind and lay for weeks upon the open sea, the waiting became a torment, the crew wanted to mutiny and go back, but then birds with strange feathers flew past, the men were amazed, they gathered their strength and sped full sail towards a new land, none looked behind now holding out their arms lamenting: "If only I had stayed at home."

A few years later Karl was always at his uncle's side as his confidential assistant, exactly as the mother had envisaged. He travelled to foreign lands, his horizons expanded, gradually he took on another nature. He was one of that typical kind of man who not only constructs machines, but also learns from them. He had to be brought into the management of the factory, because production processes were undergoing rapid development, and the uncle's dilettantish expansion measures were swallowing vast amounts of capital. Karl's arrival brought a change of wind, sweeping away the remnants of a patriarchal regime that haunted the entire organisation in the office, in the confusion of machines, in production techniques. Even the workers learned to see the wider world

of business, their training improved, they were able to build up their organisations and support activities, the times were good, wages were rising, the gulf between worker and boss grew no wider, the two powers consolidated, learned to deal with each other, the tone became more objective and balanced compared with the capricious swings of the patriarchal era.

The mother saw her efforts for the family wonderfully rewarded (even if, she said to herself, she'd had to put her foot down, and it hadn't done her any harm). Even the last bit of business – winning Karl's friendship – would in the end be up to her.

This was a new Karl. He was over the hill (and down the other side). Childhood and youth were behind him. He was a strapping young man with a natty moustache, his expression was mellow and benign – friendly and charming, you might say; his eyes, mostly half-closed as if short-sightedly scrutinising something, were unemotional, grim even. They measured the world in metres and centimetres. He was a passionate billiards player, a good dancer, in movements and speech the complete man of the world. He accompanied the mother on visits, seemed always happy to see her so animated and pretty. Only rarely did she notice a haunted look, a glum inconsolable relapse. He was alone. If only he had a girl. But something was missing in him. He hung on his mother's apron strings. He explained to her that what he knew about the female of the species did not attract him. She was still the only one. Which she was not pleased to hear. With a humble feeling, the face of someone truly submissive, he sometimes kissed her hand. Even worse – and now she grew afraid – he would extol in company her merits and her virtues. Her face would flush deep red. "You need a wife," she would joke, shaking him off. She took it for granted he would remain a bachelor, and the uncle was quite content; as he said: "Women are a distraction, they lull you and divert you from work."

The happiness that came the mother's way during those years was almost too much. Erich was studying to be a pharmacist. That Karl would one day become a partner in the uncle's firm was already a given. Then a heavy blow: little Marie, the apple of Auntie's eye, not yet fifteen years old, went to bed with an ear infection, and never got up again. Karl had a hard time with the mother that year, she blamed herself for giving Marie away as a ploy to bind the uncle to them, now this was her punishment. Clearly Karl would have to introduce a new female into the family. The question arose more frequently, no badgering needed; he knew he owed it to society, to the family and to his career to find a wife. (He had rarely indulged in dalliances.) His response justified the faith they had in him: "The matter will be carefully considered from all angles."

At an affectionate moment, as he and Erich sat with the mother, he urged: if you're going to send me away, the least you can do is help me find a wife, nothing's more important than harmony in the family. And with this, the older generation had licence to look around on his behalf. Uncle showed the way. The factory has expanded, business is booming, new sources of finance are needed, we must find a good family of impeccable reputation, the bride must not be some scatterbrain, for that will suit neither the family nor our Karl, he being so serious and ambitious. The mother had the same notion. As luck would have it, they came upon the government architect and his only daughter, Julie.

And so Karl surrendered to love, that most terrible, most implacable of forces. Love had never yet looked into his heart and put it to the test.

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The world rose like a yeasty dough to become a lovely cake of affluence. Vast funds flowed to the liveliest countries, while others continued to decline – it was their destiny to be swallowed by more vigorous nations. Colonies were sought and found, and while swarms headed out to those “developing regions” – the coloured peoples, brown, yellow, black, were incapable of exploiting their enormous natural resources, they just hopped about like fleas on the surface – while this was going on, the cities became larded with ever more agglomerations of buildings. The wretched shanties and smaller structures of the big city’s earlier phase vanished as if under a firestorm, replaced almost overnight by huge multi-storey tenement blocks, new villa districts. Artists, architects, masons, plumbers, fitters and many others all thrived. Thousands were engaged on roadworks, extending tramlines, constructing underground and elevated rail lines, shops and schools followed new street layouts, as did doctors, solicitors, cinemas, lawcourts, prisons.

Karl and Julie returned from their honeymoon.

How lovely the city, how lovely the whole world that lies at their feet, a long boulevard with tall leafy trees, they step out down an unbroken swaying avenue of foliage, and behind them the greenery closes up to a mysterious jungle, and in it magic twinkles, ever renewed golden magic.

