

Alfred Doebelin



Beyond Alexanderplatz

ALFRED DÖBLIN
EXPECT NO MERCY

Part 3. Crisis

Translated by C.D. Godwin

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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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Part Three

Crisis

HARD TIMES

Hard times set in.

If only people had let things be, they could have led their placid communal lives for decades longer, a little turn this way, a swerve that way, only old age would arrive at last and lay them horizontal, as Nature intended. But now the affairs of the world are organised so that one always needs another, the husband cannot live without the wife, nor the wife without the husband, nor children without the parents, and none of these tiny groups without bigger ones, ever bigger, bigger. When the world was local, the nomads of the steppe led their primitive lives, and all they worried about was the grazing, the weather, the growth of their flocks, the birth-count. But once you have railways and ships and aeroplanes, telegraph, telephone and radio, you give up any right to peace and quiet, you've grown out into the world, and must live with the fact that it comes to you and every far-off event is right here at your fingertips, knees, soles of your feet.

How affluent most countries had become! Truly, there had been such a boom that nobody could miss it. The big city had spread like a mighty tree, an oak with multiple trunks, branches all entwined, adding year by year yet another growth ring, flaunting its blossom. Then from afar – oh the world is wide, but is it really so wide? – bad news arrived of collapsed businesses, bank failures, but who is affected, a few little scratches won't kill you. Strange names popped up everywhere in the newspapers, and would not go away – annoying grease spots on the page.

News came of stock exchanges and their supposedly catastrophic falls, crashes even, someone or other had lost millions, somewhere an enormous fraud was uncovered, incredible numbers were bandied about. So if you were an ordinary wage or salary earner, your hair literally stood on end. Voices could be heard proclaiming that speculators are mixed up in it, the entire system of stocks and shares is infected. It was but one small step to a slick phrase that every wage and salary earner came to believe ever more firmly: the stock exchange itself is a disease. At first, it's true, you could find comfort in the fact that the affected countries were geographically all far away, and so the hoi polloi asked: why not simply cut the phone lines, set up a kind of quarantine zone. Otherwise people preferred just to ignore the whole thing. Because looking out of the window onto the street you saw that everything was going along fine, spring had come, summer followed, those with money travelled, those without stayed at home, many knew nothing at all of the enormous calamity lurking in those far-off lands, and really it was for the best. The cleverest thing to do, seen rightly, was to cancel the newspaper, stop reading the papers, don't upset your nerves. No one likes a killjoy, so a newspaper dependent on subscribers must take care not to alarm its readers.

And so, for quite a while, the papers offered only short scattered items that could be read like the solemn post-mortem after an accident; the reader was given a brief glimpse behind the curtain, but only to boost his own self-assurance, for if you asked the tobacconist, the postman, acquaintances at the office or in the factory, no one had any

inkling of the disaster unfolding over there, and the telephone lines could confidently be left intact. With true passion, and an accurate estimation of the current situation, the most careful attention was given to the normal flow of murders and train crashes and the occasional loss of an aeroplane. The functioning of the parliamentary system was an enduring interest, and assertions were made about the qualities required in a truly great, to some extent fully-fledged, newly elected representative. But the only known examples to fit the bill were already deceased.

Then, suddenly, a low yet penetrating howl like the yowling of cats could be heard from the industrial and commercial sectors. They had to repay their debts. In itself this was nothing surprising, and would not have alarmed a public chewing calmly on its diet of murders and plane crashes. But so many firms, and such big ones, and none of them can pay! Behemoths, their names had become famous over the last decade because of their dizzying rise, almost every month their share capital added another zero. Names with the glitter of gold were on every tongue. They were unable to repay their debts, debts they themselves had incurred! Now came the shock: in those far-off lands with their damnable speculations, they had once hit upon a splendid wheeze: hand the satanic gold acquired through an economy built on plunder over to other fine, solid countries in order to reap a bounteous harvest. They hoped for (and to some extent received) absolution from the fine solid countries for their past crimes. Having unrepentantly carried on their depraved activities and been punished by ever bigger bank failures and depressions, now they were demanding that others ... repay their money!

But why, a sober debtor might wonder. Surely only to finance further speculations. In such circumstances, said the entire naïve population of the big city, it's quite in order not to repay, thereby saving the creditors from further crimes, and encouraging them onto the path of righteousness.

Nevertheless there were some in the world of commerce and industry who spoke of commercial morality, and they repaid certain sums: generous acts that quickly led to their own demise. Like insects that perform their manly duty with a female of the species, and thereby sacrifice their own life. But most domestic industry shrouded itself in genteel silence, kept complaints to itself, action limited to not repaying.

While the public remained engrossed in murders and aeroplane crashes, and enjoyed learning about society's yeast – the criminal underworld, love-life in low dives, strange rituals, gangs and their romantic relationships – an insidious worsening of the situation came creeping up behind. Up till now everyone had remained calm and patient. But with debts not repaid and foreigners refusing to lend more, the bottom fell out of the barrel. Those foreigners are taking revenge, just because we pointed out they can't go on like that. Now the public heard that those foreigners were accusing the debtor countries of burying the borrowed money in vast banks, factories, hospitals, housing estates. OK, so why exactly did you lend it? To take the bull by the horns, did you not intentionally force your Mammon gold onto others, in order to earn higher interest from the sweat and toil of those others (a sly manoeuvre!) and now you hurl accusations because the work was actually done? Here we see a "stony adversary" (cf. Shylock). Anyway, no more loans.

Now everyone was eager to see what would happen next. But the least eager saw it first.

Construction activity slackened across the country, and in the big city too, that happy proliferation. Which caused many men to grieve, and their wives and children, the relatives they supported, their mothers, grandmothers. And if mother and grandmother still lived with them, they tried to shuffle them off, mostly to the municipal old folk's home or care home. Which meant less custom for the local butcher and baker, cobbler and tailor.

Not only bricklayers, but others too were dismayed by the slump in the construction industry: carpenters who trimmed beams and went about with axe and folding rule, glaziers, fitters, plumbers, painters, wallpaperers, stove installers, and all their wives and children, and the relatives they supported, their mothers and grandmothers. They too had to tighten their belts, and provide less custom to butchers, bakers, tailors and shoemakers. On the other hand they spent a lot more time in the pub; at home they were morose, maltreated wife and children.

Out in the countryside and in the suburbs, brickworks fired fewer bricks, and so could let workers go.

This was the first trickle, the early stage of the Crisis. It advanced with pauses and jolts. But in the countryside and the big city there were still millions of people who noticed nothing, shook the head and said you mustn't exaggerate, there are good times and there are bad times, now it's the turn of bad times, nothing unusual, it'll pass soon enough, we can bear it –and for sure, *they* could. Anyone listening had to agree. But then they were in the same position as the man who sits peacefully in his garden under a beech tree, dreaming and smoking, enjoying the beauties of Nature. A few leaves flutter by, he observes the delicate leaves with their little stalk as they fall and turn and turn about, they convert the falling into a little game. More leaves fall, onto the lawn in front of him a chestnut comes crashing in its prickly green shell, whoa, wouldn't like that on my head! He thinks: what a remarkable time of year, here I am out of the wind, there must be a wind higher up. And he looks up at the foliage, which is utterly still. And he gazes even higher hoping to spot the breezes that blow there but not here below, he's hot on the heels of one of Nature's secrets. Suddenly there's another crack! Bits of husk, torn leaves flutter onto his knees, there, movement, he shades his eyes, there's a rustling in the leaves, there's an animal up there, a squirrel with its flouncy-bouncy waggly tail.

The public began to ponder. There's never a good outcome to pondering by the public. It takes up this powerful tool only in the direst of straits. The approaching calamity was much on its mind. In the Middle Ages, when the Black Death, that fearsome plague, broke out in the west, they pondered on many things, but not on the muck that coated villages and towns, that piled up in foetid quarters where the lanes were deep in ordure and the houses were overrun by rats. They pointed fingers at wizards and witches, and burned them by the dozen, they hanged well-poisoners, they went in procession to holy relics and confessed their sins, they pronounced summary judgement on anyone suspicious, along with wife and child. The dirt in their houses was left lying.

But now everyone is enlightened and swears by Science. So Science is given its head.

Institutes were set up (hey, building work!) to study economic interdependencies, a kind of social weather forecasting, and it turned out that the new Economics was no slouch compared to venerable Astrology and Meteorology. Equipped with enormous libraries and reports that flowed in endlessly (some were accurate), the professors at the institutes along with their numerous assistants began to construct graphs and charts like doctors, to edit books and scribble furiously for the newspapers. No one could doubt their diligence, they showed how essential they were. They were a boom amid the slump. They laid out the situation point-blank, showed what everyone already suspected, but this time in black and white with red green blue lines: it was all to do with Technology. An entity, a mischief, a monster called Technology – it must be hunted down as quickly as possible and expelled from the country – had maliciously caused Industry to develop too fast. This despicable Thing, with the help of unsuspecting engineers, had perfected the Machine, modernised the Work Process, and (disastrously) functioned all too well, superbly even, bringing wonderful harvests. Mines yielded astonishing quantities, no one had ever thought mines could hold so much in their belly. And with everything so abundant, there was nothing crops, coffee, copper, zinc could do but become cheaper, and then they were no longer worth the effort, there was no profit in it, and so Money, that good and useful substance, everyone's spoiled favourite, crept down to the cellar and sulked, and as for the thousand ten-thousand hundred-thousand workers still with a job, they were now completely surplus to requirements, and that's the cause of Unemployment and there's no mystery about it, it's clear as daylight. Obviously enterprises must become smaller, to restore an orderly business routine.

Remarkable, said workers and staff after a pause, in order for the Economy to digest what belongs to an orderly business routine, we must be thrown onto the street. All around the world, their leaders and teachers who still had a place in the enterprise or the office declared: alas, it is so.

Yes, a most remarkable and unfathomable event was playing out all around the world: the Crisis. During the boomtime, the Earth had rung with wild happy sounds, everyone gathered like a band of victorious warriors in a cacophonous hall, drinking and celebrating as ever more gold, loot and slaves were carried in.

Now the world was draped in apprehension and silence. Whoever had the strength defended his position in fear and gloom. People began to arm themselves against others. The structure erected by the boom rustled and creaked. Worms were at work.

WORMS AT WORK

The moguls of the furniture industry had a blessed time behind them. The firm run by Karl and his uncle was one of the most modern. The old-fashioned jigsaw, jacksaw, auger, breast-drill, the mallet, the plane, the woodworking knife, riving knife, straight iron, curved iron, they all still existed, but only as adjuncts, kept on the side. The mighty power

of heavy machinery had long been conscripted into the workrooms, just as artillery had been conscripted into every great army, and in place of the two-storey structure with the metal stairs that Karl ran up and down every day as an apprentice, now two massive buildings behind had been taken over, and the front structure served as a permanent showroom. Lathes turned iron as easily as soft wood, the electric motors installed below hummed. Grinding and polishing were done on a machine with endless belts. Timbers were brought down from the mountains by lorry and caterpillar tractor, flung at once under wood-splitters, dismembered by the huge tearing teeth of vertical gang saws and transverse saws. Mechanical chisels gouged sharp-edged holes, there were steel benches for cutting joints and grooves, the workpiece was clamped in a great big moulding machine equipped with a gouger to excavate precisely right-angled tenon joints. The firm deploying all this firepower turned premises across the city into depots and showrooms for its products, while the sales force spread across every corner of the land. The earlier focus on furniture for the affluent and middle classes was maintained, while new mass-market items were added, mass-produced for customers in the rising working class. Payment schemes were explored, and clever instalment plans enticed customers into not just purchases, but also, one might say, into establishing a household, marrying.

The Crisis huffed its icy breath across every land. No one built anything. The rich grew uneasy, the poor saw at the window the most dreadful of all humanity-haunting spectres: unemployment.

For Karl, the blow fell on both the luxury and the instalment-plan ends of the business. One after another the workrooms fell silent. Some provincial operations were (as they put it) consolidated.

What did he see of the blow? Deserted halls in the factory, expensive machinery lying idle, profits lost. But there were reserves. Ledgers of incomings and outgoings would balance again before long.

What did he fail to see? The final pay packets received by the workers at the cashier window together with their papers, and how the workers tucked them into their haversacks and stood around in the fume-filled hall, spat on the floor, and walked out. He failed to see their still tolerably fresh-looking faces as they stood around outside the gate, shook one another by the hand, and cast a last sour look at what was a splendid modern factory building, the pride of modern architecture, the façade had been featured in illustrated papers with a photo of the builder and the two bosses, pioneers of modern construction methods. And then how one or other drew near to home, eyes directed ever more gloomily at the ground, shoulders slack, lips tight. Then he hands the final pay packet to the wife, he hears the canary twittering in its cage, the children come running, and he slumps with his elbows on the table. Tomorrow he'll ... get up late, but he'll be awake at six, no, he'll sleep badly, lie awake at three, he can sense the wife and children lying there, can hear their breathing, it's still pitch-dark, there's no work today, I can lie in, I'd better go to the Union, register, then the unemployment office, get a stamp, what will they hand out, the wife will have to see about another waitress job, I'll look after the children, they'll take all our stuff away if we don't keep up the payments.

In the morning they came on foot and by bicycle to the stamp office, gathered, waited, queued up, were let in, sat down, waited, queued up at the counter, stood, waited, pushed their book across, obtained a stamp, went to another counter, stood, waited, shoved their book across, received their due, and now that's all settled the day is free, they can go home and wait, wait. In their hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands they creep home one by one, take out the purse, put away the money, nothing happens in the next three days, then they seep once again from the tenement blocks, drip trickle pool stream towards the unemployment office, but there they no longer gush like a river, only make little ripples, murmur, and a few hours later spill again out of the wide doors, push their bike, fix their cap, trickle into the city.

However many they were, they never swamped the unemployment office, never flooded into a building, all they did was suffer, oh, such suffering.

*

As the Crisis gathered, Karl was an overworked broad-shouldered man in his forties, with the bones of a peasant and quick movements. There was a vertical furrow in the middle of his forehead, as if from a thought that would not go away. Mouth, chin and gaze energetic. Face pale, often sallow from long periods in enclosed spaces, trains, hotels, cars. His hair was thinning. That the boom would hit an obstacle at some time was clear to him and to other industrialists. But they had plentiful reserves.

Even though Karl basically went his own way, he kept in touch with his manufacturers' federation. Common measures clearly being necessary (though what, exactly, was unclear), he took part in discussions like all the others. In the evenings, at dinner with Julie, he would report on the situation in his flat factual manner, he has to attend another meeting of the association, has to represent Uncle, who's unwell, so tonight their cosy after-dinner session in the nook must be put off.

Her eyes widened: "Are you becoming political, Karl?"

He peeled his pear and cooed good-humouredly: "Not at all, Julie. There are others for that. We have more sensible things to do. Preventive measures are called for. I'm afraid I shall have to leave you on your own rather frequently in the next few weeks."

She was disappointed, annoyed, almost outraged.

Throughout the decade, their marriage had remained as harmonious and exemplary as at the beginning. Julie, offspring of an affluent bourgeois family, lived in its ambience, under its laws. She had long ceased complaining to her parents, she was on excellent terms with "the" mother, even paid court to her, and became reconciled to having married into a "petty provincial clan". And if it was sometimes too constricting, too enervating, there was at least the other aspect: Karl's care for her. (She would tell her mother with a laugh: "Peasants always take care of their cattle.") Then she would play a little game and take to her bed, and he would be at his wits' end, her doctor quickly saw through the ploy, such a shock to see Karl so agitated, the fellow really will miss her if she should die, or abandon him. More recently, to be sure, with all this economic turmoil

Karl revealed his true businessman's colours: now and then, for no reason, he allowed himself to take brutal liberties (only verbally; once even in the presence of her dumbfounded mother), chastising her like one of his factory hands. Afterwards he made up for it by being especially attentive, asked her forgiveness. He could also go about all day in icy silence, treating the home as if it wasn't there.

Julie knew that marriage was no honeymoon. Right from the first Karl had rebuffed her tender advances: "What if someone sees us, Julie!" But no one saw her, he was not at all bothered by it, their life together was a private affair, nothing in the world would lead him to see his marriage reduced to the level of a love affair. But this fatal ineradicable yearning of Julie's, this sense of oppression, emptiness, she feels a physical discomfort, goes to the doctor, he finds nothing wrong, smiles. Oh, how often she goes to the mirror. I have two children, they're growing up, I'm growing older. I'm not fat, but I don't like my eyes. I'm collapsing, like cinders in the fireplace. Whatever pot you stew in, it's all the same. Must be old age coming on. If I were someone else, I'd moan about stagnating in a provincial dump. How lucky I am to be in the big city.

That evening when Karl spoke of the upcoming activities and meetings that would interrupt their evening conversations, they chatted a bit more, the children's procession approached down the corridor, led by the nanny with little Karl in her arms, Miss Julie tripping along behind in pink pyjamas. There were goodnight kisses, the little troop retreated in good order. Karl stood, kissed Madam's hand. This unapproachable man. That was the word: unapproachable. And now off he goes, he won't even allow himself to say I shall stay here tonight, and sit around as he always loves to do.

When Julie's mother came and saw the deserted nook, Julie was in the drawing room, on the telephone; her eyes were darting, almost wild. Her mother wanted to take her to the nook for a cosy chat, but Julie threw back her head, scowled: "We'll talk here."

Has something happened?

Julie smiled: "Nothing ever happens to me. Karl and I haven't quarrelled."

"The children?"

Now she asks after the children. Will I be that sort of mother one day? "They're in bed."

"Not ill?" – "Quite well."

"There's so much flu around, I'm so worried about the spring."

"You always have been, mother." Daughter on the leather sofa, arms spread left and right along the back, makes a counterthrust: "How is Father?"

The woman on the writing-desk chair stares in surprise: "Father? Why do you ask?"

"I just thought. How is he?"

The woman, uncertain before this peevish face (have I done something to her?), fumbled for a few words: he has a lot to do, he's away again tomorrow for the whole week. Julie laughed out loud: "So you're free of him for a whole week."

Whatever does the girl want?

“All I mean, Mother, is that the house is clear, you can give it a thorough cleaning, no one in the way.”

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That evening Karl exchanged his tranquil living room for a blue-themed hotel conference room. Two enormous chandeliers scattered light. Committee table, men bowing, papers rustling, chairs scraping. There was talk of necessary austerities, invited experts were called on to explain their charts. An impression was given that here there would be no Crisis. Fierce competitive quarrels were set aside. The white-bearded convenor of this plenary session declared in ringing tones: “We are engaged in a life and death struggle. For all of us marching here there is but one line of defence, one trench, against the common enemy (who went unnamed): we must stand shoulder to shoulder ...”

A gentleman of enormous stature – a mighty orator who brooked no objections, a jovial smart-alec philistine – delivered a very respectable speech. The unanimous view (here Karl felt a stab of terror) is that the Crisis will last quite a while. Of course we are all just in the initial phase, the rain is setting in slowly, umbrella manufacturers have their hands full, and anyone with holes in his shoes has wet feet. We shall experience great changes, and those too are necessary. (Karl thought: a bit steep to say that out loud! They must have broad shoulders.) We can see clearly enough, and won't hide the facts, tomorrow the sparrows will chirp it from the rooftops. They accuse us – our industries – of expanding too far too fast, and no one wants to pose the counter-question: given a booming economy, a surging construction sector, a growing population, should we have tried to stay small? All we did was follow the course of development step by step, adapt to growing demand, as was our duty, and it can all be boiled down to one simple formula. (Everyone nods.) On the other hand, over there serious excesses were piling up. Development and development are in the end actually two things. Everything needs to maintain a healthy foundation. But where do we stand with social welfare? All things in moderation. That legislators have devised benefits for sickness, accidents and so on: all honour to them. The thoughts of every civilised person are governed by humanitarian impulses. But when humanitarian impulses gain control of business, where will it end? I have to calculate and calculate, and can never make ends meet. A load of timber, a stack of veneer costs me so much, transport so much, rent, wages so much, hence the furniture item costs so much to make, and I have to sell it for roughly so much, there's no room for humanitarian impulses there, because those don't reduce my costs at all. If I want to be humanitarian, that's my private pleasure, and I keep no separate accounts for it. Business cannot be pressured by humanitarian impulses. But that's where we are, to the detriment of the whole. For when social and other costs climb so high, prices can only climb accordingly, but then no one wants our products, and we have to let people go, and then what? You see where sentiment alone takes us to.

And so this orator – it was quite a temperamental outburst – demanded austerity in areas that should really be viewed as luxuries: schools, universities, libraries, museums.

They consume enormous amounts of money, nobody knows what all that education is good for, they breed an academic proletariat, plant brainworms in every young person. We need clear heads, not eggheads. Ancient Greece can be stolen from us (let's be frank), there's a sharp wind blowing, we can't afford pastimes that come with such a price tag.

The theme of "salutary crisis measures" having then been touched upon, the moderator, a lawyer who was also a businessman, saw fit, sweet-sour smile on his lips, to offer the room his opinion: he is anguished by that philistine middle-class vandalism which would do away with universities and academies. Here he is, luckily still has a job, and can justify his existence only by charts and higher perspectives. He referred in passing to the cultural importance of universities and art colleges, for apart from the question of prestige – a great country cannot do without universities and education – they are important for attracting foreign visitors and thus boosting revenue ("That's good to hear!"). Then the lawyer, resentful salary-man, crept closer to his overlords with a different argument, thinking to establish a link between industrialists and academics. He came around the corner bright and bushy-tailed with the demonstrable (but how?) growth of the trade unions. Political parties, alas, are probably necessary, to each his own, but when the unions begin to believe they can criticise industrialists, what, for our part, are we supposed to say about the growth of the trade union movement, where the radicals have the floor (hackles rising)? Where is it leading to? The unions are aiming unambiguously for a state within the state (high treason, blah blah).

The white-bearded convenor, well-used to cutting off the lawyer, raised a hand, the lawyer promptly subsided and hid behind his beer mug. The convenor spoke for all (cementing victory over the academics): "We shall not involve ourselves in politics."

Karl's sober contribution drew attention, and certain points were agreed regarding tactics for reducing wages. They took notice of this man, whose aggressive approach to business had up till now marked him only as an odious competitor. He's a fine up and coming fellow, wily, likeable, unemotional.

During a conversation in the sick uncle's apartment – as treasurer of the federation he had been hauled out of bed and sat pale, thin, a heap of ashes, in a corner of the sofa, cushions at his back and on both sides, you could imagine his arms were cushions – the white-bearded convenor declared, this being a quite private meeting where all can speak freely: it's going to be a tough fight (he did not say with whom). Who can say which of us will still be on our feet in two years' time? Then we'll put on our caps, go as workers if anyone will take us, or head for the stamp office. Anything is possible, these days who can tell the future. Well then: we must think about support for industry. The one and only productive measure is protection for industry, for keeping people employed and paid. As clear as ABC. When people have work, they have cash in hand and can buy things. But where will they find work if we are pumped dry? So: we must prevent any dissention in our ranks, we need subsidies, tax relief, and so on. The government bends to the unions and the parties, better if they had a modicum of courage. Instead of blowing his trumpet at our meetings, our lawyer colleague would do better to take his charts to the Ministry, and stir them up there.

The uncle with his childlike shrunken wrinkled face, pince-nez wobbling on his nose, glumly shook his head. He thought: I'll soon be in my grave, sitting up doesn't suit me, will they ever stop talking.

The gentlemen there in the uncle's yellow salon – it was actually the aunt's – next to the grand piano long left unopened, between artificial palm trees in a respectful semicircle facing the uncle (not without some fear of infection), sitting on much too dainty little gold chairs, were one and all the progeny of the amiable and half-obligatory philistinism shared by a great majority of the population in this country. Flat undeveloped faces, little liveliness in the expressions, they carried the eggshells of their origin around with them, and if a stranger, a foreigner say, were to drop his handkerchief, he could be sure that at least half of them would instinctively make an irritating move to retrieve it for him. And yet they were not to be trifled with; they were alert enough, for example regarding the importance of their business for their country, and in energy and cunning were a match for the robber barons of old.