They did not live on one of the former fine streets of the city centre, where the old Uncle had now settled, but rather not far from the factory in one of those newly laid streets – one built over the earlier wretched alley of dismal memory. Karl chose the location, it was so convenient for the factory, but then too he was simply unable to tear himself away from the district.

On the journey back with Julie he had taken her to see his childhood home. There was no longer a Meadowlands Inn, there was little sign of a boom in this provincial backwater; everyone complained: it all goes to the cities. Karl beamed at Julie: “We made it to the city in good time, no? Heavens, what if we had stayed!” He tried to gloss over their dire circumstances back then. At the churchyard they found the father’s grave, it was in a deplorable state, Julie looked in vain for a proper marble slab with a legible name and an epitaph. They must rectify this lack at once. “I take after him,” Karl declared as they wandered through the meadows. He recognised some of it, but how small and mean it all looked. “Father wanted to achieve something impressive,” he boasted, “set something big in motion, a farm with an inn, maybe a sanatorium, but there was nothing doing here in this backwater. It broke him.”

“So really he’s to be thanked that you made it out, Karl.”

“If you look at it rightly, then yes. And these days I really believe it.”

She teased: “You’d never have met me, otherwise.” The arriviste squeezed her arm. She giggled: “Because sorry, I wouldn’t even dream of being buried here.”

He felt abashed before this daughter of the government architect. After all, we used to live here, Mother grew up here. She smacked his hand and put her arm in his. "Yes, I know, my country bumpkin." Not for long will they indulge in such teasing.

Karl carried her into their new home like a victor. The living areas, furnished in the most modern manner, were chock full of flowers. Mother, Uncle and her parents had arranged them. Julie, mocking as usual, presented her diagnosis: "The violets and lily of the valley in the bedroom are my mother, they want me to be meek and mild, the proud gladioli in the dining room are your mother's, you're her hero. Your uncle planted the araucaria, that's cosy family life, Karl."

She was wrong, this spoiled only daughter of the government architect, in thinking she could toy like this with her young husband and master, and put him under her thumb. As she soon discovered, he was not the flexible kind.

Because he knew what marriage meant. What was it? A household, a family, managed with stern dignity. He did not become someone else when he stepped away from his desk and the telephone, took the lift down and headed off home. Marriage meant social recognition and (for him) the crowning event of a hardworking life. Julie had a delicate, finely shaped little face, a truly noble profile, loose golden-red hair; she moved with an easy grace, her eyes were oddly lovely even with a cool sober look. But this is not what he saw. He saw a delicate creature from the lap of a family secure in its status, she was his wife, and how could he do anything but make her happy. Julie thought to pirouette up to him as Julie, but he did not accept her as such, her charming nature served merely to set her more firmly on the pedestal of "wife". As the ancient Roman state once presented the populace with a bust of their emperor in the temple, so now he accepted this woman and would strive to be worthy of her.

It was touching, the way he treated her – gently, tenderly, as if she were no earthly being. She and her mother laughed together about it, though not often. And Karl's mother: she was radiant! How marriage suits him! Such luck to find this tender charming creature, this porcelain figurine, how can you not adore her. And Karl gave his mother's hand a heartfelt squeeze. He paraded the marriage before her. He made confidential reports about Julie, earning the mother's praise. He ruled the new family in ways that pleased her.

The effect on our Julie was remarkable. For without ever quite being a shrew, she was prickly, sharp, a small coquettish little person who loved making fun of herself. And now she "adored" someone in the true sense of the word. Her father shook with laughter: "The little fraudster lets him treat her with kid gloves. Does he believe a word she says?" He was alluding to an earlier weakness of Julie's: she used to tell lies as a way to escape the dubious joys of the parental home. But Karl really did believe her, and why should she lie now? Yes, she enjoyed being treated as special. How attentive he was. Once she had cheerfully gone her own way. Now Karl knew her wardrobe, made sure she chose warm things, light things. Her health, her mood, the occasional migraine were matters of national concern. Early on, experiencing all this for the first time, she was tempted to

evade him or jump down his throat, as she always had with others. Then – oh it's all so marvellous! Everyone told her how envious they felt, and she did feel it. She succumbed, stared in admiration at Karl, and went along with it. Life was just so pleasant. What was he shaping her into.

It was obvious that Karl was the one constructing this marriage in stone and bronze, all the while walling her in. And how can she expect mercy, when no one has ever shown him any.

The household ran on strictly regimented lines. Karl explained to Julie, so that she would be quite clear, what her function was in the enterprise. He oversaw the whole operation. On the one hand her servant, on the other the complete master. Not a corner of the apartment – at least on Sundays – escaped his sharp inspection. He could not turn a blind eye, and would quote Napoleon, for whom nothing was incidental and whose victories stemmed from his attention to the smallest details, from accommodation for the horses to axle grease for the forage wagons. "My home is my castle," Karl would without fail tell visitors, and he was the castellan. He ran the household like clockwork. He established a strict formal regimen.