An undersized man with a grey moustache and a long thin nose, who liked to gaze past his nose down onto his lap (perhaps to count any drips that might fall), began to mumble. He gazed moistly at the terminally ill uncle: Now that the crisis and the times have become difficult, he allows himself to point out that he saw it all coming. The pursuit of pleasure, the desire for amusements. Everything wants to live. As if we have not lived, though differently, we have no need to feel ashamed because we have lived in modest circumstances and kept our pennies on the high shelf (my dear man, we are not a savings bank!). One should also spend, but in moderation. Everything wants to stay young (he glanced at the uncle, with whom he had often had this conversation, but the uncle clutched the cushions at either side). Now it has to stop. Pride goes before a fall. And the righteous must pay, along with the unrighteous (the righteous awkwardly avoided each other's eyes). Who today thinks of domestic bliss, of wife, children, parents? Those of us who deal in fitting out new homes, and especially children's furniture, have a tale to tell: it's become a most unprofitable line. And who is having babies these days? Two are already plenty, and they run about the streets like stray puppies, in gangs, people hurry off to bars and cinemas and gawp at vulgar films, not a thought to having babies. Parish councillors where I live lament how lazy our youth have become, the pastor complains that the boys and girls who come for Confirmation have nothing but sport on their minds (that's healthy, colleague, let's not start on religion here). Rednose, bent over, mumbled on inarticulately. Then his voice rose, he gazed directly at the uncle, who was fiddling with his pince-nez. "All they want today is a full stomach. That's what all the fuss is about. They couldn't care less about anyone else. The root of evil is the need to fill one's belly. As if our kind have enough to live on. Order must be restored, sobriety."

"No, our brethren won't heed a call to prayer, dear friend, that lot don't give a fig for the dear Lord." All laughed.

Undeterred, the man with the long sad red nose: "We are not wreckers. Without morality we cannot go on, our parents and grandparents knew this. And if the

government does not support the employers, it will collapse. And in the end: who upholds the government?"

"Yes yes, we know all that, friend."

Then they discussed a fighting fund, a new levy for the federation. They wanted public education, propaganda, support for sympathetic politicians, if bending doesn't work, then something must break.

The uncle in his corner of the sofa, propped up by cushions, shook his poor shrivelled head; head, face and neck were as dried up as a field where no rain now falls. The little head thought: my eyes want to close, my mouth is dry, how they love to talk, I was young once, now all my clothes are too big, I'm sure its cancer.

MARITAL CONVERSATION

That was the last meeting attended by the uncle, the oldest member of the Committee. The bed he was carried back to he never left again.

A long-forgotten brother of the aunt, a retired schoolteacher, came to the funeral from a small provincial town. The aunt paid for his trip, at the funeral he took her on his arm. Karl walked behind, with the mother. The mother wore the thick black mourning veil from years ago when she followed her husband to his grave, when not so long ago they buried little Marie.

A choir sang behind bushes, they stood at the graveside.

Now Karl had sole charge of the factory. How high they had raised him; and even Erich, their favourite boy, was doing well. How much resistance she had needed to overcome, how bitter it had all been, how she had hammered at this man's door. Now here he lies, and her children are at her side. Though I must go one day, don't you go from me. A cold breath wafted from the grave, she flung down a handful of soil from the shovel, it rattled. Erich had to grab her to prevent her falling in. Away from this place, I have so much still to do, I shall be my children's joy for a long time yet.

And now, with the uncle dead, Karl was faced with a difficult situation. The widow had discussions with him. She wanted to go travelling for a few months with a hired companion, and would then settle in the small town where her brother lived. Karl was to buy out her share of the business. A substantial capital sum immediately, then regular payments. Karl can decline. When he pondered on the incalculable problems brought by the Crisis, and sat in his office with the chief accountant, the matter was clearly a risk now and for the future. Perhaps the payments can be hedged about by reservations and crisis terms. He can say yes or no. With no, nothing would be lost, the risk would be all on the aunt's shoulders. But then she would have the right to a say in the business, or to appoint a representative. Karl could never think of this without becoming enraged: someone at his elbow, monitoring his decisions, at a time like this, one of her relatives.

When he laid out the situation at the mother's apartment to her and to Erich, they provided his answer: let no one else into the factory, simply take sole control. They trusted him absolutely. The mother was on fire, aha, the final triumph: "The day you sign the agreement and take over the factory will be your second birth, Karl."

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Still he hesitated, went over the calculations once again, the bank raised no objections, but who can speak for the Crisis? It will be a momentous decision. Who can advise me? Suddenly he thought of Julie, obviously not in regard to this matter, for you don't bother her with such practical questions. Plays, music, books, art exhibitions, yes. Julie enjoys her life with the children, at his side noble as the swan on blue waters. But some of Julie's glances, her tone of voice, kept niggling at him. Later, in the midst of all these business matters, he would be bothered by those glances, that tone. Was she dissatisfied, had he done something amiss? Does she lack for something? Perhaps he should confide in her for once about the serious situation, but no, it's no good, it's demeaning, she won't know what to say. Karl was ashamed even to think of the mother: what a funny idea. But still: Julie niggled at him, this lovely creature who had stood and lain at his side for more than a decade; with her births and conversations, her father, mother, children, she was a part of his own existence. Long forgotten the time when they first met, the time when they did not yet know one another. But the Crisis brought everything into confusion, order was overthrown. The idea stayed with him: I simply must talk to Julie.

Back home that evening, having gone through the rooms on his "little" inspection tour, seen the faces of the staff, it was ... impossible. The very thought of discussing business ... impossible, it would be to declare bankruptcy. Dinner, even though he led the conversation, proceeded with fatal normality: queries about knife-sharpening, about laundering the table linen in-house. Other questions were out of bounds: they would conflict with Julie's role in the world.

They moved over to the nook, where the coffee apparatus stood – recently he had taken charge of it – and beside it the toaster, which was under Julie's management. As they stepped across the carpet he tenderly offered her his arm, she wondered: what's up, has he confused me with the mother? Then the maid, approaching without a sound, lit the tealight under the coffeepot gleaming on its little side table, plugged in the toaster, whispered to Madam, who shook her head, Sir reached to his left for the cigar box.

The little flame flickered blue, the toaster gave off a warm spicy aroma. Karl thought as they both sat silent: impossible to let anything break in here. He was aware of this as his gaze took in the shiny glass pot where bright pearls were rising to the surface of the water. Then he glanced at the toaster, Julie was opening and closing it with a little pair of tongs, lightly browned slices of bread appeared, which she laid in a silver dish. Then he looked at her hands, how she wielded the tongs, studied her carefully as she looked down. There she is, my wife, my living property, she who together with me forms this family, with the two children too. This woman belonged to him, this housewife in her little pale blue summer dress (well well, I don't know that little dress, I won't show weakness by

asking about it) and her red-gold hair, today parted in the middle, with her head and her thoughts which include me and her mother and the children. It's the family of the government architect, who remarkably enough has just secured a major commission, his supply of good contacts is inexhaustible.

The water bubbled. Julie asked something, yes, I'll light a cigar. How astonishing are these social rules, these customs. Such a remarkable phenomenon, runs on rails someone else laid, specific width, specific direction, and here they are, I come along with my wagon and have no choice, I must follow the tracks and go in just that direction. Why? They're not like the smoke from my cigar, pale blue by nature, following physical laws as it rises. These rules here I myself laid down, did I not, together with her, they are no laws of nature. And yet here they are, they fill this space even though we cannot see them. In this room only certain things may be said. So, for example, I may not ask Julie what she thinks about paying off Auntie. If I did, I might never set foot in here again, it would give me no pleasure to sit here. Everything would be ruined. The water bubbled, climbed from the pot into the tube, turned brown as it swirled in the filter and mixed with the coffee grounds, dropped back into the pot, boiled, climbed back up. They breathed the heartwarming aroma. Julie handed him his little cup.

As they chatted about an art exhibition she had attended this bright spring day together with her mother, Karl thought, sipping the hot coffee: not to be broached, not to be torn open. She'll laugh if I bring it up. There are things here in this room that compel me to speak, or to keep mum. On the other hand they are all to the good, everything rolls along by itself, which makes life easier. Or should I just tell her?

And as he broke pieces from his toast, he observed the rustling of her sleeves – these too have the force of laws – and asked Julie, his living property, mother of his children: "Have you ever noticed, Julie, how cosily, how calmly we can sit here? In the apartment? Right away when you open the door and step inside, do you notice it?"

She nodded, what's that tone in his voice, he's celebrating the family, he's contented.

"And when I consider, Julie, where it all comes from" (now he laughs, and his features, normally so severe, are those of a mischievous child) "it comes from furniture! It has just become clear to me what a great part our much-maligned furniture industry plays in the life of society. Clothes make the man, for sure, but furniture makes the family. You can't argue with a sideboard, a credenza, a set of leather-covered chairs when they stand there on the carefully chosen carpet. They dictate your steps, your expression, your very thoughts." He paused for her response, which came between two sips of coffee:

"I am very much in favour of furniture dealers, Karl, obviously. But furniture that prescribes or forbids, if I understand you correctly, furniture that upholds society, no. That must be a novel advertising ploy you've devised. I can see it already on the page: Furniture makes the family, furniture the bulwark of the State. You're a cunning lot!"

"So you disregard it? You think you are free, you'd rather be free?"

"But so would you, Karl." (He was stung.)

“It’s impossible, you can’t always be starting afresh. Things have been set up, there they are, and they guide us along.” It was a wish, a plea.

“But for God’s sake, Karl, we surely must be able to call a halt at some point.”

“On the contrary, we should be grateful that we cannot.”

“That we cannot?”

“No, try to see, Julie. We cannot. At first it seems like an obstacle, but then it’s security, tranquillity, comfort.” (How strange, what’s he talking about? Is he talking about what he has done to me?)

The radio he was idly fiddling with emitted a sweet plaintive waltz. They succumbed, eyes closed, to the melody. When he looked up again, there on the wall opposite was a peaceful harvest landscape, but the landscape was swiftly overlain by an image dredged from his soul, the heroic canvas spread itself across the treetops and lakes, he saw the victorious king on horseback on the hill between two broad-crowned trees. Thus is the nation founded and secured, the king is no longer with us, but what was accomplished on that day is present, visibly and invisibly, and extends its threads across the land, and we move about among these threads, and it is so, and let no one dare disturb it.

Karl asked no question of Julie. Later, to her surprise, he went arm in arm with her through the front rooms. He was at an emotional peak. She let him lead her across carpets and runners, aha, this is no inspection tour. “You say ‘my home is my castle’. But actually you have two castles, Herr Kommandant. The factory, and this home.”

“The factory is no castle, Julie. It’s an open battleground, with trenches and defensive lines. Who knows how soon it might be overrun.”

“Oh! You’re in peril? Do you need me? Or the castle?”

She’s tempting me to say something, she wants to switch our positions.

“You and the castle I always need, Julie, But you should know what a relief it is that our castle – and it is yours as well – exists independently of us, independently of our moods and external aggravations. It’s the marriage, the family.”

“And how we furnish it to our taste, Karl.”

“Yes. Here we have a kind of breakwater. I was once a little boy, and saw how my father raged against his own castle, we went through bad times. And I almost did the same as he, I wanted to run away from Mother, conquer the world, what did I know. So she boxed my ears, and then it was all good again.”

They were now at the State Apartments, the Museum. With his left hand he lifted the heavy door-curtain. Julie glanced up at him: “She hit you?”

His smile was proud. “Did me no harm, though I was already a grown lad. Refuse to listen, and you have to feel it on your skin. Mother knew what she was doing. It always happens that people do what is necessary.”

They came to the knight with the iron hand, the tin skeleton, now I understand why he's come into this room, he's praying to the iron fist, they are little people, provincials, worthy master cooper, the Revenue Office. "I would never submit to a family, certainly not one run on the lines you suggested. We never had that back in my home. But now you have your own home, Karl. The pretty cupboard, the wonderful sofa, the Byzantine lamps, your mother is not here now, now it's this apartment and its furniture, it's the castle. I suppose I am the prisoner, Herr Kommandant."

"Julie!"

"I shall never let myself be subjected. There's your furniture. Why am I needed. It'll go along well enough without me."

"But Julie."

"Of course it will, Karl, it'll go along nicely without me. You said so yourself. And if I ever displease you, you can do the necessary, and hit me. "

Her lips were quivering, she removed her arm from his, stood apart, arms slack, nostrils flaring. What's going on? Never has anything like it been heard in this room. How is it possible. Is the furniture still here? She dares to give the law a shake? She too is a revolutionary? He felt for her hand. The slave, accepts a slapping, should have lived with his uncle and aunt. She pulled her hand away. "You don't need me at all. It'll go on very well without me."

One second, five seconds, ten seconds, and he was consumed with rage. She had stuck the knife in. She too. She meant to betray him, this very moment. When she had so many duties to fulfil. The bitch. What did the bitch want. This bitch. Who was this bitch at his side. She was looking down, her whole body trembled at the way he had insulted her.

His rage, unremarked by her, crumbled to ashes. He pulled himself together, in a moment of cowardice and weakness he forced himself to say: "But Julie, we are married, we have children, it's not about the apartment, you are my wife, I am your husband."

Her head turned quickly to him: "Yes, think about it, Karl. If only I could feel it more often. You owe me something."

How she talks, how she talks. Rage rose to his very teeth, made them ache. He pulled her arm to him, bent the elbow, raised the hand to his lips. (Oh, the slave is abasing himself, I'd love to grab his hair and fling him to the ground, here in his lovely quiet home.)

"Julie, we should go out together more, you'll come with me on a trip perhaps."

She was in torment: "I really don't understand you at all, Karl," and ran from the room.

Her mirror. She flinched from the reflection, took a comb, dragged it through her hair, powdered her face, sprayed perfume on her handkerchief. He's still in the Museum, looking at his tin knight. The tyrant. No, not tyrant, an unbelievable person, I'm only here so he can indulge his playacting. Tcha, submits to a slap, and he a grown man. She lowered herself onto the chaise longue, her eyes roved about the room, over the Japanese

prints she loved so fondly, the white furniture, her young girl's corner. Standing there in front of his tin knight. The nanny passed down the rear corridor, whispered through the door to the children: now you really must go to sleep. Are children affected when the parents quarrel? She punched her dress, slipped back to the Museum. He was pacing up and down. She ... apologised. I wonder what he'll say now, something tender, it must be. There, I knew it, female caprice. And he pulled her to him, stroked her hair. That's something, but still no kiss, he never does that, can't bring himself to do it, it's all the tin knight's fault.

And she stood on tiptoe, pressed her lips to his, bit his lower lip. He tried to step back, but she held fast, I'll thrash him, the beast, I too can give him a slap, or else he won't listen. Finally she let go.

"But Julie, pull yourself together, what a childish prank, I have meetings tomorrow, my lip will be swollen."

"Then you'll be thinking of me at your meetings."

It gave her a blaze of pleasure to see him dab his bleeding lip. What children they are, these women, and I nearly asked her advice about the payoff.

Soon they were back in the nook, he under her mocking smile with a handkerchief at his mouth, but calmer: the castle has held, she's content, he can feel it.

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This conversation actually had an effect on Karl. No, he won't utter a word to Julie about the Aunt, however momentous the decision may turn out to be. But Karl passed several gloomy confused days and nights, he needed energy and time to restore his balance. He was still annoyed, the more he thought about it the more outrageous and scandalous Julie's behaviour appeared. He could not dislodge that crazy thunderclap of an incident from his mind, the shamelessness was even more serious when you considered the follow-up, the business with the lip, it was still swollen, as if he'd been walloped.

The critical decision, the payoff, acquired for him an unlooked-for significance. I shall have to come clean with Aunt: now more than ever I cannot allow anyone else to have a say in the factory; but I must also take extra care at such a time not to put the factory at risk. My home is my castle. How lucky I never asked Julie for advice. But he postponed the decision for a week.

It suddenly occurred to him, as he paced through the silent halls of his factory, that the Crisis had played a card aimed at him; Julie was part of it. He felt cut to the quick (actually: threatened). Outrage took hold as he reflected on the incident: he will have to take revenge.

What was his disposition following that conversation?

As if he lies in a cave, has fallen asleep, all around him it's calm and good, and suddenly he starts up, there at the bright entrance to the cave there's a rustling in the foliage, branches move, become entangled: something's there.

Or, a peasant has built his farmhouse on a mountain slope, there's been a lot of snow this year, now it's spring, a warm Föhn wind blows through the valleys, there's a fine drizzle, the peasant turns about, sniffs the air, rubs a handful of snow: when will the avalanche come, will the snow-fences and trees hold it back?

After hesitating so long, he looked for a "good" day to make the decision, allowed himself a leisurely drive into the country, then back and forth through the city. It was a fine bright April day, hordes of children had been brought out for an airing in the almost too hot sun. Women and girls in their first summer dresses. The car drove up into the city centre, it was slow going in the snarled traffic, for years he had never taken much notice of the surroundings up here, always the same broad crowd-seething streets and traffic jams. Then over the bridge and you're in the royal quarter, like being in a different city. Fewer cars, no din, parks, monuments, everywhere fresh young greenery and the first flower beddings of the year. Fountains. Sentries left and right in front of the rulers' palaces. And then the huge structure with the many columns, the rotunda of the Hall of Victory towering over the city.

Karl let himself be driven slowly along the winding park roads and the enormously wide avenues laid out for marching armies; branches still stretched bare and black. Such a grand day. What was worrying him, actually: the Crisis, having to drum up ready cash? But the bank raised no objection. Quite the opposite: he was about to take the most momentous decision of his life: become sole owner of the factory. The mother was right: it would be his second birth. The pinnacle of his victory. Lovely dainty wife from the best society at his side, two charming children, a tranquil elegant home, power and mastery, king on the hill of battle after his victory. How strong and solemn and awe-inspiring it all is up here. You feel the centuries of bygone violence that have retired to this royal precinct. Just try to rouse it from its repose! Could anything here be uncertain? Could anyone be apprehensive, given all this? Who, what could unsettle all this? The Crisis? It's his blood that runs in these edifices, so why hesitate? If it all goes under, I shall go under with it. And if it does go under, why should I of all people keep standing. And as he once again greeted the columns of the Hall of Victory, the phrase that stirred in him at the start of the Crisis sounded: "Let's seize our chance!" (The warhorse heeded the signal.)

For another half hour the chauffeur drove at random. The man glanced around at his employer, saw that he was fast asleep in a corner. So relaxed, knows he's in good hands.

They stopped outside the notary's house, and then came a wait of several minutes. The chauffeur understood: he needs to wake up properly first. Then Karl got out, gathered hat and gloves, nodded with a smile to the chauffeur. Upstairs the lawyer, the widow and her representative were waiting. The notary invited them in, they sat, he read the document, the lawyers advised that, as regards subsequent payments, at Karl's wish a crisis clause had been drafted; this was now inserted. Signatures, if you please: widow, Karl, witnesses, the notary himself. The aunt, sobbing, held out a hand to him, he gave it a squeeze, the woman had been shaken to the core by the uncle's death, her life had always revolved around her husband, and however that life may have played out, it was

her life. Now she was feeble, swallowed up in her monstrous obesity, the gaze that emerged from rolls of fat was inexpressibly fearful, childish. So that was the aunt.

Once she had left with her representative, the notary said: "I've known the good lady your aunt for decades. She became so well off these last ten years, you know, yet her husband never recovered from his illness. What does money mean to her? What has any permanence, these days."

Karl patted him on the shoulder. The notary showed him his finger: "The same gout your uncle had."

THE CRISIS - FULL STEAM AHEAD

The Crisis continued to spread. It loomed over every business, enterprise, factory. Whatever was not nailed down went off the rails. A hurricane steadily building its strength, it ripped tiles from roofs, blew windows in, in forests broke big branches off.

Everyone was affected, lined up one behind the other. Shops that clustered here and there close to the ground, paid little rent, small businesses that had just managed to keep afloat and avoid being bought up – these kept going. In the streets, in the markets, unlicensed hawkers sprang up like mushrooms, as well as people openly begging. Uncanny, so many beggars appearing in the streets. Empty shops, the wonderful department stores – the city's big raucous glory – deserted. They hadn't collapsed, their growth had taken long decades, factories depended on them, but now they too were seized by ancient hatreds: they strangled their small and medium sized suppliers, they lowered their prices, the enormous capital behind them kept them afloat. The celebrated emporia of the big city, what were they other than robber castles? Along their aisles, visitors were bedazzled, their pockets picked, and at the same time the artisan, the stolid worker, for whom such smoke and mirrors were beyond reach, went hungry ... and provided corvée for these emporia! In every age, whenever people suffer they look for someone to blame, they cannot think straight, they're satisfied if some victim can be quickly named and they can be freed. Here and now their loathing was directed at the banks and the department stores.

Why the banks? Theirs was a murky business, all that ready money for which the poor had to struggle by the sweat of their brow, a sinister back and forth of papers, shares, debt notes from which the little man was never free. All he saw was cheating. During the boom, he saw those people erect huge buildings in the most fashionable streets of the big city, palaces for which the best designers were hired. Outside these palaces with their banking halls – some even placed statues right there in the hall – long lines of the most luxurious cars queued up daily, elegantly clad gentlemen old and young descended from the gleaming vehicles, kept the cars waiting for hours, then drove away again. What were they doing inside the palace? Conversations, telephone calls, going over figures with someone or other, giving free rein to their cunning, their shrewdness. And with that they

can build themselves villas in the most exclusive suburbs, erect these soaring robber castles, employ armies of modestly paid staff.

And there's the Stock Exchange where they all come and go, the classical building in the city centre with its pillared halls, staircases. But the object of this genuflection to Ancient Greece was not philosophy, contemplation of life and death, human happiness, Nature, eternity. They packed these halls, these staircases, bawled, hat on head, cigarette between the lips. They shouted, shouted over each other. So what were they up to, what was it they passed from hand to hand? Money, always money! It was the heavy, arduous toil of those in the factories, on office stools, in the fields, compressed into wretched lumps of gold, into dirty bits of paper! Everything done by the sweat of their brow between sunrise and sunset, in rain and shine, sowing and harvesting, all the output from the monotony of production lines – what happened to it in this building? They gave their sweat and blood, their nerves, their faith, health, bliss and eternal salvation, all around them hard soil, heavy wet winter clods, springtime thunderstorms, hail, and the hot summer, often all too hot, dreadful autumn damps, they set to with forests, with ripened grain, with bulls, cows, hens, struggled with the fiery blast furnace, down mines where they lay on their stomachs a mile deep underground wielding a drill, at any moment the walls might cave in, constant thunderclaps and the dread of firedamp. To say nothing of homeworking, the hollow-chested seamstress, clerks in offices, street hawkers, drivers and conductors on buses, trams, the Underground – all these and many more knew nothing but work, work, it ate slowly away at the only life that had been given them to find joy, to experience love and peace.

And what did they do with it, those who bawled in the Exchange, the banking magnates and their bands of mercenaries? Priests at the altar utter obscure words, arcane maxims, bow the head, officiate at ceremonies no one understands, maybe they really are devout, or want to help. But here, in the bank and at the bourse, you find insolent scorn for anything that is work, shameful debasement of all our efforts. (Such thoughts were ever in the minds of the lower and middling classes, and upon necessity they would even say them out loud).

Necessity gave voice to anger, the Crisis proceeded on its way. Menacing alarm signals appeared, all the more frightening because their meaning was unclear. Minor bank failures: they're glad those swindlers have got their comeuppance. A larger bank collapsed: thousands lost all their savings. Instead of the pleasant daily throng running errands this way and that, now small gatherings in the streets, debates around advertising pillars, queues of savers intent on causing a bank run; policemen guarded the doors.

Because the factories were fitted out with gleaming machines and had mastered the knowledge of modern work processes, because factory after factory had been set up, because warehouses in many countries were bursting with products and commodities, no one took anything off anyone's hands.

Because no one took anything, production came to a halt, the factories little by little fell silent and sent their workers and staff back home. Because there was less freight on

the railways, workers were dismissed and less coal was needed. So coal piled up in dumps by the mines, miners were dismissed, others were kept on at reduced wages.

The countries over here had no need for what the countries over there produced – here the raw materials (for who will take the finished products off our hands), there the finished products (for how can they be paid for when no one takes our raw materials) – and so cargo ships had no cargo. Sea lanes became deserted, ports were choked with idle shipping, seamen and stevedores were sent on their way, a few hands were kept on to maintain the vessels, their eager gleaming machinery, their cavernous holds crying out piteously for ore and grain. They were like great beasts with enormous thick legs, hard muscles, they felt good only when plodding with a load on the back. There the elephants lay, ships rocking in slick oily water, men scrubbed them, painted the name afresh, mortally ill creatures, slain.

The sorrow that was dubbed the Crisis careened on so splendidly that it never once desired to call a halt. It wormed its way with a literal sense of entitlement into those countries where the boom had so carefully prepared its bed. Some had believed the Crisis only affected others, but it was a pitiless God, punishing all without exception. Slowly it became an actual danse macabre.

The government grew poorer as tax receipts dropped off, wave after wave of officials were shown the door, the rest had to tighten their belts. Here masses of teachers with no students; there schools stuffed to the brim with pupils. Law courts had little work, lawyers were still lawyers but had nothing to do except stalk the halls and play chess. Young doctors had plenty of leisure to engage with one another and diagnose the state of mind in which they had decided to become doctors. Only the price of bread, meat, butter, cheese, milk remained unchanged. Like a block of granite they defied the world, and in these unsettled times were remarkable paragons of stability.

But poverty revealed its withered arms, its hollow cheeks. It appeared in thousands upon thousands of homes that had never before received a visit, and gave advice:

If the bedsheet is torn, sleep without a sheet.

If you have no butter, eat margarine instead.

If you have no margarine, make do with jam, and if the worst comes to the worst, there's such a thing as dry bread.

If you are cold and have no heating, go to bed early, pack old rags around you, they will keep you warm.

Of three rooms make do with two, of two rooms with one, of one with none.

The main thing is: wait, keep waiting.

Let them wait: for there is no escaping death.

THE FIRST LEAVES FALL

Since the time of his wedding to the daughter of the government architect, Karl's domestic society had included people from elevated circles, who turned up singly or en famille. There was the architect's brother, a retired major with a wife and several daughters, a young embassy counsellor, two directors from the iron and steel sector, both with wives but an otherwise underdeveloped family, several ladies from Julie's schooldays, who now and then put their husbands on show but otherwise ignored them, a silent physicist, etc. During the long boom years when he was so inordinately busy, he had avoided socialising; the gentlemen, in accordance with national custom, were merely called upon at various times, especially in winter, to gorge themselves at stiff formal dinners, or in summer to join a Sunday gathering. All attended each other's events. Such communal life gave rise to suggestions for summer holidays together, for autumnal hunting trips hosted by one of the iron barons, who owned a forest near Karl's old home. There Karl refreshed his love for Nature, and made regular trips by car to visit his father's grave with its enormous marble slab.

Oh, the old ne'er-do-well lying asleep down there! What might he have said to his son? The gap in his teeth from that wild altercation between the father and the mother had long been filled, the false teeth indistinguishable from the natural. The father in his farmer's big boots would have stared at this martially upstanding fellow as a being from another world, only with difficulty would he have reconstructed his son, his stubborn hardworking obedient offspring, from the eyes, the nose, the shape of the head. But has the family come into an enormous inheritance, or wait, has the new estate, the farm with the inn, at last produced big returns? No, old friend, you've been asleep a long while, these days one year counts for ten, your farm and the inn produced nothing, almost cost the family its life, buying it was just your style, and sneaking away from what you'd done was also just like you. But it hadn't done them too much harm. On the contrary, they became big and strong, their steady nerves and the busy times saw to that.

What would you say to the mother, to your little servile affection-seeking female you used to leave at home with just a tinge of regret and no other emotion? She's now a head taller than you. A servile creature has become a human being. (Actually she has become more than that: a tyrant, and you're to blame, you who never granted her humanity, but let's not talk of that.) Only Erich would cause you no surprise, and once you'd got used to his corpulence you'd nod and laugh: "Truly my blood and my fat, by their fruits shalt thou know them." Old friend (easy does it), even Erich, lethargic fellow with the trembling in his fingers, sups to the full the soup you cooked. Sleep well beneath your cosy slab of marble, or else we might have things out with you once more, pose the question of guilt, and you would not come off unscathed.

Once the Crisis set in, Karl and Julie dabbled ever more vigorously in Society. They did what many others did, there was a general trend, people sought contact. Like water under winter air, their class condensed. And although no one knew why it was that they chatted only of inconsequentialities, some different topic always with some other new people,

they followed the ancient herd instinct and recognised one another – this was no longer a joke – in their shared foreboding.

The Crisis sat there like a stern teacher, it lifts a finger and all the children look up.

Julie, still sweet-tempered, even more so than before, with her wraithlike face in which the most delicate movements were in constant play, the face of a person condemned to an over-active inner life – red-headed Julie made an appearance among people, with or without Karl. She showed herself, and was seen. Karl too, now more unsettled, made uneasy by this self-same Julie, became socially more active. Julie had no clear purpose but many obscure wishes, towards Karl she was neither friendly nor hostile, it was up to him to push her either way, she wanted no enmity, had no desire to be free of him, all she wanted was ... what? To be unburdened of herself. Like every human being she wanted a different human life where she could be renewed. She wanted to blow up the hard bleak prison walls erected around her by her lord and master, which he called – but only as a favour to her – their marriage. She wanted to exist! Exist! She wanted it to the point of exasperation. Exist as a living person, even as a criminal. How will today play out yet again. What will it bring, or actually not bring. Should she perhaps abandon hope?

Surely Karl, the burned child, must understand, but he of all people failed to understand! He suspected it, during those months of Crisis he smelled trouble for the first time following that ... conversation. But he pushed it firmly away. His heavy hand lay upon her, and it meant: I too will make a place for myself, and this is my place, I lived through exactly the same thing you're complaining about! He had to follow her around to see what he was up against. It rattled inside him. He would protect himself. (And in the background: she wants to make a fool of me, she despises me, what does she want of me, what will she do to me, the insolent shrew, I will not allow it.)

They met all kinds of people. They conversed in a fake-animated way on all sorts of topics. Julie learned from them more and more about the nature of marriage, that tawdry object revealed not least in the theatre, to be whinnied at by stupid audiences. And what is a good marriage like, what do custom and social order do to you, the world of men? In Mexico, girls from noble families were consecrated – prepared and dedicated so they could be given over to the god, the holy one. But what did even they do when one morning trumpets blew in the temple and after the consecration they were led off to the mysterious mountain lake where the god lived who was to take her in his embrace? They screamed, struggled, only a few would jump in unaided, most, despite all the preparation, would have to be thrown in, and still their white arms would emerge high from the water.

José, an attaché at the embassy, was a man of Karl's age. Whenever you were invited by an immensely rich iron magnate – there was a lot of that – you would come across him. He was a trade specialist, a friend of the arts. Being lively and proactive, he appealed to Karl, and was brought into his circle. In conversations with Julie he was, it has to be said, disconcertingly uninhibited. He had a large head with a shock of hair, wore gold-rimmed glasses, the sticking-out ears rather spoiled his good looks. His manifold interests made him one of a kind. Once he spoke with Julie about astronomy. This was at a reception in

his apartment, for which Julie's father, the architect, had done the interior design. Everyone courteous and guarded, sizing each other up. She settled in her yellow silk dress into an armchair supplied by Karl, gazed up at the delicate shades of paintwork on the ceiling, Father's doing – only the grey autumn sky peeping through the open window belonged to a different trade – and said: "I could really feel at home here, your place is so terribly friendly. Do you always have a place like this, wherever they send you?"

"You'd prefer a rented apartment, with furniture that you did not choose?"

"Yes, to be frank. But my husband wouldn't hear of such a thing."

José laughed: "It would go against his business interests."

"That too. But he's very sensitive on that point. You've seen his Museum, and how he raves about different kinds of wood. He considers eccentric furniture just as impossible, you might say indecent, as eccentric clothes. Now, eccentric clothes, that I can understand, even though I might have fun in disguise."

He raised a warning finger: "These are serious times, dear lady. Who can think of masquerades."

"But furniture. I could happily buy something here today and there tomorrow, and throw it away the next day. It's so unmodern to set everything up once and for all."

"This is turning into a true Crisis conversation, dear lady. I must protect myself."

"I'm curious. I've already conceded that you've furnished this place very nicely."

"Firstly, dear lady, my whole life is spent travelling. My profession is a veritable removals trade. My fatherland is not big, but a kind of polyp, and I am at the end of one of the long polyp tentacles that it extends into other countries and wiggles them about. That's already an unsettled existence. Then there's another problem ... we'll set that aside. But it seems quite prevalent here to repudiate one's own domesticity."

"Herr José, what are you saying! Repudiate one's own domesticity! I with my husband and my children. But you mentioned a problem, a secret problem, which is why you need this apartment."

"The problem is no secret. It's my wife."

She sat up: "You're married? But nobody knew that."

"Indeed, I am married." – "And ..."

"Where is my wife, you mean. I don't know." He looked down at his shoes.

Julie sank back into the armchair. "I do beg your pardon."

"But please. Anyway, you have heard of Eddington?" – "No."

"He's an astronomer. His theories disturb me. Eddington asserts that the universe is a kind of grenade in the process of exploding. Once we had the simple notion: the Earth orbits around the Sun, a comfortable, rather boring routine, it brings us spring and summer, autumn and winter, and so on. Now here comes Eddington and confirms by

exact observations and calculations that the universe is expanding, it's flying apart with everything it has, with stars, nebulae clusters ... And yes, I have to concur."

"You're joking, Herr José." (He wants to separate from his wife.)

"Dear lady, it is no joke, alas. Everything is becoming lost to us. Global economic crisis, world crisis, and in the same way I seem to have come loose from my wife." He took off his glasses and smiled at her.

"That's awful. What if your wife heard." (So she wants to know the whole story, this inquisitive Eve.)

"Dear lady, whatever else I might believe, that I do not believe."

"But where is she?" (Next she'll ask me her name.)

"I don't know. All I know is that I'm married. As for the woman herself, I have not yet made her acquaintance." He replaced his glasses and gave a little laugh.

Who is he? An educated man, over-brainy, up to now has occupied himself only with science and books, it's there that he knows himself best and can make the most subtle distinctions. But he has never yet focused on himself, he cynically lets whatever is amusing play out, tells jokes, and there's nothing else there.

When he mentioned his as yet unknown wife, Julie's eyes widened. "Is that still the custom among your people?"

"No, only among people like me. We are married, not knowing to whom, and prepare the apartment so that this wife with her particular tastes may feel at home as soon as she arrives. It's a little daydream."

He seems to be lying, he's either married or not married. She pursed her lips and stood up. Why bother with this man. But could such a thing be true?

To her husband, standing with her father in the same room, she said: "This José, is it true he's married?"

"Julie, he is not married. Has he been spinning you a yarn?"

"No. I just thought – he wears an engagement ring."

Her father laughed: "José, what an absolute rascal!"

But José had caught the scent of prime game. She avoided him. Then he discovered where she had her hair done. And when she turned up at the salon one morning, people reading in the reception lobby, the stolid shock-haired attaché was there smoking – and when she entered he jumped up in surprise. Fancy meeting you here. Of all places in the world. Just bought some perfume, waiting while they wrap it up. May he be permitted to wait for the dear lady, since the pleasure so seldom arises. Why not, if he has unlimited time at his disposal. She allowed him to remove her coat, glanced past him into the mirror, nodded politely, and disappeared behind the curtain.

An hour passed, she emerged from the ladies' salon. He had been thinking: now it's actually working time, I work for the fatherland, is the fatherland my boss, I am also my fatherland, if I do well, the fatherland does well. She looked "charming", waves of red hair, little face powdered white, you could see she had been carefully made up to be "charming", and as he stood and picked up the hat beside him, he allowed himself the pleasure of a few remarks, she was both suspicious and intrigued, and so, having ordered the car for half an hour later, she let him complete their conversation as they strolled down the autumnal street. Happy chance now arranged a light shower, and to her annoyance she found they were sitting in the nearest cake shop, which rapidly became a refuge for several other passers-by.

"What must you think of me, Herr José, sitting here with you. What must I tell my husband?"

"That it was raining."

"And how did we come to be together?"

"I don't know." (She said "we", lovely word, enchanting from her lips.)

"If you were in my place, would you tell him, Herr José?"

He acted surprised. "Surely anyone might bump into me in this city. Whatever low opinion people may have, I'm still a physical body, taking up a certain amount of space."

She nibbled her cake, eyes on the plate. "So tell me more of your story, who your wife is, and why she ran away from you."

He put down his spoon. "My dear lady, I am not yet married."

"Then I too am not married."

He touched her arm, whispered: "Is it true?"

She pushed his hand away: "As true as what you just said."

He looked at her askance, what does this lovely little bird have in mind, did I hear correctly. She crumbled her cake, her face assumed a cheeky look: "Now I'd like to see inside you and know what's in your mind. So what is she called, the one who can't bear to be with you?"

She's an easy catch, a nice ripe golden fruit, only question is, how shall we pluck it. What would she prefer: demonic, romantic, or plain lovable? Up to you, dear lady. Now the old sinner tried the ardent approach. He swallowed, and looked at his finger.

She thought: he's smitten, at least he's not wearing his engagement ring today, in my honour.

He thought: I don't know how long I should keep staring at my finger, how long does being smitten last, I don't have much experience, I should have my nails polished. He sneaked a glance at her hand, are her nails painted, yes, so I shall have mine done too.

Seeing him glance at her hand, she thought he was about to grab it, so she moved it a bit closer to lighten his penance. Then in a low voice (it had not occurred to him to grab her hand, as he spoke he merely gazed tenderly at each of her fingers, what an interesting exhibition, there's something silly and innocent in the way she holds out her fingers, dear little novice, I should be ashamed of myself) he began to relate how his wife really had run away from him, they had married very young, he has often seen her about, now with this man, now with that, he has no doubt she'll leave those utter boobies in the lurch one day. If only life did not trickle away in such games. He looked up, truth itself: "I am not divorced. Why should I deny that I have lady friends here and there. After all, I'm no saint. But I am waiting. She will definitely come back to me."

"You think so?"

"I know so."

"You love her."

He let his hand fall in resignation on the marble top. "She is my destiny." (We've sorted that out nicely.) They had finished their cakes, Julie opened her handbag, brought out mirror and powder puff, composed her face.

"Retreating, dear lady?"

"The rain's easing. Retreat is a funny word to use. What should I be retreating from?"

"So I may live in hope."

"Excuse me?"

"Of seeing you again."

"Of course. Just give me a call, I'll let you know when we're next at home." She stood up, lowered the veil over her forehead. How delightfully she fences, this little woman.

"There is much, my dear, that a man cannot say in the presence of a man."

"That is not always unfortunate." She felt able once again to joke with men and abuse them as once she used to so happily in the time before Karl. Her car was waiting, she offered José a lift, he declined.

It's nothing, she told herself as the car carried her away and she laid the fur, a gift from Karl, across her knees. Fresh flowers were in holders at the windows left and right, you feel at home as soon as the car door closes on you. I don't know how much of what he said is true. Father calls him an absolute rascal. What a lovely warm bath. She closed her eyes, hummed to herself. I can't deny he does me good. She hummed serenely away, and wrinkled her nose.

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It came upon Karl sooner than he had feared. That morning he said goodbye, stood on the pavement looking up, whyever must he look up every day, before getting into the car. There ... she's standing in her morning gown at the open window, hands resting on the

sill, never glances down. Her eyes are half-closed to a twitching twinkling slit, her small delicate mouth is open, she has a slight smile and is thinking of ... something. A beam of sunlight fell directly on her reddish hair, it shone like gold. What is she doing? He saw her expression only for a moment. The chauffeur opened the car door. Karl's hat was in his hand, ready to wave up to her. But she stood there without moving. Karl nodded to the chauffeur, climbed in, the door slammed, the car drove off.

He sat there. Strange. Herr Kommandant, if you don't like it, you must do the necessary, and strike. It's happening even without me. I do not know that smile. I've never seen Julie like that. And the way she bit my lip. Prisoner in my castle. She wants to break out. Maybe she already has. And it was for her, for her, for her that I decided to pay off the aunt, such a huge payoff, for her I took up this dreadful burden which may be the end of me. But then I'll make sure we go down together.

As his anger grew, he chewed his upper lip. I should have gone back up. I should never have let her stand there like that. Shameless, standing there like that. In my apartment. My wife. When she'd just poured me a coffee, set out my gloves. I should never have let her stand there like that.

But already they are at the factory. Karl got out, took the lift, glowered as he worked. Between correspondence, dictation, going over wage lists ... ridiculous: the window, the sunbeam, the shameless woman. You go about the apartment, won't tolerate the least speck of dust, and then this happens.

When his secretary stepped out to type what he had dictated, he allowed himself a pause for breath. He positioned himself at the window, Yes, this is how she stood. Not looking down, gazing straight ahead. He paced back and forth between the wall shelves and his chair, had to position himself again at the window. Yes, like this. It was a relief to stand as she had, smile as she had, mouth open. Hope no one barges in. Satisfied, he sat down again. Something in him had been destroyed. Rage lurked, ever ready to erupt. Am I jealous? Nonsense. It's violating the family. She has destroyed my peace, my family's peace, the peace of this factory. It's a scandal.

But after he had proofread the typing, and the secretary had left to make corrections (the boss is so gruff and distracted today), he just sat there. I, love? Love Julie? He took her photo from his wallet. This nose, this forehead, let me see, the hair, I need to compare, see if I love her when I look at other photos. He ruffled the newspaper for the fashion page, but they were tiresome dolls. He went to the bookshelf, but only after yielding to temptation and standing again for a moment at the window – in her pose! It calmed him. He stood at the bookcase, business books, magazines, I my Julie, Romeo and Julie, no I do not love, I am not Romeo, damn it, she still has me in her clutches.

At noon, to her surprise, he turned up at home. They ate a little lunch, a book lay open at the window, see, the same window, Persian fairytales, he leafed through it. Does she like such fantasies. Her laugh was quite natural, she was more than usually cheerful. For a moment the strangest feeling swept over him when he saw her face, so open, unusually

approachable: can I perhaps love her one day? Can her lips really have grown soft ... for another man? He was overcome with grief, shame, sorrow. He left without a word.

At the factory he worked aggressively. On the drive home he thought: it's not jealousy, it's a pain in my throat when I think of her, it can turn all my toil to dust. And when he stepped into the hallway of his apartment and the maid took his coat, stick and hat, he passed a hand over his forehead: appalling that this has infiltrated my home.

There was nothing insubordinate about Julie. On the contrary, she was more than usually attentive, concerned, chatty.

THE OLD MAJOR

When Karl began to track Julia's movements (what was he testing: her loyalty? her love? No, the soundness of the edifice he had constructed), he found something he had not sought. It was a comfort for Karl that winter, the bad Crisis winter, to make contact with very sober and solid people (among them relations of Julia's – the "officer camarilla", Erich called them). One of the families he found especially supportive was that of the Major, a brother of the government architect. They were solemn confident types, the wife not particularly pretty, but from a proud old gentry family. It was known that the Major had once been poor, then the wife came into an unexpected inheritance, and he was able to retire on a pension. They lived partly in the city and partly in the same provincial region that produced Karl, where the wife's family had its seat; even as a child Karl had heard the family spoken of with great reverence. Daughters were the Major's great unspoken headache, daughters big and strong, but firstly nothing but daughters, and secondly lacking any practical schooling – such wares were hard to shift. Their looks, in the old family tradition, left much to be desired. In these circles the Crisis was regarded with interest but a lack of concern: whatever difficulties might arise in economic matters, the really serious thing was not money, but the sabre. This, oh yes this was what Karl wanted to hear. He had economic woes, his partners at the billiard table were the Major and a military padre from the Major's regiment.

One day during a game of billiards, the Major suggested a joint visit to Karl's factory. A guided tour was arranged; Julie and Frau Major took part. The visitors greatly admired the huge modern machinery, which pleased Karl (as Julie did too). They went together through the wood-drying facility, stood beside the veneer presses, observed the gluing machines. The visitors were amazed to see wood treated with steam to make it flexible. In a smaller room wood was heated, then passed through rollers to form a pattern, converting sheets of veneer into imitation leather wallcoverings. And how impressed they were by the bright clean spaces! Many of the machines had protective hoods, mesh fences. Karl demonstrated for them (he knew what interested the laity) how shavings were cleared away, the dust-removal installations, the vacuum hoods close to the machines, twin tubes leading to each machine and converging in the distance on a powerful suction device. Then the offcuts separator that removed dust so offcuts could be loaded directly onto wagons for later use.

The next day the Major and his spouse chatted after dinner. She praised the factory and its owner. She suggested: "We don't make enough use of our dear relatives." Everything revolved around money. She complained about the old attorney who had hitherto advised her on legal matters. "I no longer have confidence in him. He grows deafer by the day, just consulting with him becomes a chore. And he can't keep up with the times. We need fresh support."

The Major agreed, tossed back his little shot of schnaps. Normally he kept his wife at bay, but now he concurred. "The old fellow has no idea what a devaluation of the currency would mean for us. He thinks it inconceivable in a country like ours. But who knows."

"Nonsense, husband, how can you say who knows. Just look about you."

"Anyway, this Karl is a capable chap. If the worst comes to the worst, we won't lose our savings in some stupid currency mischief they keep talking about." The very thought of being turned out onto the street with his wife and four daughters, or even simply having to live on his reputation and his pension, sank pangs of dreadful terror into the Major.

The large well-nourished man sat two days later in Karl's private office and prattled blithely: "Have you read the memoirs of our late revered diplomat, the matter only came out after he died. The fellow played the stock exchange. Not a pretty picture. Well then."

"An embarrassing affair, Major. They should have left that part out of the book." I can't give him the brush-off, my dear wife would give me an earful.

"Not to beat about the bush, I'm at my wits end as to where to place my savings. You know they're actually my wife's. The stock exchange goes up and down, keeps chopping and changing, I need a new angle."

"Very honourable, Major. I have a pretty good idea of my own operations, but banking is not my field."

"We know. Never took you for a bank-wallah. Precisely the point. Who can help you today against a collapse, that's what everyone's asking, and every comrade must stand shoulder to shoulder with every other comrade. No malingering!"

Karl's smile was bland. "Again, most flattering to be asked for advice, but if I may give you one piece of advice: do not follow my advice."

"We'll take care of all the details, dear friend. We'll relieve you of any responsibility."

And now Karl listened to a proposal that drip by drip, most carefully adumbrated, at first astonished and then shocked him (sabre, money). When by many a winding path the Major had laid it all out, Karl said nothing; not, as his visitor assumed (by the close his voice was a whisper), in order to reflect, but in order to compose himself. Karl stood up. "Now I understand," and went over to the window. I might have misheard, I do hope I misheard, but ... he's sitting there, he's not joking. He's quite serious. My god. I'm supposed to smuggle his savings abroad.