In the dining room – a very large space, the rest of the apartment was not so extensive – they had created a sitting nook with a view into the adjoining salon, later the Museum. In the evening he would sit there with Julie, savouring the surroundings. Her gaze, which usually tracked uneasily his own prying eyes, could relax: her lord and master was basking. The little mantelpiece clock chimed. He held her hand in his. He felt he was happy. She not quite so much, but she thought: some things will surely change before long. Sometimes his mother turned up, "the" mother as Julie sometimes dared to joke, but he was so certain of that status that he let her get away with it. The mother would sit in the leather armchair designated for her sole use. Sometimes Julie grew jealous and wished her mother in law to the merry Devil. If Karl clings so to his mother, why did he bother to marry? But her parents laughed in her face: Karl is what a son should be, a good son, he supported the whole family all by himself. (Julie, irritated, nodded: "Yes, yes, poor people, I know.")

It is only natural that, given all this, there will be little need for regular reports on their marriage. It was an exemplary marriage: both acted as if they loved each other, and neither felt any desire to really know the other. The noble socially-conditioned institution revered by Karl took the place of a personal relationship. And so for a long time Karl noticed nothing about their marriage, apart from occasional dust accumulations on the carpet, or rooms insufficiently aired. They travelled a lot, the economic boom carried them along and protected them. They kept very much to themselves, content with occasional get-togethers with relations and Karl's business friends, went often to the theatre and to concerts. Erich was not included in their actual social circle, Karl disliked bringing his brother's happy-go-lucky banter together with Julie, even though she often called him a "splendid chap". Erich scoffed: "Karl's hiding me away."

And as for their love-life, it too was as regimented (you might say formal, ritualised) as everything else in this household. It excluded unsavoury excitements, was kept in check as a therapeutic intimacy permissible to the heads of a family. It was a procedure that had nothing whatever in common with foul back-alley lewdnesses, or with so-called lovers. It began in darkness – we must not suppress such secret matters, for they are important – with a discreet wordless greeting, and ended with an almost formal hand-kiss from Karl; sometimes she imagined him bowing as well. She always knew during the evening, observing his preparatory moves, that the hour of love-life was approaching. He would finish his supper on the dot, then sit a little while with her in the nook, showing no impatience, and then – he who bathed every morning – he would order a shower-bath at this unaccustomed hour. Then he would wait while she too took a shower, and would not go to her when he heard the water turned off. Sometimes she thought: does he not know that some people embrace even without first taking a shower? But she could predict his response: “I know it happens, Julie, but really it shouldn’t!”

Their endeavours on behalf of state and family were rewarded during those first years with the arrival of two children, who having achieved separation from their progenitors were able to occupy their due slot in society. As far as they – the progenitors – were concerned, gaps in the world were now securely filled. They were a girl and a boy; Karl and Julie named them Julie and Karl. No others followed, for, like so much else, an abundance of children is not quite proper.

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And so Karl has achieved economic security, respect, and a happy marriage. How long since he wandered the alleyways that once made up this district (I keep you with me, I shall never abandon you, I carry you with me wherever I go, I am a traitor, a bad weak person). Where now any talk of a society that ruthlessly throws the poor onto the street, where now any loathing of the oppressor (I’ve been abused, my freedom is tied up with yours), where now a single thought in him of that fellow Paul? If anyone were to remind him, he would curl up in shame and deny it all. Those were aberrations of his fledgling years, the family had been battered almost to dissolution by sudden disaster, and a brief period of foolishness has been offset by a long life of work and duty. Fate revealed what it had intended with him: he was blessed.

Sometimes after dinner he would stare out of the window: They have their law, we have ours. Fine catchphrase, romantic, so prevalent in those days. The workers now are clear-sighted: they know their fate is bound up with ours. If we go down, so do they. But why such untimely thoughts! The Earth has room enough for all. The boom has filled every storehouse with its opulence.

It really does seem that the threefold crime committed here will go unpunished: the crime of mother against son, his crime against himself (for weakness and half measures are a crime), his betrayal of society.

The children are now seven and nine, they have moved to a bigger apartment in the same building, still on ground where once slums festered; Julie goes often to villa-land

where her parents reside. But Karl (feeling secure, or defiant, or guilty?) never leaves the district, where he has also placed his mother in a nice little flat. Once, during an evening conversation in the apartment with his father in law, who is trying to interest him in a move and incidentally hoping to set his son in law up in business, he utters curious words: "I shall no more leave this district than my father can leave his grave."

The mother sits upright in shock, the conversation had been so relaxed up till then, she claps her hands together: "What did you say, Karl?" Does he feel unwell, is something amiss, does he still hold a grudge against me? Unprepared for her agitation, he replies calmly: "I only meant that I'm stubborn by nature, I dislike change." He's not wrong, thinks the father in law, the architect, but a dashed strange turn of phrase. He's not wrong, thinks the mother in law, but if I were Julie I'd know never to let myself be buried here. She looked uneasily from Karl to Julie and Julie to Karl, but their faces were inscrutable.

It's a prosperous and cosy home, this place of Karl's, an island set down in the enormous flourishing raucous excitable city; here the furious waves break. No, truly, here like a castle with walls and ramparts you seem able to scorn and challenge the age and the so-called "fate" of little people. How comforting to have a family! How on earth Karl managed to set it up is a constant wonder to the mother. On the discreetly papered walls, expensive pictures in gilded frames hang on long cords, mostly idyllic landscapes with or without animals, extolling the magic of silent simple Nature. The artists have brilliantly achieved their intent, spreading the colours across these little surfaces to sing the sweetness and inebriation of a self-obsessed Earth. Some pictures show figures from old sacred books, grave, at prayer, standing tenderly in groups, their faces and hands shaped by meekness and humility, submission and devotion, their garments delicately arranged. All bestow blessings on existence, on peace, on the social order. Of course, in among them is a highly incongruous picture, an actual war scene in garish colours, and when we peer closer we recognise the battle scene at the Hall of Victory, the surrender to the white-bearded king on his charger. Yes, Karl has hung this very picture, he never tires of passing his eyes over it in reflective contemplation, slaking his thirst on the picture – what thirst? Julie disliked this picture, it belongs in a "school hall", but Karl would shake his head vigorously: "Wrong, wrong. It's a man's picture, a genuine man's picture." (And who is he, actually: the one on the horse, or the one trudging meekly up to him, sword in hand?)

It's evening, the end of another active uneventful day. Julie, in the next room at the grand piano, is playing a dreamy Chopin piece, the master of the house is enthroned with grave assurance, he and his father in law are enjoying a cigar, and he's talking of a remarkable economic phenomenon: sales have strangely, unaccountably fallen off, a crisis seems to be brewing. Julie trips lightly into the room, casts an eye over the company, she whispers something from behind into Karl's ear. He stands and, being the host, offers his guests cognac and liqueurs, they take the opportunity to move, glasses in hand, to a corner of the library to discuss the world situation. The ladies sit together, and from their hand gestures seem to be talking of hairstyles.

ERICH

The family that long, long ago waited on the open platform of a little station all dressed in black – the mother motionless in the hot sun between two peasant women, the little daughter holding her mother's skirts and sucking her thumb, the two brothers in their cheap new jackets patrolling up and down the track – this family has boldly made its way in the big city. Only little Marie, raised in the best of circumstances, has been taken before her time. It was one of those elemental events, like an earthquake, say, with which one must simply try to come to terms.

For two centuries the mother's family supplied their country with artisans and minor officials. The artisans, coopers for the most part, were always the better-off branch, who supplied the next generation of officials. The officials never rose another rung, they were a spiritless breed, had inherited obedience, frugality, arrogance. The coopers refreshed the line, but they too valued order and dependability. Their class was formed by fear.

The new age with its machines and newspapers made its way into the provinces. The mother's frugal father had achieved the status of guild-master, and accumulated a sizable property; he employed several workmen and used tolerably modern equipment. Then one of his sons became another surly paper-shuffler and flywhisk, who contributed to the traditional shrivelling of his line in the Tax Office.

The second son was Karl's uncle, who was sent to the big city to investigate better methods and stayed there as a cabinet maker. His sister too, the mother, longed to escape the lethargy of her decaying class. It was her yearning for warmth, openness, love, for an unconstrained word and a laugh, that led her to the father. But he wasn't up to it. He steered her and the family into disaster. Relatives left behind in the countryside, acting with the slave's age-old timidity, raised an admonishing finger: "You should have stayed back here with us!" The mother fled with the children and what remained of her property to the big city. There, like a late rose, she bloomed. The woman still had her sharp resolute chin, but her face had lost its grim severity, her cheeks were smooth and rounded, her hair, which while it was brown she kept tightly combed and parted, now graced her head full and grey and fell over her brow like a cloud giving thanks. She bore herself strongly, with a certain fullness of figure. Her gaze instilled confidence.

The children emerged from the marriage with the intractable husband, and continued the mother's struggle in the streets of the big city. Karl, as we know, had to become the breadwinner. Now he has the factory and the wife, the two children, and the strict placid order within his four walls; he preens himself. Society he sees as firm and assured, as worthy of admiration, and his family beneath its little dome is its mirror image.

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And now the other son has grown up, the younger son, Erich. Mother and brother love him. He is a remarkable contrast to Karl.

In him they found a restorative. Whenever difficulties arose, his attacks of illness brought them together. His vulnerability played an irreplaceable part in their little family.

He himself came gradually to understand this. He learned to recognise when the time had come to take to his bed – when it would benefit the family. The fateful aspect of any role is that the one who plays it is never let go, may even be changed. Karl, the new paterfamilias, knew a thing or two about this. Of course they never intentionally harmed Erich, but they exploited his weakness, his episodes. And as if he suspected something, he would utter feeble protests (for back in the village, despite his frailty, he had always managed get the better of his playmates) – but such protests were never more than feeble. Then the family's Moloch would approach, not with fiery breath and iron claws, but with soothing words and little presents, and set him once for all in his place. As Moses came down the mountain in Sinai bearing tablets of stone with commandments to govern the behaviour of the people of Israel, so did his mother and brother appear to him and explain to him his place and his task. Well, the task was easy and undemanding enough: he was to let them spoil him. Now they had him, and he kept quiet. They drank as often as they wanted from his lifeblood, and did to him what had been done to them.