This was the revelation that came to Karl that Crisis winter, as he moved about in society keeping track of Julie (in order to see if his castle was still secure, to delay the

revelation, keep a tight hold of Julie, as a tight hold had once been kept of him). A scandal. The shameless fellow. He insults me, I'm a businessman, so he thinks me a swindler.

The Major lit his cigar, which had gone out. What he had said had not tripped lightly from his tongue, the fingers holding the match were shaking, he repeated: hope Karl has not misunderstood. (Damned awkward task the missus gave me, but this Karl fellow doesn't seem amenable, not at all.) An oppressive mood, maybe the heating was set too high, the telephone shrilled.

And as Karl was speaking at a side table, address books at his elbow, his secretary slipped in with urgent documents for signature, soon a knock at the door, and while Karl was still speaking the secretary went across, whispered. The tension broke. Karl had to accompany the foreman, who stood in the doorway, down to the floor to check a new design. The guest came along. And there on the floor, with the boss chatting on the side with the foreman for several minutes, the Major – he was gloomily brushing his black frock coat – lost his sense of embarrassment.

Back in the office he was once again his old self, and he suddenly outlined to Karl a splendid notion. Perhaps he can help Karl fill up that damnable empty space in his factory. "Just occurred to me. You know, old nags like me have stiff legs. To think it took me so long. Actual hardening of the arteries! Well now, the government is making plans to put people back to work. Not all cut and dried yet, but quite by chance I can see what's needed. Spotted it sooner than your federation, haha! There's something in it for the timber industry, alongside roadbuilding, flood prevention and so on."

He offered to talk to his friend in the Ministry of Labour and a few others, truly a damned shame to see all this machinery and it's all shut down, a real loss to the country. Oh well, you can do nothing without connections.

So this was what he offered Karl in return. Karl remained steely, the man is soft-pedalling, but now he's utterly shameless. It was a bolt of lightning right in front of him. So that's what it's about, find an honest enterprise, what illusions the uniform gives them. Karl was so disgusted he had no idea what to do, so he produced a bottle of cognac from the little cupboard and he and his guest gulped a few little shots. The Major said: "Cheers! Alas, we must arm ourselves against all kinds of perils. Mustn't let 'em bowl you over."

Well spoken, you old fraud. The cognac was warming. You're all part of a dying breed. Just watch out for a rain of sulphur on your heads before very long! To bring it to a close, Karl said he needed to think it over, the Major was ecstatic, thank God, now it's been broached, a virtuoso performance, bite my tongue off before I go through that again. He gave Karl a jovial handshake, he'll head straight to the Ministry, sound out where their plans have got to. "My duty to help out comrades like you, we stand together."

Steady now, thought Karl as he stood alone with the empty cognac glasses. The lift with the guest hummed downwards. He wants to use me for his schemes, makes promises. He sat and thought: it's all horrible, horrible. What can I expect of Julie if such

things are possible. His wife, his Frau Major, comes from that family up at the castle near our village, that sort are our idols, that's the Hall of Victory and the palace and the splendour of the State that I have built upon, that sustains me, it's for them I've dedicated my life, and it's all so worm-eaten, and then a door opens and they send someone out and he bows down before me and he begs can you please smuggle my savings out for me? Karl stood, paced up and down on the carpet. He snorted a laugh, how dreadfully low we have sunk. It ought to help me in dealing with Julie, it's my last line of defence. We've really fallen headlong into the mire.

He swept out of the office. But when the ground shakes, you lose your footing. When the very laws totter, the door has no handle When the wife at home ... there's no hat on your head. And ... and ... there are no knees when ... He leaned his back against the door, his lips livid. He huffed. Sulphurous rain. Thunder.

He sat at the table, head in hands, how far we've come, Karl dear boy, we're almost ready to retire from the game, oh damn.

Sometimes sounds floated to him of Julie on the stairs, giggling with the children. Once it would have given him pleasure, but not now. Julie had no better friend outside the family than Karl's mother. That vivacious resilient woman could never have enough of her "little daughter". Once she told them: "Your first decade of marriage is behind you now, when you're young and in love and don't know anyone and you shut the door behind you. Thank God you're over it, especially you, Karl. Even I hardly merited a glance from you." And she gave Julie, the little daughter, a hug, and saw herself reflected. It was a dig at Karl, and all he could do was nod and smile.

Nothing had happened, but it soon turned out that something had happened. Sometimes when Karl and Julie sat quietly in the evening chatting, the world seemed to be at peace, and he would stand up, kiss her fingertips, and dreamily she would see him leave the room, he'll come to me tonight, what a strange man, how much I've learned since I've been together with him, but why must he always be in control? When I first married him I found it so adorable and funny to be led about by him, "wrapped in cotton wool," Mother said, but I don't like it any more, why can't he take me as I am. But what am I, actually? If I was a factory girl I'd find out sooner, you can move your hands.

And she lay in the arms of this strong man, and it was a conundrum: my husband is holding me, it's Karl, and a man is holding me, and I don't know him. He has never yet truly married me. Does he want to? Maybe he doesn't really want to, just wants his dear little lamb on a lead. Perhaps I shall have to lie with him for another decade, then we'll really be married. And she began to resist these encounters, they were too agitating, too embittering, she fought with him and with herself, she bit his lip again, she knew in the darkness: he's smiling, he stroked her neck, it was no use, she would not give herself, and when she yielded she wept, felt violated, demeaned, what was happening to her, and he never came behind the secret of this damp little face that turned away from him.

He held her: his wife, his property, the crowning of his life, but it was no longer the wonderful creature given him to adore, the golden cloud that had come down to him, it

was Julie, trembling. She it was who had stood at the window, who irritated him, mocked him, he had to keep hold of her, she was slipping away. He tried to conjure up the old dream: she in his arms, their mouths pressed together, she took hers away, he could not. He lay silently on his back in his room, traffic noises invaded from the street. The world rolled on despite the Crisis. But ... something had changed.

THE HOME EMPTIES

Those were their last conjugal trysts. They ceased without a word said. And it was a significant datapoint: a disruption, a palpable yet incomprehensible fact, grown from the apparent void of their emotions, filling the space of their apartment and settling there alongside the children, the furniture. Neither saw this fact, but it imposed itself on them as soon as they opened the door. Karl knew things could not go on like this.

But he was shaken one Sunday morning as he sat at the coffee table at nine o'clock and was told: Madam is still sleeping. She's asleep, today, a Sunday. His Sunday. He would not have his routine disrupted. He would not yield to Julie in his own home, the world outside was bad enough. He drank his coffee alone, stood, rang for the maid, and with her embarked on his master-of-the-house Sunday inspection tour of the whole apartment. The maid was aghast, should she waken Madam, but Karl just shook his head without a word. They walked past Julie's silent room, Karl said they would look it over after lunch. In the Museum he touched the knight's tin hand: what have you to say to me, old friend? Next, contrary to the rule, he had a notion to look in on the children's room, but this time not in search of dust, disorder, wear and tear, but ... to sit with the two children! The girl, Little Julie, was now eleven, the boy, Karl Junior, was nine. The passage to the children's room was thickly carpeted, the door was open, he could hear the nanny's voice, she was reading about a King Bluebeard who had many wives and one by one he cast them aside until a clever one came along and he couldn't manage it. He listened to the end of the story, the nanny was frequently interrupted by Little Julie impatient to reach the ending and scolded: "Phooey, he'll get what's coming, won't he, nurse", and how she squealed and kissed the nanny who couldn't read past where she announced: "Now here it comes!"

Karl peeped unnoticed from the gloom of the passage into the room. Little Julie had her arms around the nanny's neck as she sat at the desk in a black Sunday dress, and they were both staring cheek by jowl at what must be an illustration in the book. At the side, concealed by the door, it must be Karl Junior working away, there was banging, and then he ran a wound-up locomotive into the nanny's shoe, she looked down and laughed, Karl Junior without a word wound it up again. Now Karl cleared his throat, took a step forward, opened the door wide, and walked into the room.

They all started. Frozen, as if discovered in sin. The nanny smoothed her hair and her dress, which the girl had rumpled. Little Julie beside her bowed her head and looked at the floor. Karl Junior knelt in a corner with his locomotive, hands placed awkwardly behind his back. What does Father want? Inspection's over already. Karl walked across the room, stood by the window: "Please go on with the reading, nurse. What have you

been reading?" The nanny couldn't immediately find the words, then breathed: "You say, Julie." The girl made no response. Karl: "Come on, tell me." The girl kept staring at the floor. Suddenly ... she dashed to the door, and away.

The nanny said: "She's embarrassed. I'll fetch her." She rustled out.

Karl was alone with the boy, who was still kneeling in the corner. "Now, Karl, were you listening to the story?" The boy stood up, grave, looking steadily at his father, but the hands, which were grimy with oil, he kept behind him. He shook his head vigorously.

"Are your hands dirty?"

Again he shook his head, then he whispered: "I'll just go and wash them," and headed straight out through the door.

Karl stood alone at the window. A strange Sunday. Everyone's avoiding me. I must pull myself together, maybe I look too bitter. The nanny returned, a child at either hand. Little Julie had to be pulled along, trailing tearfully behind her. Karl Junior at once adopted a military march in honour of the august guest, stood soldier-straight by the toy cupboard not even retrieving his toy train, awaited praise. Karl nodded. The boy beamed. Little Julie watched, as soon as her brother preened himself she picked her doll up from the desk with a resolute air, brought it across to Karl, held it out to him, Karl wiped her tears. So these are my children, how they've grown, how freely they move. Must show them tenderness, but try a laugh now? The boy pulled his sister away: "Can you make the signal tight?" Karl had to bang on the tinny item, made his fingers oily in the process. He laughed, Karl Junior beamed and showed his own hands, oily again. The nanny glared. But the master banged a bit more, announced: "Yes, a machine can't work without oil."

Eventually he rose calmly to his feet: "I have things to do." Little Julie ran ahead to the door, and there in a light-coloured morning gown the lady of the house was rustling past. She turned: "What, Karl, you here?" She yawned: "Sorry, I slept so soundly." He apologised for not offering her his hand, his fingers are oily. Puzzled, she tut-tutted. In the living room he was amiable, reflective, spoke about the children, facing her, elbows on the table, chin in his hands, while she, in direct contravention of the rules, slowly drank coffee all by herself. She regarded him expectantly. Pity I emerged so late, I'd have loved to see him play with the children, maybe he sometimes remembers I'm their mother.

But he ... he had gone through the apartment without her, the chambermaid must have accompanied him, it was Sunday, finally he sought refuge with the children, her breakfast had grown cold.

A lot of chatter in the kitchen, the chambermaid was aglow as she stood beside the cook at the range, Master's really not so bad, he inspected everything by himself, oh sure he's fussy, but he's classy, not like that lazy Madam that pretends to have a migraine just to keep out of it. Chambermaid and cook were excited, keyed up. And then the nanny came along with the children's breakfast tray, she had a puzzled air, the other two stared curiously at the stuck-up girl gracing them for once with her presence. Well now, is the boy permitted to play with oil or is he not, he shows the master his oily hands and the

master laughs and now the brat says he's allowed to have dirty hands, can't make head or tail of it. The cook busied herself, the chambermaid seemed not to listen, both left the nanny to her outrage. And that Sunday evening, when the chambermaid's fiancé came to fetch her, he found her wonderfully frisky, she was floating in bliss as never before. The nanny's sister came to visit, found the girl in tears, aggravation with the management, the children have gone mad and she has to put them in the corner.

That afternoon, master and mistress took the car to visit their parents, and on the way she saw that nothing in him had changed. She ventured some chat about the Crisis. Superficial responses: we must all hold together, shouldn't underestimate the severity of the situation, making light of it risks conjuring up chaos. She regarded him so solemn there at her side and felt: he's suffering, I do like him, he's my husband after all, but he sits there so pensively, tormented yet unapproachable. Yes, after that morning Karl's shoulders sagged, he felt he was now just as alone as he had been before the marriage, actually worse, because his mother took Julie's side (oh painful old memories, he saw himself as a boy, the mother against him). But – he opened his eyes – what did “worse” mean, he is in charge, he holds the rudder, he hasn't put himself into anyone else's hands, not at the factory and not at home. This he told himself. He wanted to believe it.

*

And always after the grinding daytime hours there comes the night. For people can do more than talk to themselves and comfort themselves; submerged in sleep they can find the doorway to the source of life, the fount of eternal youth. With the first snore their troubles and their furrowed brows vanish, and all they do now is breathe, lie there, feel. And although they are still themselves, there is no difference between self and other, they rain with the rain, shine with the sun, they're the tall lime tree, and in its shade the green grass, the clover. Then a bell rings, the universe springs to the fore, living things trickle together. Like a flock of birds flapping free into the sky and flocking together at the sound of a shot, they contract, the tired head turning on the pillow grows round again, two hands take shape on the blanket, a body lies stretched on the sheet, and two eyes spy the crossbar of the window in the half-dark, a birdcage with the sleeping goldfinch. Here we are again, same as yesterday.

*

The respectable Major slept badly. There had been difficult conversations with his wife, she was pressing him to conclude the business with Karl, given the ever-growing Crisis and the worsening exchange rate. The Ministry had already been sounded out regarding its strategy, but the matter was now urgent and he was trying to back out!

“My dear husband, you will end up an insurance salesman.”

“Poverty is no shame.”

“Oh really! Poverty is indeed a shame. I will not be your maidservant. And anyway, it's my money.”

Early that morning the Major stormed into Karl's office. Two days ago, when the Major came out with his proposal, Karl had been shocked. Now his head was cooler. First you're flabbergasted, then your eyes open, you see things as they are, maintain a steady course (if only you knew where to.)

The Major proposed that he accept the money as an ostensible payment into the factory, that's necessary for tax purposes, the money must have come from somewhere if they start asking questions. Karl saw the man's nervousness, and it gave him cruel pleasure. Then we shall need a contract, he mused, uncertainties of some kind might arise. The Major wrung his hands. "For God's sake, uncertainties, there are none, we're both men of honour, a man's word and a handshake are good enough."

It was very hard to make him see that it was a business transaction. All he wanted was to bring the securities to Karl and Karl would take care of everything thereafter, from that point on the Major would have nothing more to do with the matter, for Heaven's sake.

Karl was amazed at such comical bravado. He was prepared to take it on, but in an orderly fashion. The Major pleaded: "Oh tush, orderly!" Karl was tormenting him horribly. At last he got the point, thanked Karl for handling the bogus transaction.

Karl laughed: "But I very much hope, Major, you will not go around telling people I was in need of external funding."

All went smoothly thereafter. The Major was now a sleeping – a most deeply sleeping – partner. Karl took over the securities, half the Major's entire assets. And from that moment on the agitated Major did indeed take no further interest! He almost flew into Karl's arms! Karl had to inform him, once only, that he would deal with the money "within the parameters of our first discussion" (the Major avoided asking: what parameters). And now everyone was happy: the Major and his wife, because they saw their savings safely sheltered; half the remaining funds would be handed over shortly; and Karl, because he had given the man an undertaking, after taking a hard look at this world.

For here, in truth, he was.

The anxious Major, that petty swindler, had done him a very good deed. He had turned up just in time. This is what the real world looks like. It was most gratifying that the respectable old fellow had come to him rattling his sabre and making such a demand. It cleared the path. It revealed reality, and that is where we want to live, not in the world of hopeless wishes. We shall not be brought down by trivialities. Thanks a lot, Julie.

*

When Julie no longer appeared on a Sunday morning or was otherwise absent at mealtimes, the dining arrangements changed. Karl ate without her, but with the children. Little Julie sat in their mother's place, said grace, the nanny brought the children in and fetched them away afterwards. In iron calm, with no trace of a smile, Karl presided over the silent children.

He would not let anyone, whoever they might be, upset his house, his castle.

EMERGENCY HOUSING

Industry, including Karl's timber industry, took a close interest in the plans for employment, and this showed itself in the fact that no one in the federations ever spoke of them. Theirs was a stable country with ancient traditions, no one had any truck with bribery ... or more exactly, not yet. On the contrary, higher authorities were glad to be guided by higher considerations, one of which was the wholehearted allegiance of suppliers to the government. And because allegiance was ubiquitous whenever bigger contracts were in play, connections became the decisive factor. There could be no doubting Karl's attitude and his ability to deliver, this man was hewn from good old provincial timber, the old Major sang his praises, he was treasurer of a large federation, a tasty morsel was kept aside for him.

What contract came Karl's way? Collaboration on emergency housing for homeless families, camps to be constructed just outside the big city, production-line assembly of the most basic furniture.

For matters had reached a lamentable peak. Every living thing looked to protect itself. As unemployment took hold all around and gloom descended on millions of modest dwellings, while huge factories stood unaltered and bank buildings flaunted their ostentatious façades, the railways still ran, no war had devastated the land – now, after professors and scribes had been asked and had given their answers, the Big Question began to infiltrate into the heads of innumerable involuntary pavement pounders. Those who once sat in holy Jerusalem and in exile by the waters of Babylon beat their breast: it was their sins that had brought them to this point. But now – how had anyone transgressed? They had not lived beyond their means, had not stirred up disorder in the land, had not put a spoke in the wheels of government, of trade. So the labour force began to be radicalised.

During the boom the Workers' Party and the trade unions had grown muted and more moderate, for when there is nothing to defend, weapons grow rusty, muscles flabby, and people fatter. Now the long-prophesied split occurred: those who were content and only a little bit nervous stayed with the old guard; those who gnashed their teeth went with the new. The new guard looked their enemies – those over there – in the eye, and formed the opposition. Here was appetite for struggle, for war. The new guard were not the same as in Karl's boyhood: no longer isolated individuals hurling barbed comments at some individual enemy, but a mass, as unified as those on the other side. Soon military-style formations appeared among them.

This called for compromise. A housing shortage was evident. How had it come about? In recent years there had been no significant population growth, buildings in the city were not so decrepit they had to be torn down this very minute. No, it was a matter of rents. Building owners had mortgage and other payments to make. They met these out of rents. What to do when rents fell too fast? They could not allow rents to fall too fast, they joined together to oppose devaluation of their buildings, while tenants for their part

... moved to cheaper accommodation. And so the remarkable situation developed where whole rows of buildings stood half empty, where lovely villa districts became deserted, and a Great Migration was set in train within the big city and to towns in the provinces. This was the social decline, the battle to the death, waged by the Crisis against the classes. And because machines had been so perfected, work processes so carefully analysed that a house could be constructed of concrete within two weeks, masses of human beings moved from bright living spaces to dingy, from large to small, from airy to airless. Sturdy hygienic new buildings were avoided like the plague as people moved into miserable older places. But for the hordes of unemployed other measures had to be found; on the one hand landlords needed protection, and on the other, tenant organisations were becoming a menace. So barracks were erected, some distance from the buildings owned by landlords (which of course remained empty).

So one machine room after another in Karl's factory sprang into action. Saws once again set up their buzzing and screeching. Oh the painful heartrending sight of glittering apparatus that had perforce lain idle, madness had made them idle, and now motors roared back into action, you felt it and breathed it, so there's still a smidgeon of good sense in the world. Production lines started up for simple (the very simplest) practical furniture for the interior fitting out of the barracks, a few (not too many) new employees were taken on. Karl acted as if he felt that work, and asserting oneself in this world as it really is, that's the main thing, even if your home affords you no pleasure and the children grow up without you. Once he had stood out as an exception with his stable happy family, now he marched in lockstep, and why not.

More often now, Karl's big sumptuously decorated apartment hosted soirées for a small powerful group of industrialists, brought together to discuss the Crisis. At one of these sessions – in Karl's Museum, Julie herself placed a cloth over the tea table to preserve the shine – at this council of war Karl declared to his friends, with the old tin knight just behind him: "This Crisis is bad. We did not cause it. There must be a defect in our economic system. Did we build this system? Does anyone know of a defect-free system? You can read and convince yourself that if the glitch is not visible somewhere today, it'll sure enough show up tomorrow. They should stop pestering us with their Utopias. We don't sit idly by, consuming our rents. We should be spared their schemes for world improvement. The times are too serious for fantasies and stepping out of line. When a man's hungry he asks for bread, not paradise.

"To the point. We cannot bleat about welfare measures. Laws have been passed that dip deeply into our purses, and have almost paralysed production. We are at a point where we, where Industry, must say to the government: thus far, and no farther. We who have kept silent up till now and allowed ourselves to be plundered – I do not exaggerate – we must now look elsewhere and find the respite we need. Another two years of this advancing Crisis, and all money will have taken refuge in mattresses, or in foreign havens. Then we shall be finished, and our country a field of rubble. The government will have nothing left but its army, which it cannot pay."

The white-bearded man regarded Karl with uneasy curiosity: really, the fellow's of different stock than his easy-going uncle, and his aggressive tone today makes him no more likeable than before. "Well then, colleague, what do you propose?"

Karl cast a rapid eye over the contents of his chamber of curiosities, the ornate cabinets, the Byzantine lamp (what secrets did they all hold, what language did they speak?), and there in the corner was a little table with a pewter candlestick. The candlelight in this dark corner cast over wall and ceiling the tall black broken shadow of a bust, a human head; an image hovered over Karl, but he no longer had any memory of it: the mother in the kitchen, the mother in despair, thrown helpless onto the streets, the same streets down which he once had to roam.

"The way most people recently have begun to talk about the Crisis, the consequences of the Crisis, the causes of the Crisis, they no longer mean the Crisis alone, not by a long chalk. You beat the sack and mean the donkey. We are the donkey. People don't want improvements to production, they don't want regulation and compromise in matters of production. They want our heads. They say it out loud: they mean to stifle production. Two implications: the government must be prevented from pursuing a policy that was feasible in calmer times. It is not true that appearances must be kept up. How a clear policy that enjoys the support of ourselves and the military power should relate to the aggressor party is quite clear. The aggressors must be forced to unmask themselves before they are ready. We shall see what comes next." (Road is clear.)

Karl's face was grey and slack, he looked exhausted, had bags under the eyes. He spoke, tin knight at his back, at the round table cleared by Julie herself and set with ashtrays and cigarette cases. This graceful person, so frail beside the robust master of the house, rustled solicitously about the room behind the chairs, the six visitors relished the vision, then she vanished, and they listened to her husband's icy words.

His speech was followed by several moments of silence. A large rotund magnate from the iron industry, sucking on his cigar like a contented baby, spoke as if Karl had addressed him personally: "Very funny. Here you are, a man from the soft timber industry, actually giving advice to us steel men. In fact we're united, absolutely, we subscribe to every point, every clause, absolutely. But I cannot understand why you want to proceed so rashly. I prefer the velvet glove, my dear friend. It has the advantage that your hands stay clean. At home I have a bunch of little children, you're always learning something from them. The various nannies are always somehow baring their teeth when dealing with them; but whoever tries persuasion, it's clear, absolutely. Why not persuade? Costs nothing. You have to consider a fellow's feelings. Everyone likes to pretend he did it all by himself. Makes him feel good. So let him feel good. Speaking for myself, I have no objection to a government of reconciliation, sometimes you hear others say differently, it's really quite amusing." And puffed smugly away, and thought of his children.

The clever white-bearded man from Karl's federation smiled around the circle, his gaze resting on those few who were keeping their powder dry. "Perhaps we're overstepping the mark with such discussions? For sure, unrest in our country is growing.

Now for the love of God we cannot let it grow any worse. Strikes and the military horrify me. Just imagine it, in our day and age. Maybe the people have become radicalised, but to think of the unemployed and their hungry dependents marching in the streets and we send the military to confront them: horrible, anything but that.”

Karl interrupted: “Correct. That’s exactly what we must prevent. But if we let things go on like this, how will you prevent it?”

“With calm and flexibility. We must strive to bring everyone to a spirit of conciliation. The moral advantage is obvious.”

Karl had laid both arms on the table; he shook his head gloomily: “And why? To save face. We have to show a different face.”

Whitebeard: “Live rounds, you mean?”