Ever since the night of the mother's attempted suicide, Erich was never free of screaming fits and dreadful nightmares. He became a quiet obedient child. Pale and full of face, he kept his long locks until his tenth year; his eyes lay far back. He was glad that Marie lived with the aunt. No friendship developed between him and Marie; to the consternation of mother and aunt she conceived a real hatred for the gentle boy. Once, on her birthday, she went at him with a knife, and when he got home Erich told his mother and his brother that Marie was a murderer. When she fell ill and died, he told nobody his real opinion: that she has suffered her just punishment, and he will come through quite happily without her.

Secondary school came, the upswing in the family's fortunes, the move to a new apartment. Erich was and remained a dreamer. What a strange bird in this nest of squabblers! Such an amiable pasty creature, listening so attentively and nodding that he understood and yet, since his face always wore the same poignantly contemplative expression, it was impossible to tell if he actually was listening. He had a noticeable tremor of the hands, and when anyone spoke to him for long, or when he himself spoke, he would hold up a hand and observe the degree of tremor. "I must keep a sharp eye on myself," he would say, "otherwise I'll never know what's coming. And I'm especially sensitive. The hands are my barometer. If they really shake, then things are not too bad, but if the tremor is rapid and faint, then I must be on guard, an earthquake's coming." Because he thought about everything under the sun (but surely never about politics) and early on showed interest in flowers and plants, he wanted to become a botanist or a gardener or a flower-grower. Then came a fervent interest in death, but the mother pulled him out of that – it was just after Marie died. He liked to loiter outside hospitals, first-aid stations, pharmacies, observed the people who turned up, are they ill, what are they holding, are they running errands for a sick person, what does a doctor do.

Then came the school leaving certificate, the question of a profession was now acute, he had often mentioned pharmacy as a career. Mother, uncle and Karl weighed the matter. Karl made the decision. "Is it really what you want?"

“With all my heart, Karl.” With all his heart! Karl’s heart was heavy as he heard these joyful words. Now there was no question: Erich would be a pharmacist.

As Erich pursued his studies, the radiance that had long emanated from him grew noticeably stronger. He enlivened people, delighted, calmed and soothed them. Without wishing it, he drew people to him. Karl, who lived closed in on himself and knew only work, failed to see it, but the mother quickly became aware, and was inwardly delighted. “Do you know what it is, Karl? Perhaps it’s a gift, something special, but it doesn’t have to be. It can happen when someone just lets go, and becomes free.”

Karl forced a smile: “I have no time to just let myself go.”

“And you are our protector.”

He looked away, let’s not speak of that.

They used to call him “Fat Erich”, or to distinguish him from “Lanky” Karl, just “Porky”. Once he had a girlfriend, a very pretty young lady whose parents were keen to marry her off; for months she enjoyed mixing with pharmacy students in the big city and round about. She told him: “To look at you, you’re a sybarite, or a roué.”

He was horrified: “I’m not in the least a roué.”

“No, but the way you walk, you’re always about to drop onto a comfy divan, like some pasha or sultan.”

“But I’m no despot.”

“No, you couldn’t be. But people listen to you. Now stop talking.”

He shook his head, puzzled by this mirror she held up to him, and dethroned the young lady none too soon. Later he kept her among his circle of women friends. He could easily have gathered a harem.

Just a year after Karl, Erich got married. He was barely in his mid-twenties, and there was no question yet of supporting himself. He had passed his pharmacy exams, and was learning behind the counter and in the laboratory, earning little more than pocket money. And it was actually only by chance that he had not married earlier. Knowing so many girls, he felt it his duty to do something for just about all of them, they deserved it, they were always in straitened circumstances, and were so frail. He kept Karl and the mother up to date whenever they were in a mood to listen. Erich never kept a secret, and it was his habit, when no one at home could be bothered to listen, to spend a lot of his time looking for ways to help the needy creatures he encountered, or at least comfort them by sharing his opinion of the case with other people. In order to alleviate the thousand sad fates that befall stray young women in the big city, he would empty his purse, and then extract as much as he could from the mother and Karl. He never approached the uncle and aunt; those two ancient creatures were lamentable relics of the Stone Age, from an age otherwise known only from memorial statues. He never once cadged from them, but whenever his mother dragged him along he always brought flowers, fruit or suchlike, sometimes a curious present, a book maybe. The mother

laughed at him: "If you always bring Uncle something, what can he think of us? He must think you're earning heaps of money. Next he'll be asking you for a loan."

Erich remained serious: "I can't change how I feel about that poor man. If he ever touches me for a loan I shall see what I can do. If it's not too much, I shall rustle it up somehow. He mustn't go disappointed."

This remarkably generous disposition towards the wealthy factory owner's family led to Erich becoming Uncle and Auntie's favourite nephew, preferred over serious Karl. For example, they always celebrated Erich's birthday with a lunchtime visit to him at the mother's apartment. (Karl's birthday went unobserved.) There they sat for an hour with the numerous guests, male and female, and the old couple had a wonderful time.

Maintaining a tradition from his high school days (let us linger a while after so many sad and gloomy chapters), Erich's room was always thrown open the evening before the birthday to a mob of his current friends, so they could prepare it for the party. Erich would spend the night in a hotel; then at a specified hour an emissary would collect him and lead him back to the festive apartment. Usually the room would be unrecognisable. For the mother, who had two other rooms, Erich's birthday was no small matter, as the enormous architectonic project extended far beyond Erich's own room, turning the entire apartment into an Aladdin's cave. On one occasion the apartment was the forest where Siegfried was intent on stealing the dragon's gold; the dragon lurked in Erich's room as a dreadful monster, to be confronted by the birthday boy himself armed with shield, helmet and sword; the guests, young men and women, stood around with sticks and umbrellas, encouraging him and offering him and the dragon refreshing lemonade. Eventually the dragon was defeated and dragged to the kitchen with music, and all the goodies he had concealed about his ghastly person tumbled to the floor.

Another occasion celebrated Tannhäuser's return to Venusberg after his unsuccessful visit to Rome. This scenario was concocted by Erich's girlfriends, and of course, as it all took place in the mother's apartment, it must not be in the least bit unseemly. The hero was waylaid by nymphs in the corridor and made to relinquish walking stick, hat and coat and whatever other items seemed superfluous, and to arm himself with a pilgrim's staff. He advanced thus through a living room transformed into a mountain, into the rosy light of a chamber which, he realised with a shock, was his own bedroom, but completely cleared of furniture. Pink gauze drapes and electric bulbs of various colours had been arranged upon layers of moss, and on these, sadly sleeping, lay various of his young lady friends, some seemingly at a great distance. When the door was opened to the pilgrim choir's mighty solemn singing, the little heads stirred, eyes gazed around in confusion, pointing fingers tried to make sense, and they recognised the pilgrim standing glumly by the door. He had a plain pilgrim staff in his hand, his companion, a one-eyed shepherd with a big armful of roses, declared: Tannhäuser has returned broken to Venusberg, no roses have sprouted from his staff as Rome demanded, it wasn't the proper staff; now wearied from his long wanderings Tannhäuser has returned with lovely natural roses that he himself has plucked. Let every nymph and Venus graciously receive him. And a miracle occurred! As the ladies rose from their couches in their gauze veils making lots of delicate

gestures, with one voice every one of them declared: I am Venus! They stretched bare arms out to the bemused pilgrim, beseeched him to believe them. He mumbled, the situation was critical, clearly the true ring of Venus had gone missing. He fended off the ladies, under this surfeit of love sighed that he'd better go back to Rome. The guests intervened in to resolve his perplexity. Anyway, by midday when Uncle and Auntie appeared, they found a Venusberg echoing with music and joyful sounds of reunion.

Some among the very mixed crowd of celebrants evinced a somewhat mercenary interest in the wealthy businessman. They made approaches, turned up now and then at his apartment, they might be invited to dine, and Mr and Mrs Industrialist took delight in these young people, acquiring knowledge of social circles which were otherwise a closed book. The aunt, as we may well imagine, especially relished the stimulation they brought. Small – very small – considerations made their way to the visitors, albeit only until July each year (Erich's birthday fell in May), then it was time for the summer holidays, and the industrialist couple played the enviable role that was their lot on this Earth of being merely uncle and aunt, and when they came back they knew of nothing more. It was the fate suffered by the goddess Persephone when she returned to the wintry ground, for only in the lesser half of the year could she adorn the surface of the Earth.

There were many such harmless events around Erich the Fat. The mother revelled in her delight: truly, in her sons she had everything that was denied her as a girl. Strength of command in Karl, love and joy in Erich. She could not often enough persuade Karl (he's at risk of becoming too stern, oh he takes after me, it runs in the family) to come and visit Erich. When Karl was busy in the office and travelling a lot, she had little success; at that time Karl disapproved of the way Erich was going, he had no desire to take part in such frivolities, but his love for his brother remained steadfast. Only after the marriage did he change. Karl, overburdened by work, head of a respectable household, came more often, without Julie of course, to see Erich, who was still living with their mother.

What did Karl look for from Erich and the company he kept? "My shadowed guest on an Earth that knows not morn," Erich would quote at him. At first only distraction, diversion, later "observation". Yes, this was the less assured and ever growing impulse in Karl: to observe, watch, listen. But for what? He wanted to stop time – no movement, nothing happening. Gaze into a mirror. When Erich greeted him like that, Goethe's words referred as well to Karl's eyes, which were ringed by shadows. But actually Karl was never gloomy, merely overworked. Erich knew this: "When you're tired, come to me, I'm the date palm, you can rest in my shade."