“We have to frighten them, or it’s no use.”

The rotund magnate laughed: “Quite wrong. Just the opposite. Can’t do it with fear.”

Karl, dogged: “We need a strong hand to instil fear on one side, and confidence on the other, the side of the more prudent.” Suddenly he became vehement, held his arms out before him. “You must not forget we are under threat, we don’t yet know how gravely. Do we know how far the others have got in arming themselves, oh yes, they’re already arming. Here we sit, debating. I am against giving them time, time is on their side, not ours.”

The iron man was no longer smiling, he stubbed his cigar out in the ashtray and whistled through his teeth: “Seems you want decisions from us right now?”

Karl shook his head. The iron man was doubtful, whitebeard too, the others held fire. The federation’s lawyer cleared his throat, but he too kept quiet. Gradually private whispered conversations started up. The topic faded from view. Every participant was deep in thought.

One winter evening, Karl alighted briskly from a suburban train together with Julie. It had brought them from a large gathering, not far from their apartment, where military officers were prominent among the attendees. It was late, the discussions had been heated, but in the end every conversation converged on a single mood: that no one would go down without a fight. A jaunty “on the contrary!” resounded through the room. So there’s still something worth defending! National tradition is still a powerful force. They were stirred by thoughts of grand historical events, of the powerful individuals who had erected the pillars of this State, their Fatherland. If anyone should come along and succeed in attacking or undermining this wonderful beloved structure, rather than surrender they would perish amid the tumbled pillars. For the first time many sensed a strongly militant mood, though no one could have identified its source.

Karl and Julie in their fur coats, having passed along the platform, now turned onto the wide ticketing hall, from where a grandiose set of steps led down to the street. This hall, normally thronged with travellers, was almost empty at this after-midnight hour. The only light came from a long row of lonely frosted-glass lamps suspended high in the

vaulted roof. Of the thirty or so ticket windows, only three still showed a light. As they walked across the hall, Julie suddenly let out a little scream and clung to Karl: "What's that?" She pointed to one of the windows. It was closed. On the railing that separated the entry and exit lines was a heap of rags, and shoes dangled. Karl shrugged: "He's sleeping. Why do they allow it here."

She tugged at him, her hand pointed to another window, she turned around, on every railing was yet another human bundle, face down on the wood. The few passers-by ignored them as they walked past. At some windows were more bodies, lying or squatting on the stone floor, human bundles in sacks and rags.

Julie looked up at Karl, clutched her fur close to her chin: "But it's horrible. They're sleeping here."

"Yes. Until two or thereabouts, then they'll be sent on their way. For the cleaning."

"It's awful. Where can they go to?"

"That's why they have homeless shelters." He went into the still-open hotel café, which had an exit onto the street, to buy cigarettes. Julie stayed by the door, looking back into the wide silent hall. On the walls were bright inviting posters: "Off to laughing seaside vistas!" "On to the mountains – bracing air, snow, sports." Behind one of the still lighted windows two officials were moving about, their faces relaxed and unconcerned. Then close by her something stirred on a bench, sat up, gazed yawning about the hall, fumbled in the sacking it was lying on, brought out a hunk of bread, and chewed. There wasn't much. Then it looked at its hands, rubbed its face – she couldn't make it out in the gloom – yawned again, and lay back down on the wooden bench.

"A person," she thought, she felt. Karl came back fresh and cheerful with a cigarette between his lips. They went down the steps to where cars were waiting.

"They'll all be chased out soon, Karl?"

He smiled, blew smoke, gently and courteously took her arm because of the steps: "Don't waste your sympathy on the wrong side, Julie, they'll land on their feet all right." His smile was mocking. He is a monster. She hated him.

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On it rolled, the Crisis.

Relentlessly, with undiminished force, it swung its mighty pickaxe at the walls of the structure in which people – some of them, anyway – had enjoyed such comfort. For a long while the foundations had gone uninspected, and the rotten places were now laid bare.

Karl was rich, feared, little loved even in his own federation. His money, they knew, supported a number of groups close to his heart. Since he was his federation's treasurer, it was impossible to say whether he or his industry set his policy; and this called for clarification. His influence had grown so great that now he had no need of some good old Major to drum up contracts, everyone knew that the State Secretary for the Economy's door was always wide open to Karl, and he had contacts too in the Ministry of the Interior.

In view of this it is understandable that he could say: the Crisis has not affected me, even after Julie, that worthless woman, had distanced herself from him, and his home had grown desolate. Now he was truly free, his own master.

For sure he felt physically no longer so fresh, but the laurels of victory were rustling all about him. His brother, who seldom saw him face to face, called him "Karl the Great: Charlemagne."

A FLING

For a while now he had no longer been in the mother's good books. He was rarely to be found home in the evenings, and mostly Julie was nowhere to be seen; queries received evasive answers. The mother heard, too, that he hardly ever turned up at the factory. When she found him one evening in his Museum hosting a "discussion", she was struck by the "friends" he was mixing with. Quite young people were there, including officers. She had only peeped around the door to say hello; in the living room she asked Julie: "My dear, who are all those people?" Julie coldly mentioned some names she knew.

"Girl, you allow this? They're ruffians, those people are nobodies." Julie shrugged, and placed a cloth on the little table. "If I were you, Julie, I'd show them all the door."

"But mother, he's your son, why don't you try." Her face was hard as she cleared away the cups; the mother was shocked.

When the mother was able to draw Karl aside a little later, she went for him: "You've no self-respect. It's not done to invite company that your wife finds offensive."

"Julie? That's news to me. A wife would do better not to stick her nose in."

"They were officers, the titled class, what do you want from them? They're not for our sort. They'll lead you by the nose." She was incensed to see how hard Karl was, the venom he spewed over his opponents. "For God's sake, what have they done to you? Have you forgotten how things were with us earlier? And you especially: who was it who used to hang around with the poor, and cause me such heartache?"

"If I have anything to thank you for, Mother, it's for disabusing me of all that."

As for all the money his new passion cost him, he kept silent. He was dipping rather recklessly into his purse.

He had to worry about Erich. Rumours reached Karl that he found distressing. Erich was said to run around with political riffraff. Easy enough to believe. So one evening on his way home (home held no allure now) the thought came that he should drive out to see Erich, put him on the right path. Soon he was there, walking with Erich through the shop to the stockroom at the back.

"Are all those poisons?"

Erich replied: "Only what a pharmacy keeps in stock. Wonderful stuff. But do they actually do any good?"

They sat side by side in the small laboratory ... brothers! Erich puffy-faced, his features girlish and amiable, Karl upright, showing his age. There was no talk of politics. They smoked and drank, Erich asked: "Where's Julie?"

"At her mother's." Aha, how unconcerned he sounds, they're each dancing to their own tune. Meanwhile, as the evening advanced, various "riffraff" turned up, little nobodies, male and female, five or six of them. Karl let them talk, steered the conversation to personal topics, they tried to rein the detestable man in. This was the evening when he accompanied a young woman back to her home; he had come across her somewhere before, in company. On the long walk down cold wintry streets, she commented that she usually found her own way home. Erich had asked him to go with her. When Karl casually asked if she found something about him disagreeable, she replied: "Only all the things one can find disagreeable in a person."

Yet a day or two later she saw Karl again at Erich's. Again the sardonic guests found no chink in Karl's armour, he was the most nonchalant, passive creature in the whole world. Afterwards they wondered among themselves if he was spying, but they had to concede that he took no part in their rants. He lent a superficial ear, regarded this face, that face, they were no more objectionable than the sight and smell of Erich's herbs. And the young woman: nothing special, but not displeasing.

The woman, slim, her brown hair braided, stood in the laboratory, to which he had withdrawn, observing him. "How long have you been married?"

"Ten, twelve years."

"You don't know for sure?"

"Of course, but why. It's coming on to twelve."

"What are you up to here? Why isn't your wife with you? I've seen her out and about. You're here behind her back, behind Julie's back."

"You know my wife?"

"Through my sister, she and Julie were at school together. But we stopped being such posh people long ago. Twelve years, and you're no further on with your wife."

Karl gave a complacent laugh: "Twelve years. Doesn't seem that long to me."

She picked up a Bunsen burner, pointed the flame at Karl: "So you must be all burned up by now."

"Maybe."

"So where is she now?" – "Somewhere."

"And you're not worried about her? That she might be unfaithful?"

Karl gazed dreamily at the flame: "We've been married so long already."

She sought his eyes, then said: "Sheep."

That evening she left early, and on the way home he missed her a little.

Thinking of Julie – always that endless, hopeless imaginary conversation with her about their marriage, about the family, and many other things impossible to put into words – and incapable of talking to Julie, one day he scribbled a note to the young woman with the question: had she contrived their encounters at Erich's place? He thought of Julie, though unable to see her in his mind. He scribbled it down, a stupid note, superfluous too, since he could always just phone Erich. But ... it's done now, so he sealed the envelope: why shouldn't I write this note if I like? (Strange how this business with Julie has struck me dumb.)

That evening the doorbell rang at the apartment: is it Julie, Karl eagerly opened the door to his Museum, but there's the young woman tripping lightly down the carpeted hall. She nodded to him, fur hat perched on her forehead, offered him her hand: "I wanted to say thanks. That's all."

She had to come into the Museum. "You're sitting all alone here? Where's your wife?"

"Somewhere. But do sit down."

"So this is where you confess your sins, and she leaves you on your own. "

"I don't make pleasant company."

"Are you suffering?" - "You too have to say that?"

"Who else said it?" - "Julie. Just today she asked if I was sick."

The woman stepped back, muffler to her mouth: "Is it true?"

"Yes." He looked at her: "Why?"

"I wouldn't have thought she'd notice." She stood silent, then quickly went over to the window. He approached her, she kept her back to him.

"What's wrong?"

She whispered: "If she came in now, I would feel ashamed. I am ashamed. But I never realised that she knows." She turned: "So go to her." Her eyes glittered: "What's wrong with you, for God's sake."

"Not your concern."

The apartment door slammed behind her.

As soon as she was gone he shook his head. It was stupid, a misunderstanding. God knows how it had come to this.

But when he went to bed early, before he fell asleep a feeling stole over his face and chest, so very comforting he almost glued himself to it. What touched him was as delicate as a spider's web, he kept still, something lies silent upon his breast, so close he can almost put his arms around it. Where is this leading? What's the secret? Images of horses drifted through his dreams, he's riding across fields, a hay cart he's loading up.

All kinds of memories swirled about him. He was at Erich's, in the pharmacy, aromas of dried herbs and the barbed words of his adversaries drifted by, they can't hurt me.

When he awoke in the expensive bed with the subtle veneer inlay of lovely bird's eye maple, he was thinking of a slim proud assertive figure emerging from a thicket of people and gliding towards him. A sweet dizzying thought came to him: why am I afraid, what do I expect, have I lived my whole life for nothing, placed it always in the hands of others? I am here. I too am here.

Now this was a wonderful seductive notion that had him stepping lightly through the apartment. The apartment was so real and solid, he had created it, had filled the Museum, all flowed from his wishes, there it all is, and then he opened the door to the children's room, he heard voices, they were being made ready for the wintry walk to school. And as their satchels were strapped up, gloves pulled on, he gazed eagerly on them. See there, my children, my blood. See there, my life. Combing, brushing, lunch boxes. And one by one they hold out a hand, first the little one, the boy with his shoulders back, I taught him that, that's ten years of mine, and now the girl, graceful young lady Julie, my twelve years, now they're being led away.

And once the nanny had left with the children he took a comb from his pocket and went to the mirror. He had to bend down, how wretched I look, man on the brink. Yes, I provided everything, furniture, Museum, the children, and the factory and Julie. Today I shall go to the factory, he decided, and the reverie was over. In the office he changed into overalls, in the machine halls he took pleasure in the operations, of course back in the office the bookkeeper and the chief accountant drew his attention to money problems, a payment to the aunt was due, they considered how best to handle it, most of the government contract income was spent already. As he sat at dictation he thought of the Major, the nitwit who had handed over his savings, he's already been paid some interest. We'll take him to the cleaners, he thought. The fellow tried to involve me in his dirty business, now he's a very silent partner, if I do get into difficulties, I shall take him by the ears and make him a real partner, whether he wants it or not. And he continued calmly dictating. Before he left he dropped in on the head foreman, what does he think, should we go for more contracts, open a couple more halls? The man was absolutely on the ball.

Karl phoned the slim woman. At noon she came to the restaurant in her grey fur-trimmed jacket, lambswool hat in one hand, briefcase in the other. He saw her through the window. This is not real, I'm an old man, respected, feared, Julie's my wife, I made my vows, Uncle and Auntie were there, many people from good society, I have held Julie in my arms, we have two children at home.

She sat facing him. This improbable creature. He had been waiting for her, but it rolled like distant thunder through him, she's a stranger, he's her enemy, he had nothing to say to her. But she seized the initiative, for now she was here and could not be debated away. A new figment of his imagination was sitting large as life before him. His fight with Julie (but why exactly are we fighting?) had so terribly fled from their quiet apartment, and was slinking away over the road.

She was wearing the same grey fur-trimmed jacket, a skirt underneath, she showed her face, she was a woman with a brain, a past of her own, an alien murky world is there,

why let myself into it, why did I summon this spirit? There she sits in her grey jacket, puts her briefcase on the table. Oh bitterness. What is Julie doing to me.

The young woman began to speak, his ears failed to catch it, she fell silent, picked up the briefcase, kept staring. He tugged at the ropes that still moored his ship to Julie.

This woman, this stranger, had assumed it would be easy. She was young, thought: he's a big player on the other side, he crosses my path, he's suffering a sad fate at home, who knows why, he's not at all a nice man, I shall lay a trap. But then he started talking about himself. She thought: amazing, such an important man, and he has no shame. He came here thinking to spend a jolly afternoon with me, and all he can do is pour out his yearning for Julie.

The woman listened in silence. All her embarrassment vanished. Where to butt in. She closed in on herself. He told her how wonderful it had all been, how he had done everything for Julie, how she filled his life. Then everything changed. He kept repeating, shook his head in bewilderment. (The Major handed me his money for safeguarding: me, how strange, soon I shall put it to use.) She looked down at her briefcase, I expected something quite different, I'd better give him a miss.

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"Forgive me." Why must I talk to her? Both were uncomfortable on their stools, she thought: the man's paralysed me. She stood up, ready to go.

"Where are you off to?" – "I have lots of plans."

"Please stay." – "No."

"Then I'll see you tomorrow."

"I'm not sure. No." – "Do stay!"

She planted her fists on the table: "Do not think you can bore me with your tedious saga of married life."

"It just slipped out."

As she was on her way he grabbed hat and coat, laid coins on the table, and chased after her. He soon caught up. She shook her head angrily as he walked alongside. When he wouldn't go away she stopped by a display window. "Now you will do me the courtesy of leaving me in peace." She went on without another word. He after her, through the crowd. Strange chase, strange day, and I am Karl? I'm doing this? Before long she stopped outside a building, heaved open the heavy street door, at once he was at her side, in the half-dark of the wide passage she whispered: "This is where I live. You'd better leave."

"I'm going. But don't speak in that way to me."

"What do you want?"

"That you won't ... run away."

"Put your hat on. You look like a lunatic."

“There, that’s better already.”

“May I go now?” – “Yes. But give me your hand.”

So this was a hand, a hand of flesh and blood, it was held out to him. He held it between his two hands, a great joy flowed from the hand, a great calm. She – how astonished she was to feel what was going through her – she gave a start. And with the same irresistible astonishment she felt his arms enfold her in an embrace. Her briefcase dropped to the floor. She kept quite still in his arms. What had happened to her? Who was embracing her? And she let him? He might start to kiss me like a silly goose, ravish me like a slut. But he was stroking her fur collar. Now she pushed her arms up and loosened the embrace. She was free. She reached for the briefcase. He was smiling, he had screwed up his eyes (so this is the position Julie has put me in. I could strangle her): “Now you’re going to slap me!”

She was already at the staircase, he couldn’t see clearly, her voice came across the half-dark space: “No, you wretched man. You do that to yourself.”

And up the stairs. He tugged at his hat, pulled the door open, his smile was frozen. I must try not to behave stupidly. I’m entering on deplorable territory.

SEPARATION

While this was happening, Julie was sitting in the lovely new apartment of her friend José, experiencing the worst time of her life. It had been clear for a while that he would present her with a bill for his “services”. She could not give him up. To provide breathing space and find someone who would take her as she was, as Julie, she could have changed course and taken some other “friend”. But what benefit would another bring? And why start all over again with the chat and the awkwardness? So she stayed with José, and he proved to be a better man than he actually intended to be.

That afternoon she endured, sobbing, his first passionate and somewhat drunken kisses. How often had she tormented him with questions about his lovers. She had no doubt there were a whole handful. She didn’t care. How often, when she turned up to take tea with him, had she presented herself as soon as he opened the door with: “Reporting for duty. All present and correct.” Now none of that mattered. All right, so he’s a skirt-chaser, actually that’s good, she wants nothing more. And so he was able to take her, carry her in his arms to the bedroom, she kept up her weeping, trembling he removed her clothes, such a sweet delightful bird has flown into his cage, appalled she tolerated his caresses, she soon fell asleep, he had to leave her there.

It was late in the evening when she came out of the bedroom into the master bedroom. She made no witticisms about how wonderfully provided his boudoir was with every feminine requirement, of course she already knew it, she gave him a long ardent kiss, he was confused, wondered what he really felt. He wanted to be passionate again, she said: “It’s late. You don’t want me, José, but I love you.”

*

Karl pressed the night-light switch in the entrance hall. The lift was there, he ignored it, went slowly step by step up the stairs. He stopped on every landing. Cold air, how it blew down on him. He had endured a contentious political discussion, and then the afternoon with that young woman. Upstairs, in their room opposite the children's room, his wife will be lying, his wife Julie, who has wrecked his home. He was powerless to stop her wrecking their home. Now he was on his floor. The slave bowed his head, bent his neck for the yoke. He pulled out his keyring, hesitated. He held the apartment key, studied it. The night-light went out. When I was a boy I stood like this with a key, I was late back, mother hit me, I've never forgiven her, here I am, the key again, I've never forgotten, if I live to a hundred I shall never forget. Downstairs the street door slammed. Quickly he put the key in the lock, slipped inside, carefully closed the door. This is my home. Total silence. They're asleep. The master of the house, the pillar, the creator of this oeuvre, is home. Carefully he opened the door to the living area. He was still in his hat and coat. The room was cosy and warm. He lowered himself into a deep leather armchair near the door. Who chased me away from this.

Someone was climbing the stairs. Proceeding cautiously step by step. It is Julie: if I wasn't scared someone might come, I would sit on the stairs. And she really did sit down. Not home yet, please, please, not home yet. She drew a deep breath. He'll be up there. If only he's not up there. My children, my dear children, I had them from him. He bosses them about. What a mess he's made of me. What have I become, a bad wife, bad wife. She thought of José, and wept. He drove me to it. Hangman, hangman. Even his mother doesn't like him.

Up there he sat in the club chair, brooding. Now the front door, very cautiously, he gave a start, what's this, burglars, he hunched down in the chair so his head couldn't be seen over the back, pulled out his revolver. The door to the living area was wide open, someone clicked on a light in the passage, he could see reflections in one of the big wall mirrors. It's her. You couldn't say she was walking, she was creeping into the apartment, he watched her weary progress in the mirror, the bleak sad face under the hat. At the end of the passage she turned out the light. She came into the living area. He kept still, the revolver still in his hand. She crossed to the other side of the room, sat at the table.

He was sitting in the same room with her. She was sobbing gently. What has he done to me, that criminal.

After a while he heard her stand up, her steps crossing the carpet. She tried the handles of the doors to the back corridor.

*

Next morning he was called into the factory again. Then Madam expects him for lunch, a most unusual message. When he entered the dining room she was not there, she appeared, flustered, only when he had already finished. At once she withdrew with Karl, and he could read in her face not only yesterday's grief, but the coldness of a decision.

They remained standing. Julie has been to the doctor, she was feeling especially unwell, he has prescribed a southern climate, particular hot springs. She is leaving this very afternoon. She showed him her ticket. He asked if it was serious, he had no idea what to say, and to fend off the blow and make her feel better – he had to make her better – in her presence he phoned the doctor, who confirmed everything. She had personal accounts at the bank, money was not an issue. After she said goodbye to the children, without a word as to how long she would be gone, he drove her to the station. Excruciatingly forced conversation. Not until the station, where they were much too early, did she appear red-eyed on the platform after vanishing into the carriage to stow her bags.

At last no more false words. At last they stood and walked up and down in silence among the many other people. Not looking at one another. They watched the station clock, the second hand ticked on. The last awful few minutes before departure. They stood by the carriage, he big and broad-shouldered in a black winter coat and stiff bowler hat, she in a grey travelling dress, pale and delicate, her red hair pinned at the nape. Resolutely she kept her head up.

“Farewell, Julie. Shall I hear from you?” She’s my wife, she’s going away, it’s final, we’re plunging into the abyss.

“Yes.” She took the hand he offered in both of hers, squeezed hard, whispered: “Are you not a murderer, Karl?” Her tormented over-refined face was close to his.

“Won’t you stay, Julie? Wait a few days, then I can come with you.”

She punched him lightly on the chest. “No, murderer.”

They looked at one another, man and wife, twelve years, the two children, the cosy apartment, so often breast to breast.

“Why not, Julie?”

Now the cur is cringing, I should have beaten him like his mother did. “Ask yourself, Karl. I wish I had never met you.”

And with that she left him on the platform. He stood stunned, angry, yearning, frightened. The carriages rolled past.

Farther along the train, José was sitting. They had agreed that he should not come to her until two hours after the first stop. But when he came looking for her she was not in her compartment, and not on the train. He realised she had got out at the stop. Two days later he received an express letter from that small town, in her handwriting: “José, I cannot go on living.” At once he flung himself into action. He sent a telegram on ahead, at noon she was not at the station. In a dreadful funk he rushed to the hotel. The man at reception told the agitated jittery unhinged gentleman that the lady was up in her room. Number? He gave the number, lifted the phone from the hook. But the stranger was already dashing up the stairs. She opened the door as soon as he reached her corridor, closed it behind him.

He had shared so many experiences with her already, she had seen through him, a little adventure between friends had become something that shook him to the roots. She flung herself down at his feet, pummelled his shoes, groaned out: "What have you done to me, how could you do this, how could you, how could you do this to me?" He lifted her up, she fended him off, her lovely hair fell over her face, she was in her nightgown, the room hadn't been tidied.

"Whatever has happened, Julie, my life?" She was in a state of total collapse.

"You did this to me. I've been disgraced, oh, oh, why did you do this." She wiggled free of his arms, again fell to the floor, whimpered: "I must kill myself, José, I can't bear it, I can't, I can't." Again he lifted her up, she was hard to hold, he pulled her over to the sofa, she lay there, he was glad to have managed it. He saw she was ill – because of him? He knew her, even loved her, with her wonderfully sculpted little face, her dainty little hands. And how sweet, how embarrassingly innocent the body she had revealed to him. He knew many ways to speak to her, he felt she was drawing him on so he would offer up his all and prove to her what she was to him.

Long long hours. She wanted to return to Karl. She wanted her children, her home, her parents. How can she find a way back, after this. She had to grow exhausted before she could even look at him. No judgement seat had ever had such a cruel profound effect on him as this tender woman. How often did she call him "sinner", he would laugh, for what is a sin? Now he felt that sin did exist. He had seen enough females in despair, things are never as bad as they seem, if you let yourself be taken in you're a sucker who'll marry the first one that comes along. But with her he had let himself be well and truly trapped. How helplessly she had approached him, how superficially bold and assured. How she had tried to draw out their growing closeness into a game masking her real intention, and he too had taken it as a feminine craving for adventure. Until signs of pain appeared in her when he grew importunate.