"Yes, it's good to sit with you, Erich. It's so nice that you have no telephone here."

SAINT GENOVEVA

This cordial relationship persisted after Erich's marriage, one year after Karl's.

It was, as mentioned, merely by chance that the stout amiable young man, for whom everything turned out for the best, had not married years earlier; but the mother applied

the brakes. He declared: "Mother, people shouldn't take marriage so seriously. They all overdo it. I'm sorry, but you still have provincial notions. Take that fat pastor, the mammoth, the water-tower who joined Karl and Julie in matrimony, what concept can that ponderous monster, that representative of received opinion, have of marriage. For them, marriage is a snail's shell for two, or a family vault where the still living must dwell: here they rest in peace, John Doe and wife, and form a family. Dreadful business, Mother. We need something else, something that helps, that brings relief and joy."

The mother stroked his head, and thoughts tumbled through her brain.

And so she allowed him, in God's name, after many storms had blown themselves out, to marry "Saint Genoveva". Here was "Veva" in person: her real name was Inge, but Erich insisted he could only imagine her with a fawn at her side. Fate had, alas, entangled her in a situation that marked her clearly off from the saint, and he could see no way out of it but marriage. "Nothing lasts forever," the mother consoled Erich. "Nothing lasts forever," Erich consoled his mother as they accepted the inevitable. "Your view of marriage and the family is too tragic, with Veva I have a task to fulfil. We must be humane to one another, Mother."

And so the mother and Karl were able to observe in Erich's apartment much that was amusing, and much that was painful. Little blonde Veva had been rescued by Erich from the dragon (her mother) that watched over her back home and who, now that she could come out with it, called her daughter a wastrel and a tramp, she had even pawned her mother's jewellery. But after the marriage was done and dusted mother and daughter got along better, and some said the daughter's distress and the mother's hostility had never been as bad as it seemed, and each deserved the other.

Erich, the young husband, acquired a chemist's shop in villa-land (he wasn't yet licensed for a dispensing pharmacy), and set up residence nearby. It was all as warm-hearted and casual as ever with Erich. But with an old experienced manager at the chemist's shop, there was no cause for concern about the future of this new setup.

As for the marriage, matters were very different. In the early days at least, he and his beloved could be left to themselves. He devoted himself joyfully to his young wife, now in a new environment and out of her mother's clutches. To some extent he had complete freedom of action, in particular to put paid to those stupid notions he had tried in vain to combat: namely that what drives people into ruin and misery is external circumstances. While he, Erich, knows the truth: misery comes only from the individual. For sure they are ruined to a considerable degree by society, a bad upbringing, the family; but struggling against those forces only brings more misery. By contrast, if only people simply come face to face, openly one human being to another, and know where all the bad things come from, and refuse to tolerate the bad things, then how can they fail to achieve peace and amity for themselves.

Of course, once the experiment has succeeded, he will release little Veva – dear oppressed creature with the fawn – from the marriage. Veva has assured him that she will stay only as long as he wants her, and if he sends her away, then she will go. "Of course, I

shall," she said, lifting her delicately formed little face, manly pride before a royal throne. He can see her already, walking off into solitude with her little fawn. He opened his arms: how can the experiment fail?

She was actually in clover, with Erich. She had tasted little of the world, the one or two adventures in her past had not come off well. She calculated that she was silly beyond the average, and that men found this really fascinating.

In accord with his own character, he worked only with goodwill, laissez-faire, enlightened attitudes. They took trips to scenic and interesting places, he never let anything rude or ugly come close to her, even Nature came under this rule. One must ever be on guard against the sublime in all its forms, he said, there's only one step between the sublime and the vulgar. She had to admit she had never enjoyed such free and pleasant months. Erich really was a rare specimen. He showed himself uncommonly discreet where acquaintances they met on their travels were concerned; once they were back in the city she would meet up with this or that one, and he never asked where she was going, made sure she had some money on her and wouldn't catch cold. He performed his duty, let nothing go amiss.

He was even ready to give her a child, "ten, as far as I'm concerned, if you're prepared to deal with the pack," he chuckled, complacent and jocular. But luck was with him. However hard they tried, no child came. Once when she returned home in tears, she told him the doctor had said there's still a few more years. He hugged her tenderly: "But, my dear child, a few more years! Believe me you, you'll have one much sooner than that. I'm sure the problem lies with me. I don't have a high opinion of myself in that regard."

She stared at him.

"But Vevakins, a few more years! You'll already be a different person, free, and we shall no longer be together."

She realised with a shock: he really means to send me back to Mother, then what shall I do. Up till then Veva had comported herself well, everyone in Erich's extensive circle admitted she had changed beyond recognition, and this after only half a year. Now she saw she had adopted the wrong approach, and grew depressed. With good reason, for it would be hard to find another situation like hers. When she was happy she thought glumly: he'll send me away soon; and when she was gloomy all she wanted was for him to make her happy. But that would only repeat the dangerous cycle.