She lay on the sofa in the hotel room, the light was on, outside was bright sunny afternoon, she's speaking at me, weeping at me, I must guide her through all this, she's as clueless about her past as I've been about mine. "José, I wish you hadn't done that!" I'd tried my old moves making a pass at her, they'd always been fun for me and the others, now I'm exposed as the barbarian I am, for all my learning, where could I have learned anything different.

He had to go down to the lobby to book another room. He was soon back with her. The light was still on. It was such a joy for him to be allowed into her room. She was still on the sofa, on her side in the same position, knees drawn up, hands over her face. But she's the one that is mine and shall be mine. He would fight for this frail body, this red hair, the questioning voice, how would she look going arm in arm with him. His ... wife.

He sat beside her. "Can you forgive me, Julie? Won't you forget all this? Forget!" Relentless: "Forget it!" He squeezed her cold hand. "Forget it. I want you to forget it." It was an order. He wanted, wanted. Absolutely. She became aware of the strong will beside

her, wiped hair back from her face, stared at him. He was looking at the floor. What does he want? What is he saying?

“Forget. I insist on it.”

José? She lowered her legs, leaned forward. What was José saying? “Look at me, José!”

“You must forget.” He was embarrassed.

“You want me to forgive you? Really? But why? Your little plaything.”

“No,” and he had to tumble to the floor and kiss the floor at her feet. “Don’t talk like that. Hit me. Punish me. Don’t talk to me like that.”

She grabbed his shoulders. He came up, stood, arms slack (I’ll be on my way, I’m a fool). She put her arms around his neck (if he can love me, then I can love him). They didn’t kiss. When she looked at him, a question: is he as blissful as I am.

That evening they strolled through the squares and shopping streets of this random little town. What a day. At the door of her room they parted. Before she went to bed, the bellboy delivered a big basket of flowers. “So he is human!” she thought.

A MAN ABANDONED

Karl paced angrily through the lovely big apartment. The sight of the calm orderly rooms fuelled his outrage. Julie was a disgrace. She made herself up like a lady, but she was hewn from the same worthless timber as her uncle the Major, the alarmist, the currency speculator. He smouldered in his Museum. He was in the clutches of The Beast. There was nothing he could do to counter her leaving and destroying his reputation. But: “The husband determines the place of residence of the wife.” Sooner or later the law will fetch her home.

He was deep in these imaginings when the telephone shrilled from the other room. It was for him. Reluctantly he stumbled out to take the call. It was his mother, she asked after Julie, the children, he spoke as if in sleep, apologised, he’s in the middle of a meeting, promised to call her in the morning. As soon as he hung up, the call was forgotten.

Then another march through the lovely big apartment, from deep pile carpet to utilitarian runner, from one doorway to the next. He tore himself away, went to the factory. He needed a change of air. He lasted until evening, then went back home. The apartment drew him. There was something human about it. The quiet formality of the supper table, the children emerged from their room, here we all are together, we the abandoned, you kids know nothing yet, you live, you eat, drink whatever is set in front of you, the country is at war, we’ve been invaded. The children, observed by the father with a kind of painful anxious empathy for these helpless dependent creatures, had never seen him so absent. Every glance instilled fear. He was very pale, listless. Even the nanny found him unnerving. In the kitchen, for the first time a unanimous faction formed against Dear Madam. No one believed the story of her ailment and the urgent trip to a spa.

Karl was in no condition to go out. He felt an impulse, but it was no use. The children went to bed. There was total silence. He kept lights on in every room. After wandering back and forth it occurred to him it must be very late, he pulled out his watch, the evening had barely begun, time was standing still. So he had to endure it a good while longer, quarter hour by quarter hour, each quarter hour the same. And then, standing in front of his tin knight, glaring at it, he realised he was on the brink of suicide. He looked back over the wide expanse of carpet, just now a human creature had walked across it, it was ... he himself, now the creature stands here wringing its hands. Paralysed, he thought: if no one comes to my aid, I shall die in the next few days. From his complaints against Julie emerged an overpowering feeling: I have to die, I cannot go on living.

At once the apartment changed its character. It was as if a fog had descended, rendering everything less solid. With how many emotions had he wandered through these his rooms, had sat here, sat there. So many human movements and postures in these spaces filled and defined by yielding air, now they dissolved and receded. Still they drifted like a haze in the air. Space, the emptiness between walls and cupboards, had done its duty. Rows of pewter plates and goblets along the panelling had done their duty. The wonderful antique showcases with their carvings he so loved had done their duty. All sliding into the abyss. It's all on rollers, moving away from me.

What did I do wrong? What has caused this?

He let his head droop: I do not know. I'm being destroyed. I cannot prevent it.

And again, as he stood in the nook and listened into the room, the apartment blazing with light changed its character. Torn away, the being on whom he had showered every treasure, who had made these spaces so precious, so cosy. He trembled physically, his marriage was over. What remained? He was repelled by thoughts of the factory, the Crisis, politics. I have to die.

At this same late evening hour, while he sits fully dressed in his bedroom helplessly searching back through his life, thinking and unable to think, two hours away by train Julie is in a hotel in a small town, Julie lacerating herself with bitter thoughts. (The day after tomorrow she will weep with joy over a basket of flowers: "So he is human!")

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Fate deals with people like a potter, slaps them about, and when they have lived long enough to expose a flaw, Fate leaps in. Expect no mercy.

STEPPING DOWN

During these days, though no one had been able to foresee it, the State ensconced itself mightily on the throne, and accepted the battle to which it had been forced. As the Crisis bedded in, people suspected there would be an insurrection among the lower classes, and this did happen; that their parties would become radicalised, which too began to happen, that the middle classes and even the rich would be drawn into the hellish

maelstrom of poverty, unemployment, embitterment, that it would end in everything combining against the old State, at least to take a modicum of revenge. But lo and behold, the old State proved not as tone deaf as everyone thought. It heeded the uproar, and responded with a powerful voice that surprised many. It intervened to an astonishing degree in matters to which it had hitherto given scant regard. It issued contracts, took it upon itself to monitor prices, control prices, issue instructions to banks and industries, to regulate. The Father of the Country became a rabid potentate.

Whatever it did was considered by many to be inadequate. Insidiously, the Crisis imposed on the situation an unwelcome question: What is the State, whose State is it? Dangerous excitements were shaken loose, unrest worked its way up to even the highest circles. In the cliques that formed in the big city and the provinces, many topics were broached. In one of the groups Karl moved in, an ancient landowner, a nobleman (he lived on an estate where nothing belonged to him any more, the bank would have evicted him already, if only a buyer could be found), this man, almost weeping, said: "Gentlemen! What has become of our country, our homeland, our beloved Fatherland! Into whose hands has it fallen. What is it that has been visited so suddenly upon us. We do not even live now on our own soil that our forefathers defended so valiantly. How long before we must take up the beggar's staff. And why, I ask you, gentlemen, why? Did we play at Sodom and Gomorrah? None of us lived too extravagantly – leaving aside the rare exception. Well, here we are, and with us the State that our forefathers built up. Our beloved Fatherland, they play fast and loose with it. It's the Crisis, they say. But that's no reason, for Heaven's sake, to knock down the house that we and our children inhabit. The State steps in, but the disaster keeps on coming. Who just ten years ago would have thought this situation possible? I beg you, I implore you, gentlemen, call a halt to this disaster. With all your strength. With all your love for this country we want to hand down to our children, just as our parents handed it down to us. Fight back against the turmoil that is already bubbling up. Remembering those who for centuries committed themselves to the homeland, and enriched our soil with their blood."

The combative spirit spoke up in tones heated or icy, like this officer, a man no longer young, who had already seen his wife's dowry blown away by the Crisis; they were barely hanging on to their social standing:

"Complaining gets us nowhere. Inactivity has always proved harmful. The State is nothing but a paper construct. I don't know what else it's up to or what else it knows other than keeping the army up to scratch, and the police, and providing relief for the poor. And some other fiddle-faddle and trivialities. Meanwhile the flesh is being stripped from the bones. From top to bottom. It's palpable. Let us not delude ourselves. Some of us still have their farms, others their houses, soon they'll choose to squat in the porter's lodge to save on electricity and make do without domestic staff. That holds from top to bottom. The middle classes have empty shops, because nobody can buy, the workers lie in the street. Who can look on and not lift a finger? If a regiment carelessly marches into an ambush, the colonel is hanged, if they can catch him. But when an entire nation is stripped of everything, what's going to happen? One might almost say: hour by hour, and

all they give us is tranquiliser pills, devil take them! The ruling house is out of the game. But the government is a worthless pack. Civil servants should be sent to the devil. What good they do, no one can see. We are a rich, hardworking nation, we have millions of strong hands, machinery up to our ears, more heads than we shall ever need. Let the borders be closed. Let sentry posts be set up every ten paces, and shoot to kill anyone trying to enter or leave. We are a fortress. Barbed wire and trenches all around. And now it's a matter of working our hind legs off. Bring on the unemployed, every manjack of them. If you work, you get fed. Fields don't grow on money, only on toil. Why the blazes do I even have to point this out. We've been invaded by a gang of bandits. Money is nothing but a deception to steal away our toil. Close the stock exchange, close the banks, hang the speculators, lay out all the money in public before the State – and then it will be a miracle if we can't support ourselves on it."

How the icy voices spoke we already know: "Persevere. No experiments. The Crisis is already doing enough damage. The government must be resolution and brutality personified. The workers are strong, but radical. That's their weak point. We must weaken it more. They confront our police with organised formations. Good. Let the boil ripen. They want to undermine the State with strikes, soften it up for attack. They want to keep to our seats. The mass of peaceful workers want no part in it. When the insurgents come we shall smash them, and bring calm to the nation once and for all."

They pulled in anything that might help, manipulated public opinion, showed what was good about the past, appealed for unity. The hour of danger drew near. Bands of young patriots formed spontaneously, and secretly joined forces. What they wanted was not clear. They meant to be there at the decisive moment and save the Fatherland. They called themselves the Bulwarks, and soon came out against the formations that had grown independent of the parties and trade unions and were regarded by those bodies with some unease.

Now something happened to Karl that was no longer unexpected. His federation proposed that he resign his position as treasurer. The federation did not wish to disown him, but they had to take into account pressure from several small and middling members. As he held the letter, Karl said to himself: the boobies want to harvest what others have sown, but they mean to stay neutral. Cowardly wallflowers, as always. They are fated to go to the dogs.

For the first time Karl realised he had moved away from his class. Had ventured too far ahead.

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Stepping down had bad consequences. First, Karl had to return the federation funds, which he managed to do albeit with some tricky moments. And then among those he consorted with now, who were not very numerous, there was a view that he had not much power at his elbow. Karl noticed this with some bitterness, and to offset it he had to dig deeper into his purse. He let only the chief accountant know what enormous sums he was investing in "the cause". It was no longer just "a game", maybe it still had some of the

passion, but it was something more: following his marital setback, Karl was building a fortress, a surrogate fortress.

When the papers reported his retirement from the federation board (an event that had to be seen as “conciliatory”, they said), Erich called early one day, but Karl already planned to visit Erich, “my born doctor”. It was early in the year, damp misty February weather. Erich was pottering about in his laboratory, chilled and sniffing; Karl sat hunched in his hat and coat on a swivel chair by the little electric fire in the corner. Erich thought the press reports a major blow against Karl, and was appalled; Karl was calm, relaxed even. He said the step had been necessary. “The situation was unclear, but I was quite clear: whatever I do, I do on my own account, on my own responsibility, without competitors.” He steered away from any explanation of what exactly it was he was doing: “I’m glad to sit here quietly with you. Pity it’s so chilly.” Erich at once insisted on going into the small familiar parlour. The pharmacist brother soon brought a hot punch into the world.

Karl, divested now of hat and coat, his face haggard and very pale, at once – a remarkably bitter smile at the corners of his mouth – began to speak of Julie. As Erich has surely heard via the mother, she has gone on a trip, to a spa. But it probably can’t be kept secret that she won’t be coming back as my wife.

At one time such a story would have been right up Erich’s street. Now with all the political tensions he was in an nervous state. When he interrogated Karl, who proved most cooperative, an incredible finding emerged, one he knew too well himself: the marriage had broken up for no reason. Karl had done nothing wrong, nor had Julie, no quarrels, a placid friendly life together had, it seemed, been snuffed out like a candle. Hearing of his brother’s suffering – his beloved brother, his helper, guide, father – to calm himself down, Erich ventured a few awkward remarks. Oh, if only he didn’t need to see Karl like this. He felt so bad. The fat man hastened into the pharmacy, swallowed a sedative pill, now he can pull his thoughts together, for a minute he let cold air blow on his face through the shop’s open door. Then he sat facing his brother, who calmly sipped his punch. (Coming back in, Erich was cut to the quick when he saw his brother sitting there, he had to pull himself together, it affected him so, he had no idea why.)

Sitting across from Karl he smiled: “God knows, in matters to do with women I’m no novice. There’s a very simple solution for you: either stay as you are now, meaning unmarried, or you get married.”

“Of course I’m married.”

“For now. You could seek a divorce.”

Karl mumbled into his glass: “Impossible.”

“Some men can’t live without marriage, they want to be the boss or be bossed around, for that they need the authority of marriage, and then they can have their regular quarrels, or they have order. You’re one of them, Karl, back home you had to be father for us, we can’t imagine you without the toga of marriage. So look smart now, I’ll arrange a

lawyer for you if you'd rather not involve your own lawyer, and we'll find you someone new, better, more dependable, with more staying power."

Karl gave a start: "Impossible."

"You love her? I don't really know her."

Karl shrugged: "I don't know."

Erich stared, had to hear it again, it was the worst of all answers. "Surely you know if you love her or not?"

"Sometimes I feel like beating her to death, sometimes it brings tears to my eyes to have her by my side. Sometimes ..."

"Sometimes?"

Karl's voice was very low; his brow was furrowed. "Always it's impossible for me to think that I don't have her. Since she went away, doubly impossible."

"Are you jealous?"

"Of whom? And would it change anything if I had cause to be jealous?" Karl shrank into himself. "One thing's certain, Erich: I find it intolerable to think she can live without me. A devastating thought. Damnable that I can't shrug it off. That I must carry it around in me, defenceless."

"But think, she's a human being. If it doesn't work out with you, separation is inevitable."

"Don't you say that too, Erich. It's nonsense. None of us is a human being. I am what I am, by birth, by our fate. I had to take the place of Father, nobody asked me, we all have our path in life, and we must follow it. She cries out for 'freedom'. Maybe I wasn't ardent enough for her. But I gave her security, her and the children, she lived with me, I never destroyed the marriage, she did. She knows nothing of the world, at least I hope so, otherwise she'd have regard for what we've shared together, not besmirch it, trample it underfoot, even if a myriad trivial things weren't to her taste."

The fat man maintained his posture, hands raised, watching his quivering fingers. Sadly he said: "Oh, a difficult case. People should stop having marriages. What's up with us, Karl? Father went away early, I can't remember him at all, little Marie has gone from us, I'm a bundle of defects, and now here you are, our pride and joy. Mother's the only one standing firm."

They sat in silence for a while. Erich started up again: "How are things at the factory? You should try a change of direction. That helps. Something quite new. Julie must be gone, thrown out, she must go from you, and then onwards, Karl."

"Then what?"

"Then what indeed! How could you? There are millions of people, you didn't come into the world with Julie. Let me tell you something, Karl, please don't take it amiss: come to

me often, listen to some of my people, talk to them. They have it a thousand times better than us! They're all poor, or so they say, and talk such dreadful twaddle, I really don't understand it very well, but they're so much richer than us. They want us to the Devil, and I hope they succeed. Just take a peep at them. They have something, believe in something, they show solidarity. It gives me the shivers, Karl, that they all address one another like bosom buddies. With me they're still formal, but the ice has been broken."

Karl smiled at him: "I know workers. And I know all that very well, from way back."

"So why not learn it all again? You must pull yourself out of this, you must see that. You'll see: with Julie, divorce is the only solution."

Karl stood up. His face was pale: "No!" He shouted: "Don't ever say that again, Erich!"

Erich was startled. What is this? Karl went into the laboratory, picked up hat and coat, hugged his brother. "Dear boy, you know a little about herbs. People are something else."

"But you'll come back soon?"

UNMASKED

Erich sounded the alarm to the mother. That afternoon she came to him. After reading about him in the paper, she had looked for Karl that morning at home and in the factory, but he wasn't to be found. The fat man steered the mother away from the political aspects: "What is Julie up to, Mother? Where is she?"

"Why? Really, why?"

"Please, Mother, you have to find out if she was already cheating on him here."

"Why?"

"A wife doesn't leave her husband for no reason, no reason at all. She's deceived him."

"That's a new word in your mouth, Erich: 'deceived'! Why so angry?"

"Because it's about my brother. Your eldest son, my dear lady."

"I never caught wind of anything. Now she's off travelling."

"Who with?"

"Pish."

"Who with? The woman didn't set off on her own."

"Why are you bothered about Julie?"

"The woman is wrecking us all. I'm trying to prevent it. I know what we all owe to Karl. You included."

"Please drop it, Erich. And don't talk about Julie in that way. She's ill. She's always been delicate. Karl knows it. He shouldn't have been so strict with her."

"Now you come out with it. You're defending her."

“So what. My son Karl is a good man and the best of husbands. But his head is filled with a thousand worries, and that’s why the little woman slipped away from him.”

“Pathetic, Mother.”

“She’s a child, she needs coddling.”

Erich paced up and down, steaming. “You openly take her part. He must seek a divorce.”

She stood up: “You’re mad. Did you tell him that?”

“He won’t. But he should. He must be shown proof of the woman’s wickedness.”

“Erich, you sound like a different person.”

“In my opinion, her innate unconscious involuntary wickedness. I know about such things. I shall find the evidence.”

“Evidence. What will he do with evidence.”

Erich, puzzled, removed the pipe from his mouth: “You too? That’s just what he said.”

She smiled: “So I do know my own son Karl, just a little.”

Erich, uneasy: “So that’s where it stands.”

The mother smiled.

*

Late that afternoon Erich, unable to relax, looked up the railway timetables. He ascertained Julie’s destination (he speculated she would not be there) and secured his most sensible and serious female friend as travelling companion. They would play detective. The female was a pharmacy student, had studied a little under him, then he found her a more suitable place, she being far too good to have him, a mere corner pharmacist, for a tutor. On the other hand she would not have learned much anyway, the pharmacy being so small and he so lacking in stamina.

“Oh how nice life could be,” both said in the sleeping car, “for every man and woman, if only they could behave as sensibly as us now in this sleeper, Erich and Ilse, Ilse and Erich. How good it is to embrace. No possibility of conflict.” And as the train sped arrow-swift and gentle regular vibrations came from below, they saw across the dark of night innumerable couples lying and embracing, millions of people, the world soothed and every question answered. And the wolf lay down with the lamb, the fox slept alongside the hare, the lion with the cow.

The famous mountain resort with its hot springs was deep in snow. Most of the hotels were shut up, only one big one was still open, along with a few medium and very small guest houses. Erich had to take a medium sized hotel, Julie had booked the big one – as from this evening did Ilse.

In the hotel she found a quiet charming single woman: Julie. Really she acted more like a widow than a wife on an adventure spree. The porter, with whom Erich had a

lengthy chat in a bar, told him the woman had arrived quite alone, kept herself to herself. Only she took a daily phone call from the big city, sometimes sat waiting for an hour, but it always came punctually every evening. A man's voice, yes. Could even be her father. She'd only had two letters, the porter by chance remembered the envelopes showed some swanky architectural firm. So clearly they were from the father.

Information that Ilse brought was more useful. She gushed about the sweet little woman who really did go early every morning to the hot baths, Ilse following close behind, there in the changing room in pyjamas and bathrobes they had struck up an acquaintance, but already, at least as far as Ilse is concerned, it's much more than that. It's an experience. "She's heavenly, Erich. And I eavesdropped on a phone call. His name is José. Oh how she loves him! At the end she kissed the receiver."

"She's an adulteress."

"Nonsense. You should have seen how she cried."

To make sure, Erich listened in (Ilse had arranged it) on another of Julie's phone conversations, from the next booth. Ilse came to fetch him, he was sweating, had tears in his eyes. "It's a scandal. I've no idea what my brother's been up to. But we shall leave today. If we stay I'll be sacrificing my physical and mental health to my family." They took a sleigh down to the railway station far below.

"Your brother is an unemotional businessman. Now he's been driven into a corner by her, and he's wounded in his vanity." This was no consolation to Erich.

The brothers spoke the morning of Erich's arrival home. Erich took a risk: "Would it annoy you if I asked you something?"

"Nothing I'd like better. I'll never move on by myself." He gave a faint gloomy sidelong smile. Erich's agitation grew: "Now listen, Karl, as far as I know Julie is a well brought up and sensitive person, who would certainly never do anything bad."

"And yet she left me."

"Then you must have done something to her."

"Nothing."

"Did you really love her, Karl? I'm sorry."

"We were married. Twelve years. Two children."

"Did you really love her?"

Karl was on the sofa facing him. He lifted his hands, his lips were quivering: "Stop tormenting me."

"So ... you did love her?"

Karl clenched his fists: "You're trying to make me the guilty party. Don't. I don't know. To her I was what I was able to be. She was my wife and she left me and she should come back, nothing has happened."

“She can’t. She won’t.”

“I did nothing to her. I gave her all I had. She can’t make me pay for being what I am.”

“But why are you like that, Karl? To me you’re so good, you were good to Marie.”

Karl’s trembling fists beat an irregular rhythm on the table. “It is not my fault. I am what I am. Others made me like this. I know I’m a failure. But people can’t expect me to pay for it after I’ve put my whole life into it, such as it is, bad as it is, I know it, but I’ve flayed my own skin for it, they don’t want me to live.”

“Who don’t, Karl? And why? Don’t get so worked up. For God’s sake.”

Karl’s fists drummed on the bare tabletop, and in Erich’s ears came a whirling and a spinning.

“Do you think me so bad, Erich, when you know so well what I’ve been to you? Rather you should stand by me, since you had it so much better. You all had it better than me, except for little Marie, they let her die. And now you leave me in the lurch and revile me, because of Julie. All of you, judging me.”

“I’m not judging.” If only he would stop, I’ve no idea what’s happening here.

Karl shoved the table aside, stood up. “People shouldn’t judge. People should accuse themselves.” His ancient ineradicable hatred for the mother had returned, whether she was right or wrong, he hated her. “Strike me dead, you’ve always done it, I was your pack mule, so demand that I dance like all of you, I can’t, and that’s why I am still a human being deserving respect, even if it’s only stupid old Karl.”

No, no, this cannot be witnessed, cannot be heard, there was a roaring in Erich’s ears, he tried to tell this contorted angry face, his brother, “no, no”, but all that came out was a strangled elongated “nnnn”, then the voice came and it was a shrill bone-shattering scream, and he collapsed unconscious into it.

He slid under the table. Someone came from the pharmacy to help. They carried Erich to bed. When he sat up, very pale, ten minutes later, Karl was at his side weeping piteously. “What have I done, Erich? Forgive me.”

Next morning, grey snow flurries outside, they continued the conversation. Erich, pale and bleary, sat up in bed, asked his brother for the eau de cologne on the nightstand. “How did I acquire this peculiar defect? And this whole wretched body? A breath of air can bowl me over.”

And now Karl began to talk about the past. Now and then Erich prompted him. The narrative grew more and more expansive. Karl told about Uncle’s factory, about Uncle and Auntie, and the arrival in the big city. He told of the family, and the grim poverty following Father’s death. He told about Father, how he had loved him, but Father never really saw other people. Cautiously he mentioned the night of the suicide attempt, he feared Erich might relapse, but he listened enthralled, avidly took it all in. Then Karl was persuaded to tell more about himself. Strange, strange, how different it all was in the telling from what he carried around inside him. Twilight gathered, it grew dark, a street

light glared into the room, Karl was still sitting on Erich's bed, telling his story. Everything he said was grey and clear, a web so vivid and strong, and they were stuck alive in it. Once Erich interrupted Karl. This was when Karl was telling about the fate of the friends he was forbidden to mix with, how he had clung to them, he had never met anything in his life so fine and true and (he was almost sobbing) so noble as his friendship with Paul and the others, but it was all so long ago. He often tells himself, when he thinks of it, how it was all youthful folly, but then ...

Erich, pensive, said: "She forced you, and it was dreadfully hard on you, I can see that. She made it barbarously simple. But you were running with such a dangerous crowd, Mother actually saved your life. You must see that, in retrospect."

This was the only moment during their long long talk when Karl raised his voice: "No! She did nothing for me. She told me that herself. So she should have let me go to the dogs. Then it would have been on my shoulders, I was no longer a child. And so ... so she ... ripped the love out of my body. For the rest of my life."

Erich's head sank back on the pillows, ah, so Julie was right.

And slowly Erich understood a secret he had never yet unravelled: the family. He had taken the trip with Ilse and they had imagined it was all so simple and felt they were so clever: millions of happy men and millions of happy women scattered all around them. They relished the bizarre notion that these men and these women felt out of sorts because really they were just one thing. Men and women, so it seems, don't actually exist! Only families. They grow up in families, they live and fight in families, they are shaped by families. What a silent monstrous oppressive force, the family! Working away without a sound, eerily mysterious in broad daylight. "I do not understand proper men at all," Erich had told Ilse in their compartment. "They have such peculiar conceptions of marriage."

Now it dawned in him. Yes, now he had a clearer idea of himself. Karl had come at last to lay a complaint, favourable to his own case, against their mother. And see, it's all about something else. The more Karl expanded on his story, padding, adding to it, the truer it seemed, the more vividly everything stood out, and the clearer it became that the mother was not the guilty one. The complainer himself withdrew his complaint. He noticed, secretly astonished, where it was heading: towards the family, the family. But the question nagged at both him and Erich: must it be so?

Erich pushed off the bed in his pyjamas, threw on a bathrobe, went to switch on the light. They sat side by side on the sofa for another half hour. Erich had nothing to say.

REQUEST DECLINED

Karl could not deny he felt better after the long talk with Erich. He no longer waited for a letter, a telegram, a phone call from Julie. He went through the apartment more calmly, was able to play with the children, children from his marriage with her, but what did they know, a murky chapter.

When he turned up at the factory one morning, the Major was waiting for him. The conversation in Karl's office dragged on as the Major conducted an endless parade of political and social topics. Karl was patient, let him beat about the bush. At last the visitor came out with it: he has landed in difficulties, and needs to mobilise funds; he concocted vague reasons. Karl saw that stepping down from the treasurer position had damaged his credit even here. He remained chilly and calm, asked for a date by which the Major would need the funds, and saw him out with the utmost courtesy.

He had not smuggled the money abroad. It had been placed in his account. It was an enormous sum. The deadline might be extended by four weeks, or six, longer was unlikely. But why had he not transferred the money to a foreign bank, as agreed? With his foreign connections it would have been a simple matter. The money had sat there all forlorn, but he had not forgotten it, any more than the Major, though he tried not to think about it. The money was useful in several respects, including taking revenge on the fellow – on him, after Julie – for shaking the ground beneath his feet.

Karl sat with the chief accountant over the books. A cold shiver ran through him: an instalment to the aunt was due. On the way to the bank he spoke about credit in general (the listener maintained his reserve), being booted out of the federation didn't help, it's common knowledge he won't be included in the next batch of government contracts, and it's anyway doubtful if the government will stick to the current programme, and of course the bank has to be cautious. He was unable to utter a word about the Major's enormous deposit. He promptly remitted half the due amount, explaining in a letter that foreign banking transactions worked slowly, but he shall in any case remain at the Major's disposal. He rather enjoyed it when the Major appeared at the apartment three days later: will he for heaven's sake please not use the word "foreign" in writing or speech. Karl had dashed the letter off carelessly, he apologised. He thought: it's a sign, do they mean to throttle me, drive me into a corner? It won't be so easy. I shall deal coldly with swindlers.

*

Recently he had been having a damnable time forging plans at the apartment with that determined bunch of hangers-on. He sensed a peculiarly challenging tone in their voices. A distant warning bell. A curtain being drawn back. They were people of another class, one he already knew, one he had once suffered with. They had the same faces as he, but their expressions aroused fear. Their voices had a vicious ring. He thought: Mother wasn't wrong to warn me off them. They're different from us.

He gritted his teeth. He handed out money for their big common enterprise, debated with them in the old manner, but he no longer believed what he said.

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Like a tree in autumn when it feels the cold, starts to change colour, to dry out, casts off leaf after leaf, dead leaves, strews them all around, the wind whirls them, passers-by tread them into the mud, just so had the country cast off businesses, factories, whole industries, left them to rot. Entire great boughs broke away and joined the decaying

leaves on the ground. And now roots too split, no more water was carried upward, it lay dammed within the tree.

The deadline for the payment to the aunt was approaching. Where to find it? Karl had lain under this Sword of Damocles ever since the day he tried to salvage his reputation in Julie's eyes. The aunt is still alive. And what difference would it make if she wasn't alive, she still has heirs. (What strange ideas come when you're under threat, you even think of killing.) He initiated negotiations with her solicitor, who knew that Karl was fending off case after case of delinquent payments, and bankruptcies were raining down. Karl changed tack. The instalment was remitted, costing him severe humiliation at the bank. It almost paralysed him. As if he'd carved flesh from his own living body. When Karl, heaving a sigh, came out of the bank onto an icy street heaving with beggars (they have it good) and climbed into his car (I can still be driven, I'm sole owner of the factory), he smiled a sickly smile, Julie turned out to be an expensive item. Soon I shall be the king, climbing to offer his sword to the other man perched on his steed.

Karl was surrounded by a growing morass of liquidations and suspended payments. Debts crept up behind and stabbed him in the back. The debts began to tower over him as once, when they first came to the city, they had towered over the mother. (Karl, embattled, brooding on everything, brought to mind incidents from the distant past. Where shall I go when they drive me out. I shan't go to the markets, haul carcasses and vegetables, good old times when it was still possible to hope. No child will work for me.)

When the Major had phoned in vain several times and requested in writing to be informed of "the unfinished business", he turned up, harried on by his wife, at Karl's office. There was a thaw, Karl was cheerful, he'd had a run of good luck, his theme was: keep running, pity there's no hunt on, brooding doesn't help. Broad-shouldered, heavy, he stood facing the burly equally tall Major, after helping him out of his overcoat. Karl was determined to knock him flat.

The old fellow cursed the weather, Karl praised it. Then they lit cigars, sat down and came to the point. The Major already found it curious that Karl brushed off the unanswered calls and letters without apology, and now here he sits exuding an irritating challenging good humour, damn it, I'm not here as a suppliant. Karl rang for his secretary, whispered something to her, at once she returned with documents already prepared. "This, Major, will show you we are not sitting idly by. They tell me you've been calling and writing letters. But obviously the termination date is still a long way off. When I deduct what I've already handed over to you on request as a friendly gesture, then you will not, or should not, be in prospect of receiving any more payments either this year or the next. So much is already clear from the lamentable state of the business cycle. But after extensive reflection I am prepared – naturally without posing any risk to the factory, on which hundreds of lives depend, but having regard to our personal relationship – to come to an agreement with you on arrangements for the coming year. This of course on two conditions, Major: firstly, that you absolutely do need a payment, secondly, that business conditions permit it."

The old man's hat fell off his knees. Karl saw, but kept still. They locked eyes. The Major: "What are you up to here?"

"The financial authorities keep very close watch on large enterprises. Understandable, after several regrettable incidents, which happily are exceptions. We have to show and justify every entry in our books, in particular any foreign transactions. Any substantial payouts not justified on business grounds would bring our factory, in the prospering of which you yourself have an interest, under suspicion of currency smuggling."

"Uh, what, what's all this?"

Karl gave a good-humoured laugh: "This is what happens when one engages with non-professionals. Well then: you are, of course, a shareholder in my – our – factory, Major. Or are you not?" Karl leaned over his desk, pulled a drawer open, withdrew an official document: the notarised contract between him and the Major. He leafed through it, the Major staring all while goggle-eyed, read out the clauses relating to deadlines for payments from profits. He laughed, slapped a hand on the page: "Profits, these days! A fairytale from long ago."

"For God's sake," the Major whispered, after picking his hat off the floor and smoothing it. "You can't possibly be serious. Not after what we agreed."

Karl raised an arm to cut him off: "I shall keep our conversations secret. You can absolutely depend on it." He leaned forward, laughing: "And you can thank God that in all the circumstances, including the negligence of my legal representative, I was prevented from going along with your amusing proposal back at the start. Or where would we be now, you included!" He laughed, sniffed at his cigar. "Good leaf, what?"

The Major breathed, stroked his hat, sat. Helpless, with a wretched glance at Karl, he burst out: "But you're our relative, you're Julie's husband."

"I'm glad you remember that. I knew you'd be grateful to me."

The Major had nothing to say. He managed to stand up. Karl stood up with him. The Major stuttered: "What should I do now?"

Karl was surprised, laid his cigar down with a worried look: "Are you in difficulties?"

"Not today. Tomorrow maybe."

"Who can tell what tomorrow may bring, my dear Major."

The Major turned to the door, a toneless: "Goodbye."

COUNTER-ATTACK

Next day, early in the morning, the Major's wife was at Karl's apartment. Karl drew her into his Museum, closed the door. She yelled for her money. When she used the word "cheat", Karl had the satisfaction of cautioning this titled lady, as he accompanied her frostily to the door, about the trap she and the Major had prepared for him; industry still

knows its duty. The Major, berated by his wife, broken, desperate and enraged, sought advice from friends, exposing to them the whole business. To his relief they showed understanding for his position. As the Major presented it, he had handed the funds to his relative to find a safe refuge, instead the fellow ploughed it all into his failing shop. "He invested it all at once," the old man lied in his agitation, "he forced me in my ignorance to sign a business contract that – just imagine – makes me a shareholder in his factory! Naturally I relied on his word of honour."

"So, exploitation of an emergency situation," the friends recognised; all were tangled in similar schemes. They were only too happy not to become mixed up in what was anyway a foregone conclusion, for who these days has no skeletons in the closet, best to lie low.

But they had to react to such a confidential plea. There they sat, an official from the Ministry, an officer, and a big landowning relative of the Major's wife, and undertook to mull over what might be done. As for the money, they told the desperate Major on the spot, that's anyway already gone. Because if Karl had allowed himself to be drawn into such a scheme, he must have been in a really bad way. But it's still possible to put pressure on the hardboiled scoundrel. The whole lot of them, those business types, have cheating in the blood. All you can do is cut them down a notch, with the help of the law. This scoundrel, this Karl inveigled his way in, a man from the lowest artisan class, and now he carries on like this. He should be left in no doubt who he's playing with.

Sooner than Karl expected came the counterstroke from the Major he thought he had defeated. It began with trivialities. First, the alarmed chief accountant brought rumours to Karl that their firm was about to become insolvent, he had heard this from a competitor, now it was in general circulation. Then a scandal sheet landed on his office desk, conveying a remarkable tale of a curious swindle with the headline: "Who's cheating whom?" It was his story with the Major, turned into a morality tale from today's high society; the adversary of the "rich businessman" was a "young lieutenant of marines".

In order to talk it over with someone, Karl called his brother to the office. He let him read the story. Then he gave his version. A lot of it Erich was hearing for the first time. Really, in the posh villa district where the rich live, they breathe a different air than here, where they work. What is going on? Why does his brother speak so icily? It was a swindle, really. If it was anyone else he would call it despicable. Confusion was evident in his face.

Karl, mocking: "My boy, you sit out there all quiet and merry and sell people their pills. You think money grows on trees? Or we're living in a Garden of Eden? It's all rotten here. Why not admit it."

"Did you ever think," Erich stuttered (he had never seen his brother in financial straits, and now this revelation of how men treat each other), "that these people are dangerous?"

"They're muzzled, before you get started. Otherwise they wouldn't bother with this asinine nonsense. In the worst case, but they dare not try it, they'll go to the law, and then there'll be lots of bitter swearing under oath."

Erich, shocked: "You're wicked."

Karl, enjoying this: "The Major stepped out in front of my car. He's at fault, it won't kill him, and I've already paid him back a hefty chunk. I'm through with those chancers in the newspapers, they only cost me the price of a bun."

"And you, Karl, how's it supposed to work out for you?"

"To be honest I don't really know. I reckon the others are in no better position. I'm still just as solid as my competitors, and just as cunning." He stood up, and strode vigorously about the office. "It's good you have a glimpse of this, Erich, you can see where we're all heading. Everyone's running, and the dogs nip at the hindmost. You ought to see the banks. They're hard and proud – while they still exist. They want to outwait us. Maybe they will. Just let them carry on, those dividend-chasers."

"For God's sake, I had no idea."

"Keep calm lad. The old place is still rattling along, you can hear it. We're trimming our sails, Julie must come back from the spa. I have no cash to spare for such games. If she wants to act out a marital tragedy, she can use her own funds. We have new tasks, if things are bad inside the country, we have to rely on the outside, wages here must be drastically lowered, whether people want it or not."

Erich had stopped listening, he shook his head, scandal sheet in his hand, whispered: "Despicable."

Karl kept up his striding, barked a laugh: "They're right. It's war. Question is, who will come through."

But the other side were playing a strong hand. Rumours circulating of Karl's business difficulties and all kinds of underhand manipulations were already a provocation. But then there were his foreign dealings. He had in fact concluded several profitable deals abroad. How he depressed wages in order to make these deals possible raised an outcry in the workers' press, at any other time he would have suffered merciless strike action, now his employees swallowed the bitterest pills, and the competition sought to profit from his actions. But what was behind the tenacious rumours of a foreign subsidiary that he had set up completely undetected? Was it not the case – and the rumours came from Karl's own employees, who gave their chief agitator a lot of elbow room – that he was preparing to flee abroad, setting up big enterprises with the help of a machine-tool maker over there (this is yet to be proven), mechanical engineers were advising him on the plans, and certain specialised machinery in the factory had already been dismantled?

KARL AND THE CHILDREN

Late evening. At Erich's place the parlour, work room and laboratory were packed with people, they squatted in his bedroom. Men and women both.

Heads held upright between shoulders. But the heads were not the individual beings, and anyone who sketched the heads was not sketching the individual. And below the

necks, the trunk moved about on leg-pillars, and it contained heart, lungs, intestines, sexual organs, and atop the neck was a watcher, a spy, a guardian, a seeker. The head was the spider who knew what the body needed, the spider set off on a hunt, turned its eyes, stretched out its feelers, opened the pincer-jaws.

Unconsciously and openly they carried the head around with the body, and they managed this because neither the head nor the body was “they”. For there was no “they”. What could be seen was human beings who revealed where they came from, where they were going, who had sent them. And their clothing, their words and gestures filled in the details. Who had sent them, who caused the spider to extend its feelers this way, that way? The house they were born in, the siblings they had played with, the parents who had cuddled them and chided them, or from whom they had become estranged, the city, the corner of the city on which their homes stood. What they whispered, kept quiet about, desired was ... the story of their parents, the patience, the struggles and battles of their class. They spoke, kept silent, thought they knew why they spoke and kept silent. They even thought they should conceal their past, their intentions, their names, to cover up the breast, the body. But it was clear what fate they fulfilled, in their fleeting existence of sorrows and joys.

Now there was the Crisis. The enormous mountain of humanity was collapsing. The mountain hurled fragments of rock into the house, the fragments clattered, struck out, collided, wailed, and whooped.

Erich was busy, he brewed tea and a kind of punch. He was cheerful. Karl had turned up, and a new bond connected them. As Karl stood beneath the lamp in the middle of the parlour, he heard the chatter all around him. Had he not often heard similar chatter, how many years ago now? The mill was still grinding away. He kept his ears open. These were unfamiliar and – as he’d been warned – dubious people. Bubbling away pleasantly, like when you hold your frozen face over warm steam. So many hopes and wishes from these little people. No doubt they envied him, would like to change places with him, despised him, hated him. Oh, he’d heard the same in market halls and narrow alleys, distant bells, the market halls were long since demolished, new buildings in their place, he used to stand for hours outside the homeless shelter. The company assembled at Erich’s included a mix of some who looked like workers, and others with softer more settled features, better situated. A cluster of workers cursed the political parties and trade unions, all useless. When one of them advised at all costs to maintain a united front, a grey-haired man, hard of hearing, hand cupped behind each ear, fixed the speaker with his gaze and said: “United front, what lovely words. We’ve been fed long enough with unity. Did it fatten you up, colleague? Our people, once they rise to that level, they behave just like the others. They should have their heads banged together.” Karl shrugged, sighed, mill grinding hopelessly away, actually they deserve our pity.

In a corner of the parlour, the talk had turned to child-rearing. The phrase “hell for children” was uttered. Investigations into orphanages and care homes had exposed terrible conditions, deliberate acts by sadistic teachers. (I strolled past a house where two quarrelling families lived with their many children, the mother kicked a little girl in the

stomach.) It was Erich, the fat man, the host on a stool by the stove, who kept the conversation about families going, because there was a great deal, a very great deal, he was trying to understand, it was his big question ever since Karl turned up.

A hunchbacked man had kept to a corner the whole evening, an artist, an amiable elderly man, hands grasping the lapels of his coat. His opinion: All this palaver will do nothing for the poor orphan kiddies. "Just like with criminals: there's too much talking. I would like to see anyone here who can guarantee they'll never at some point commit a crime. It'll happen to this one, but not to the other. Justice belongs to the strong, they decide what is legal, and it's others who commit crimes. They ought to proclaim it openly, it's the Law of the Strong, but they would never dare.

"Children have the worst of it, of course. Parents are always stronger. Where do those thousands of kids in care homes come from? From families, most likely. Just shows you what parents are. Take me, when I was small they let me become a cripple. Lots who have a hunchback are ashamed to talk about it. Why? I never did it to myself. I had no mother, my father had no time to care for me, he had to earn, and I was left to run around until it was too late."

"So what should be done?" asked a plain girl, an inconspicuous creature, standing there with her eyes cast down

The hunchback continued: "It's not a case of father being wicked, or mother being wicked, whyever should they be wicked? It comes from outside. They're not like chimney sweeps, who can clean themselves up every evening. People are always carrying soot from outside into the house. Shall I tell you how I came to speak openly about my hunchback? It happened when young lads used to come to me, I taught drawing at a further education college, those big boys told me about their home life and then the parents showed up and complained to me about their sons. So then I saw: they have nothing to laugh about, they carry their hunchback around in a different location." The little man now grew heated, his hands let go of the lapels and began to gesticulate, his voice took on the harsh throaty tinny tone of the typical hunchback: "In this society there are only plunderers and the plundered. They plunder where it's visible and they plunder where it's not. The plundered have to defend themselves, that's family life. The family is the breeding ground of most misfortunes, the plague lurking in every living room. A thousand schools can't make good the sins committed every day by families. But you can't change the family, because it's the flesh of the flesh of this society. There ... is no society."

God, thought Karl, here's a hunchback and a young woman getting all worked up, of course we don't live in a world where a hunchback and a moralistic young woman can have it easy. But shouldn't they have some understanding of the family? Again his insides cramped, his loathing of Julie burned like acid in his throat. They understand nothing of practical politics, nothing of business, they're sentimental nitwits, and Erich offers himself up to them, for them he brews his good mulled wine. Karl looked around. He thought about that slim young woman. Would be nice if she turned up. She had stopped coming, he had scared her off.

The chatter continued. Suddenly Karl pricked up his ears. “Fine” families were in play. Someone with a pince-nez and a goatee, who looked like a journalist, had put “educational approach of the rich” in the pillory. It seemed to Karl that the man was looking at him, that he was the target. The man prated coldly about how the upper classes were “utterly oblivious to facts”. They never think through, he said, what is most important to them. Not the State, of course, otherwise they’d keep bumping up against things that needed to be aligned with their morality, and they’d rather keep their hands off those; but neither do they think through the meaning of family, of marriage. And they thereby punish themselves.

As soon as these lords and masters leave their factories and their offices and stick an imported cigar into the mouth, he said, some magic trick turns them from the most cunning schemers into the most stupid of blockheads. Just look at the trash heap that in this age of big technology, of rational management, they call the bourgeois family. Handed-down furniture, family-heirloom junk that shouldn’t be given house room. And what do they do with their children? A teeny bit of fatherly love, maternal love from the animal realm, any monkey in its tree does it better, and then the household staff – random persons plucked from a street corner with no check into their character or their competence, they take them in, sit them in an elegant modern room with central heating, electricity, lift, telephone, radio, and then: Have at the children! Educate them! If they were to act like that in the factory, letting some random person in to lubricate a machine, he’d be on it like a ton of bricks. But here we’re dealing not with machines, but only with human beings, children. And it’s tolerated. Why? Why do they engage in such nonsense, those cunning lords and masters? Well, we know the answer. Because when there’s no profit at stake, they lose interest. The entire day is occupied with profit, apart from pauses for digestion. The husband has his office, club, politics, the dear lady is lumbered with all the marital problems.

Anyway, the amusing man continued after a break for laughter, just among ourselves, it makes no difference. Let them pay for their profit-seeking, it’s just a business expense, and whatever would happen if Master and Madam themselves ever began to educate. It’s good enough just to stuff his respectable gob with imports. The brats grow up fast enough into their wonderful world.

“How can we make progress?” the inconspicuous girl asked.

While they pursued the tiresome topic, Karl left the room with Erich and pushed in between two small groups who had been debating rather noisily in the two rooms and the laboratory. At Karl’s approach they made warning signals and almost at once fell silent. Erich smiled, held out a hand to one or other of them, Karl was ostentatiously ignored. Karl was furious at the rude impertinent journalist. But that was not all. As he left he was overcome with panic: they were talking about children, and I have children back home! What are they up to, I’ve never given them much thought, apparently they’re important. At once memories came of his own childhood and youth – unbearable, tormenting: how he wandered these streets, and his father. In consternation he thought – a flash of light – my children are just like me, little people growing up, conscious and

sensitive. Little Julie and Karl Junior are human beings. And in their lives (but what kind of a life) Julie plays the role of “mother”, and I the role of “father”! Incredible. And I laid down so many rules: respect, cleanliness, tidiness. Did I omit anything?

It impelled him homewards. The panic, the discovery. Erich accompanied him to the door: “Are you cross with Mother? She’d like to pay you a visit.” Karl was in a hurry. As if he had to fetch something right away, he took a cab. Those people with their foul language were disgusting. He went agitated through his big silent rooms. Guilt, guilt, I’ve never concerned myself with the children! How could I have brought them into the world, hollowed out as I am, how could I build a family? And it paraded through his thoughts as he sat in his chair in the nook: how he was indifferent to it all, what to him were wife, children, what to him were other people, he knew only buyers and sellers, and I brought them into the world, through her. (The hunchback: those foul mouths actually spoke truth.) His chin pressed to his breast: Through her, I let myself be coupled to her, she had money, a good family, they could just as well have steered me to someone else, and now there’s the children, what does fate have in store. His hand absent-mindedly fiddled with the radio knob, a familiar motion, distant dance music, lovely distant world, Julie is far away, it’s all on my shoulders.