So she began to weep and make his heart heavy. He wrung his hands: why does she want a baby, of all things in the world why must it be a baby exactly, can't it be a dog or an angora cat, there's already such a huge supply of children, why does she want to add to it? But she would not budge. She sent the fawn off on holiday, and pleaded for a child. Once again he posed the question as tactfully as he could: does the baby have to be mine? It was only an offhand remark, meant sympathetically, but what a response it unleashed! She scolded him for besmirching her womanly honour, for trampling on a wife's natural feelings. He had to atone endlessly for being so permissive.

The wonderful outcomes of his educational methods melted away before his eyes as tempest followed tempest. He no longer dared even hint that the time for them to part was drawing near. He felt squeezed into a situation he found unnatural. She felt that life was at last following its normal course.

Now the cheerful fat man was unrecognisable, entangled in this snare.

Karl and the mother were privy to every detail of the game. Porky was as always their problem child, the apple of their eye. At first they rejoiced to see him settled and happy, and as matters turned sour their faces darkened. The mother, being the expert, kept a loving eye on the marriage, fascinated by the ease with which Erich bore what she had always carried around as a heavy burden. Even Veva, idle delicate child with tears in her bright blue eyes, brought the mother joy. She saw how Veva stood her ground, she did it so well, and how Erich fell silent. But no, little Veva, we have not reached our venerable age just to see you silence our good feeble boy.

There was a scene between Veva and Erich. Once again Veva was in tears, because she just felt so so sad. Erich took soundings. Whereupon Veva came out with it: Erich had treated her so meanly, he had sinned against her, because he'd never been serious about her. Erich was stunned. It was like being hit by lightning. He, not loving? He who did everything for love – selflessly, compassionately? He hardly ever spends a day away from her, he only knows from hearsay how the chemist shop is going, the manager might be fiddling thousands, millions, he fears he might.

“Erich! Millions, in a little chemist’s shop?”

“Does either of us know about pharmacies, Vevakins? These days anything’s possible, you get out of bed rich and by evening you’re poor, but the reverse can also happen.”

“But it’s only ever been a marriage for show, our marriage has,” she cried. “It’s immoral!”

“For God’s sake, Veva, you don’t mean you look on me as your husband?”

“Of course, why not? Why can’t someone be married to you?”

Erich stared at her, turned pale, he raised his hands, looked at them, they were trembling; he looked closer, yes, there’s a mild tremor. The mother whispered a few words in Veva’s ear. Veva gave a start, stamped her foot. Erich, the suffering sinner, sighed: “But I really don’t want to be married, Vevakins, for God’s sake don’t do this to me. Haven’t I always been good to you? What do you want from me?” Veva hissed: “Mother’s boy”, and ran to the next room.

Karl leaned back in his armchair. How seriously Erich takes these females, what’s the little creature thinking, what’s she feeling – it’s pathetic. Pacing about the carpet Erich talked to himself: “Nothing in it for me. I don’t even love Veva any more, I’ll never be done with her, if I stay with her I’ll go downhill myself.”

Of course, it wasn’t Erich’s helplessness that Veva had to contend with, rather the robust onslaught from his relations and acquaintances. The threat of a boycott by all her friends hung over her, they accused her of abusing Erich’s goodness, of tricking him into

marriage – oh, everything she secretly intended to do with Erich and had already done was raised, one might say in public, in several debates in the back room of the chemist's shop between Veva and Erich's circle of chums. And how awful they made it sound! She knew that if it had been left to her and Erich, that good man, just the two of them, then it could all have been patched up, but that lot prevented it from happening. As soon as he confessed everything to his chums, he acquired a permanent squad of guardians over his body and soul. The mother and Karl laughed together with Julie when they heard the outcome. At the sight of Veva's sad face, Erich kept trying to evade his guardians, but he was on a tight rein. The parties entered into negotiations. Veva's mother emerged from the shadows. After an endless tear-streaked embrace with Erich (he too sobbed), Veva left the house. That evening the merry guardians summoned Erich's mother: Erich had relapsed into the dreadful screaming fits of his childhood.

That same evening Karl brought Erich to his apartment. Over the weeks that followed he recovered, grew pale and thin. Veva returned sheepishly to her family with a small settlement, from a marriage that within a year she was proudly proclaiming a successful act of piracy.

Erich swore never to leave his mother. She smiled: "Until next time."

"No, Mother, anything, but not marriage. It's awful. I would never have believed it. People out there are nice and tolerable, marriage turns them into ravening beasts. It's not for a placid fellow like me."

From then on he ate mostly at the mother's place. How happy he was when Karl popped his head in for the first time after Erich's recovery, and sat with them for a quarter of an hour. She served out the soup. "There you are! With me you'll always be in good hands, my boys."

END OF PART 2