And really, to the astonishment of the children and the nanny, he appeared early next morning in their room, asked about this and that, looked on, there was torment in him, the children don’t understand, the nanny had no idea what the master wanted. Oh, and when the children saw him, they asked about their mother. And his own thoughts were clouded by memories of Julie. How awful: I can’t come close to the children! First I must clear things up with Julie. Without her I can’t do anything about the children. But how? All is lost, for the children, for me. But that cannot possibly be true! I’m at the end of my life, there’s nothing more to look forward to, botched is botched, but the children! The sins of the father cannot be visited on the children. He had no more thoughts. All he could do was grind his teeth.

But in the night, as he lay there, something stirred in him as he slept. For some are torn away in infancy, others die while they’re working, but others are granted a long life, and once they’ve saved up so much of themselves they must pay at last, may even pay willingly. A question rings in the ear, and the unpractised tongue sets up a babbling. As he slept, the deepest peace, joyous, yearning, settled upon Karl. Not until he sauntered to the office did it return. It was a feeling that was no feeling but a physical impulse, a dream-figure growing, forming itself from a human being, emanating from within and revealing itself in daylight so that it seemed he was being followed. He looked back over his shoulder, who had sent this to him, but there was nothing there. Strange, he thought as he neared the red factory building, now it breaks in on my day as well. He was thrilled to realise: it’s not nerves, I’m standing at a crossroads.

The weeks of Julie’s absence turned into months. Some formal correspondence was exchanged, Julie’s mother travelled south, Julie was tracked down on the coast. Her health, Julie wrote, has improved considerably. Not a word more.

JULIE AND THE CHILDREN

José visited Julie in the silent white landscape. He rode up the slope in a jingling sleigh, looked around on the terrace, there was only one woman waiting, but it wasn't Julie. She wore a thick deep-blue shawl like a peasant of the region, with red and yellow arabesques, it covered the head and fell to knee level. Tanned and healthy, she regarded the visitor, who hesitated, she held out a hand, so it is Julie, she smiled and greeted him calmly. Confused, he kissed her fingers. She said, as if she had seen him only yesterday and they were waiting to set off on a ski trip: "You've brought good weather with you, José!"

He, heading towards the hotel at her side: "Yes, I'm amazed. Down there it's all slush. It's like another world up here."

"You'll see how true that is. Did you manage to sleep on the train?"

"So-so, Julie. I don't find train journeys very appealing."

The hotel door was opened as they approached, the receptionist was at their service, Julie made introductions, then smiled again under the heavy shawl that swallowed her little figure. "The gentleman would like to sleep right away. Shall we meet at dinner?" He bowed, said nothing. She nodded to the receptionist and to him, tripped lightly away onto the terrace where he could see her in the blue shawl as he signed the register.

Once the bellboy had left he stood bewildered in the warm cosy room. What had happened? Yesterday he hadn't phoned as usual, it hadn't been possible, but he sent a long telegram, she must have received it, she was waiting there at the right time. She looked well, an unfamiliar state of rude health. Had he done something wrong? Until two days ago all looked good, she'd sung a little peasant song down the phone line, enchanted he'd pulled his chair closer, he had never heard her sing. And now ...

He couldn't wait even an hour in his room. He changed, rushed down in his travelling suit, see what she had to say. There she is ... alone ... near the steps ... in the little entrance lobby, a book in her lap. He sat down across the little table, her eyes followed his every move. "Here I sit, José, guarding your sleep. Did you notice?"

At last. His shoulders slackened. He extended a hesitant hand under the table, she saw it coming and stroked it gently: "But my watching seems not to have worked." So it is Julie, after all.

That afternoon she took a sleigh with him down almost to the station. They went for a stroll in the alpine forest. Snow, snow, snow. She warned: "Better not go too far in, it'll be dark soon, a few days ago a young lady lost her way, when she wasn't back by seven they sent people out with lanterns like a mine rescue, she was quite frozen, she's still in bed."

Then José told her he was angling for a transfer, provoking disagreements with his boss. She wasn't listening. "What is Karl doing, José?"

"I see you don't read the papers here either. Karl is enormously active, without much success, it seems. He lost his role in the federation, they're keeping him at a distance."

They strolled on arm in arm. Julie came to a halt. "For God's sake."

"Does it bother you?"

"It must have hit him badly, he was so involved in the federation. What's he up to now?"

"His factory, his work."

"And the children? I do so miss them. I have to force myself to stay here. Every evening I catch myself reaching for the railway timetable, and say: tomorrow I shall go to them. I won't be able to hold off much longer."

"So come back."

"There's no point, it's good for me here. Because, forgive me, José, it's so terribly hard for me to part from them all, and yet it must be. Tell me it is so, José!"

For the first time he embraced her, she would not lift her head from his breast, her tearstained face. "I'm sorry, José. It's so terribly hard. I'm so grateful for the help you've given me, I would never have made it through at home. But the children, the children. They're all alone in the apartment and they're asking for me and he bosses them around. I hoped I might think better of him down here, but I can't. He's spying on me. His brother the pharmacist was here recently, at the resort. He stayed somewhere else, I recognised the fat man. What petty people they are. My father speaks scornfully of him."

"Forget about him, Julie, come along, show me your forest."

"But the children, my dear children. I can't abandon them. How frightened they are of him, they already hate him. I can run away but the poor little things have to stay there. What shall we do, José."

Their footsteps in the snow made no sound, the air was delightfully fresh, thick white flakes fell from branches and stuck fast to them. "We must think it over, Julie."

Julie had already been alerted by José to the rumours floating around Karl. The wonderful springtime on the coast – her mother had come too – had not been too much for her. The sorrow that a wrong marriage brought with it had taken a long time to break through, she had to adjust inwardly to everything, including José. Sometimes she thought of burning all her bridges to the past, including to José, but that meant going overboard, in the end a new life has to grow out of the old, in the end I am still the same person who took the wrong path. Karl had written that economies were called for, even domestically, how much longer does she need to stay at the spa.

When she arrived back in the big city, she stayed in her old room at her parents', without contacting Karl. The sight of the big city was horribly repugnant. She had explained to José that she would need just a few days to settle her affairs, and if he wants and is able, he can come with her. José was unprepared for such a swift decision, but he was able to take some leave. Oh to think he would have to give up the lovely bachelor apartment where he came to know Julie, but she paid no visit there, there were bad memories.

She called Karl one morning at his office. When he asked where she was, she replied: back at his place. Yes, there she was, she had greeted the staff, the children were still at school when she arrived. She had brought presents, they were beside themselves with joy. At noon Karl came back, hands were held out, the maid announced that lunch was ready, and they sat down. Karl waited to see where Julie would sit, but after some hesitation she took what for a decade had been her usual place. Karl, visibly agitated, hardly spoke, but seemed relieved at her choice. Julie told the children lots of funny stories, then they were sent off with the nanny to their room.

Karl and Julie went into the nook, where coffee was served. Once the maid had left, Julie said she would prefer, having been suffering from depression (Karl: and I'm in good health?), not to dwell too long on what had happened. She could as yet form no clear vision of the future. He, unsettled by her presence, irritated by her coldness, declared how happy he was to see her, she seemed very well, at least on the outside, he was sorry to have to introduce economies, but he too was not unscathed by the times. She smiled at her slaveholder (to think he lowers himself to grant me a word about his sacred affairs), her mother had shown her the scandal sheet, what a remarkable tone they've adopted as they converse here now. He restrained himself (such ill will, she hasn't changed, only grown worse): "I think everything will sort itself out."

"For my part" (he has no clue that I'm sorting myself out) "I shall call on your mother next."

"Thank you."

"Then I shall play with the children until it grows dark. They have the afternoons free?"

"You should ask the nanny. I shall call her." He rang, the nanny was fetched, Julie interrogated her about the children.

Once she was gone Karl took his last sip of coffee and Julie asked: "You've always been happy with her?"

"She makes an excellent impression."

He stood, glanced at the clock, icy cold, thought he might die of cold, held out a hand hardly looking at her, snatched up hat and coat, and left. Crazy notion, he thought as he hurried downstairs, that thing up there in my home, better make herself scarce before long. He worked quietly in his office, shuddering now and then at the life he suffered.

A very brief conversation with Karl's mother. Julie had no particular reason to call on her, just that the woman was the only one who for some time had seemed to understand her predicament. I wouldn't want her to think badly of me, Julie thought. She was received cautiously, they chatted about the birdcage, Julie asked after Erich, the mother asked if she had thoroughly convalesced, the times are hard, a husband today always needs someone close by him. Julie dared not speak frankly before these old woman's eyes, this is the woman who fought with him; she said: well, here I am.

“And I do hope, Julie, that two sensible grownups who have children can find a way to overcome their differences. These are indeed dreadful times. One must do all one can to hold one’s head above water.” (So it’s going that badly with him, he never wrote a word about it until he couldn’t go on, and now they want to lure me into who knows what.)

Julie nodded, she hadn’t a moment to lose before spending time with the children.

“Yes, Julie, they need it as well.” Need, need. And I need nothing, you cannibals.

She went first to her mother, then on to the children.

THE CHILDREN RESCUED

When Karl returned home at his usual time that evening, grim-faced in anticipation of the coming conversation, he rang the bell (he did not let himself in, he wanted to alert her), the housemaid opened the door, and after closing it behind him gave him a quizzical look. Was Madam just on her way? He didn’t know. Given his dismissive tone she asked no more questions. He entered the dining room, the table was laid, he glanced at the clock, rang, gave instructions for the children to be brought in. The housemaid was bewildered: “But Madam went out with the children. She said she was going to meet Herr Direktor.” He stood all alone at the white-clothed table – the maids had placed a big flower arrangement by her place – paralysed for a moment, then pulled himself together, took out his watch: “No doubt they’ll be back shortly. We shall wait a bit.” The maid went out wide-eyed.

Karl pulled out his chair, sat down pensively, she goes out to meet me, goes with the children, maybe she’s at her mother’s, or her relations. He telephoned, without betraying his concern. Julie had been with her mother early in the afternoon, reluctantly he gave her a call, yes, yes, the servant at the receiver revealed, Madam was here with the children a few hours ago, but then they set off. Set off? Yes, Madam told me Herr Direktor would follow on, she would travel ahead with the children. Karl automatically asked him to repeat it, he just wanted to confirm the train and the station they had departed from. But the person at the other end had no exact information.

So, what has she done. Think it through. Let us think it through. She has gone away with the children. And quick as a flash Karl is in the children’s room, no nanny, where is Nurse, she came running from the kitchen, stood in the passage trembling, in shock, facing the master. “How long was Madam here?” (Answer.) “The children with her?”

“Of course, they were all going to meet Herr Direktor.”

“Did they take luggage?”

The nanny clutched her breast, now it dawned on her, she stammered: “They took a few playthings with them, their favourites.”

“In their hands?”

“No, each had a little case.” (Oh God, what’s happening.)

“Come into their room. They have school tomorrow. Are their satchels here?”

She opened the door for him: “There they are, that’s hers, that’s his.” (What on earth is going on. Has something happened to them. It’s nothing I’ve done, I know nothing.)

He asked: “Is tomorrow not a school day?”

She stammered: “Tomorrow’s Wednesday. A normal day.”

He stood, gazed around the room, pulled out his watch. He’s waiting for something. Might all be a false alarm.

At that moment the doorbell rang. The nanny ran off looking relieved, the housemaid was already there at the open door. In her hand was a letter, an express letter, addressed to the Director. The women stared mutely at one another, it’s Madam’s handwriting. With a shake of the head the maid held out her hands, she wanted nanny to take the letter, but she wouldn’t, both hands were at her mouth. The Director was waiting for them in the brightly lit passage by the children’s room door. The maid handed him the letter, he’d already spotted it from afar, a blow is about to fall, what will it be, he ripped it open.

“Dear Karl, I have taken the children and we are going away. They are delighted. I too. I think you will be too, without me and without them. My address is in the hands of Father’s lawyer. Julie. PS. I do not expect any remittances. As for what the children need, we shall settle that later.”

There he stands, the Director, big, broad-shouldered, in the long passage outside the children’s room, letter in his hand, he reads and reads as if it’s some major piece of writing. But he is not reading, his hand is simply fixed in that position, eyes unmoving on the handwriting that has long since ceased to say anything, and nothing stirs between eyes and brain. He looks ashen, drained, overworked. Then the arm with the letter droops, he turns and walks, slow and stiff, shoulders high, down the passage, step by step to the living room, where the door is still open. From the rear corridor, housemaid and nanny observe his unnaturally slow progress, the envelope with Madam’s letter in his raised hand, then he stalks through the open door into the brightly lit dining room where the table is laid for the whole family, wanders past the big flower arrangement, and heads across to the empty nook. The side table with the toaster is there waiting, here too they’ve placed big blooms in a huge vase, and he stands in front of it, what’s the reason, because now the knees won’t bend, the feet won’t shuffle, nothing has any meaning. But he does actually propel himself forward, and now it’s the Museum, the door is open, but the big space beyond is dark. Light from the living room falls in, and there on the floor is the shadow of the figure in the doorway. He stands at the threshold, shoulders high, stands, stands, leans against the door frame.

For half an hour those in the kitchen and the rear corridor hear not a sound. Nothing. Won’t the Director be eating this evening, should we remind him the table’s laid, who should tell him, not Nurse, not for anything, the housemaid is older and at last dares to move briskly into the living room. Then a scream, and she comes stumbling down the passage, calls for the cook by name. Director, yes what is it, Director’s just standing there,

by the Museum, he won't turn round, doesn't speak, has his back turned, I don't know what he's doing.

But when the three of them, what else can they do, egg each other on and venture into the main corridor, something stirs within and the Director looms big in the doorway and heads slowly and stiffly, unnaturally, shoulders high, down the corridor, they see he still has the letter, his eyes are cast down, the mouth strangely pouting, forehead furrowed. He stops outside the children's room. It's awful, they can't look on, we must call someone, what's happened to him, then his hand opens, the envelope flutters onto his shoe, the letter by his feet, his shoulders sag, they hear him sigh, the head moves. And then it looks as if he's going to bend down to retrieve the letter, the left hand reaches for it, but then the knees give way, he keeps sinking, slides down the wall, the legs give way along the carpet, he sits, leans over, lies prone.

Now they run up to him. They try to lift him, but he's a great big heavy weight. The nanny frees herself from an arm, goes to call a doctor. But then on the floor – they've almost pulled the jacket off him – his eyes open, his hands scramble on the carpet, he turns his head, recognises the housemaid, lets them sit him up, he adjusts the jacket, climbs clumsily to his feet. With faltering steps, supported left and right, into the children's room, he drops breathing heavily onto Little Julie's bed. He sits, asks softly for water. He drinks, gazes meditatively around him, has them fetch the letter from where it lies in the corridor. He would like one of them to phone his brother, the pharmacist, ask him to come. The women leave, nanny keeps watch at the door. He sits quietly on the edge of the bed as if mulling things over following a conversation, hands dangling between his knees. Letter and envelope beside him on the blanket.

Ten minutes later the doorbell rings, it's Erich, the housemaid whispers in his ear as she opens the door: Director's unwell. When Erich sees the contorted faces and there's such a strange atmosphere in the over-bright rooms, he struggles to gather his wits. So where is my brother? They point. Karl is there on the bed, he rubs his head and smiles mutely up at Erich. Then he massages his knees, they're not working properly, takes Erich's arm and stands up. He lets Erich lead him out. But at the door he turns once again, points to the letter, the nanny brings it to him. Slowly Karl and Erich head to Karl's room. Karl heaves sighs along the way. In his room they sit side by side on the chaise longue and with a smile Karl gives his brother the letter, which he had stuffed into his pocket along with the envelope. "A bit crumpled. It's from Julie. She's here now, that is, she's off again on her travels." He nods as Erich flattens the letter: "She's in an awful rush."

Erich reads, biting his lower lip. He has to say something: "The children?"

"She's taken them with her. That's what she writes. Show me. There, see. Delighted, why delighted exactly? I've done nothing whatsoever to her." He shrugged. Several times he repeated, with a shake of the head, "Such an awful rush." As he sits there, brow furrowed, eyes staring ahead, Erich sees that Karl is unable to gather his thoughts, and helps his brother, who is quite docile, to undress and get into bed.

Once Karl is lying down he goes to the back, has them bring him a decanter of red wine, and quickly downs two glasses. Then he waits, for he feels a deadly, icy chill, Karl has taken him over, he is no longer himself, in the empty nook he sprawls limp in an armchair, once again struck down by the calamity that others leave in their wake. And little by little he feels warmth again in his hands and feet, it's the wine, and he sees the big bowl of flowers, and the wonderful flower arrangement on the dining table across the room. The lovely cheerful apartment a battleground of demons. What venues those demons seek out for their battles.

And he starts moving, aims for where he senses something human, to the kitchen. Actually he's a little hungry, too. In the kitchen, when he puts his head around the door, the female trio – housemaid, nanny and cook – are standing tense and mute side by side, then he asks for a sandwich, with cold meat if possible, or a mild cheese. This puts a better complexion on things. Housemaid and cook insist there's hot food on the stove, just waiting, so Erich accepts their invitation to sit right down, and as he wonders how big his appetite is and cannot be sure, by and by they help him work through the whole menu.

All the while he talks with the trio and acquires lots of information: what their names are, how long they've worked here, have they eaten yet, and what's their favourite food. As he spoons it up he forgives himself for eating when actually he had already had his supper, but only a cold one. Some people eat when they're agitated, like savages who pay no attention to what they eat, others lose their appetite, force themselves to eat and then the appetite gradually comes back, a good meal is worth at least as much as a nice conversation. All this, delivered in a friendly and intelligible manner, made an excellent impression on the three females. Meanwhile he also made it clear that he would spend the night here, his brother being ill; he asked how it had started. They whisper together, we all expected Madam back here with the children, the nanny burst into tears, in the afternoon Madam got the children ready, we never thought anything of it, and now she doesn't bring them home, the Director came back on the dot, we set out flowers, then the letter came.

"What did the Director do then?"

He read. Then he wandered all about in such a strange way, and we were all frightened because he just stood at the dining room door and then he fell over in the corridor. What was it, did the Director have a stroke? Nonsense, he's just overworked, and then this excitement. Erich ponders: I can't keep talking to these girls, they're pretty sharp, but that's not much use in this house. Then the oldest of them, the housemaid, comes forward, snorts: "He won't have liked what Madam's done, snatching the children away like that, first she spends months away at the spa, then she pulls the wool over our eyes."

The cook chimed in: "Young man" (oh lord, I'm not that young!) "you must go to the police, or else she'll carry those children off to heaven knows where."

The nanny was still weeping. Erich asked: "Why are you crying?" The housemaid: "She's the nanny, she's been with the children two years already, they'll come back, dear. And you, sir, do something, police on her trail ..."

Erich puts a warning finger to his lips, silently demolishes two bowls of fruit compote, then takes his leave, offering each of them his hand, thanks them, and gives the nanny an encouraging pat on the shoulder. What a charming gentleman, says the cook as she clears the table. He turns back: will someone please fetch his night clothes from the pharmacy.

*

And then the whole apartment is dark and silent.

Far away in the countryside, Julie's train speeds down the track, its headlights glare into the darkness and monitor the steel rails. Signals, ponds, villages, forests rush past, leaving the big city ever farther behind. Eternal night. Starry firmament above. The woman has rescued her children, in her bliss she feels like opening the carriage window and singing it out into the burgeoning springtime night. The two little ones are below on the bottom bunk, sleeping side by side, toys scattered on the floor, they're still in their day clothes, they have no night things. It's a kidnapping, Julie exults, I've kidnapped them, kidnapped myself, I've rescued us all, he'll never see us again.

A SHATTERED MAN AWAKES

Karl, waking to an early dawn, lay there and not a limb wanted to move. And why should they bend? He was lying down after a fall, heavy and limp. Waking up here is the factory owner whose house – built with such care by his own hands, the cave in which he hides away – has collapsed. But he gathers his courage. He sends out feelers for what still exists within him. He seeks, not himself, but his place among humanity.

When a maid walks down the corridor, Erich switches on the little concealed light by his chaise longue to check the time. A voice comes from the bed: "Well, Erich? Good morning."

Erich in his pyjamas clambered across: "Slept well, Karl?"

"Well enough. Perhaps you would draw the curtains, I shall lie here another hour."

"But of course, I prescribe the entire morning."

"Sit with me. The night was already long enough."

"I'll fetch a sleeping draught, and you can doze away the whole day."

Karl shook his head: "She's emptied my home. It hurts so dreadfully. She's run away to be safe from me, first alone and then with the children, as if I'm the plague. Am I, Erich?"

"Oh Karl. Tell the truth, you know it." Erich groaned, covered his face with a hand: "What a calamity."

"She attacked me like no one has ever done. Perhaps to her I'm a nothing, not elegant or refined enough, she has higher ambitions, we're just little people from the provinces. Erich, I never joke around, I've always had to work and push myself hard, you know what

a burden I've had to bear. But that's no reason for anyone to punish me, surely there must still be something to me? Speak plainly. Not long ago I told you what was once done to me." Karl broke off, pondered.

Erich: "Did you tell her any of it?"

"I let something drop, around the time of the contract with Auntie. I should not have. I told her Mother hit me, when I was already fully grown."

"What did she say?"

"I revealed a weakness. I wanted to show her that, whatever happens, one holds fast to the family and doesn't treat it like a plaything. Because I set up my family so immaculately, with no ulterior motive, to the full extent of my abilities. She was my wife." (How he goes on about the family, like an idol, I don't understand, marriage turns people utterly mad.)

Karl groaned, and sat up: "No, those weren't an advantage, it's not about marriage, family is nothing, that's all wretched stuff from bygone days. I am and always will be the peasant booby who had his ears boxed. Oh, how that woman attacked me."

"You must lie down, what are you doing?" (Erich was perplexed, not a word from Karl about the love he has never felt, all he does is curse, and defend himself.)

"I'm going to the bathroom, tidy myself up. I must go and look for her, she has to hand the children back, then she can run off to wherever she wants."

"That's all nonsense, Karl. Tidy yourself up and we'll take a stroll for an hour."

"Good, and nothing here will be changed, everything stays just as it is." (I insist the house has not collapsed, I command that it not collapse.)

He stood, steady and calm, went into the bathroom. Pain twisted him, I built it all up, she's collapsing it about me, it's what happened to the mother twenty, thirty years ago with Father, she had no way to defend herself.

The lightning bolt from the shattering had reached the mother, the net of the great transformation was cast over her, the earth already opened to engulf her, she evaded it, saved face. Karl was still burning, it was not certain he could be saved.

At breakfast he told Erich: "If you want to stay here, you're very welcome, but I don't need your help."

"Wouldn't you prefer to stay with Mother just now?"

"The apartment's not a problem." (On the contrary, I have a bone to pick with it, I shall conquer the furniture, piece by piece.) In the corridor they parted with their customary cordiality. Karl's car was waiting below.

The household staff took bemused note of the great change in the master, he'll hand it over to the wife, the children will soon be back.

After dealing with certain urgent matters, Karl wrote a letter to terminate the tenancy, for him it was a simple economy measure, and he made a mental note first to dismiss one

of the maids, then to shut up the unused rooms. He thought of the Major and the slanders, and on a phone call with his lawyer decided to threaten him with legal action, copy to be sent at the same time to the editor.

*

When Erich left Karl and went on to the mother's, he could not refrain, as he paced back and forth in agitation, from telling her about José. He wanted to clarify that the problem between Karl and Julie was not so simple. He learned what his mother truly was. She bawled him out, and cursed Julie. The slut must hand the children back at once, they must be taken from her by force. As she raged, Erich regretted having broached the matter, and begged her not to speak of it to Karl.

"You ass, that's exactly the first thing he must hear. Why don't you tell him, I suppose you're happy that she has her fancy man and they steal the children away and you're his brother and don't back him up?"

"Stop it, Mother, he's already torturing himself enough."

But she made haste to phone Karl. His voice sounded calm, she invited him to come over at once, he agreed. She gave him the biggest hug in a long time – Erich had retreated, almost weeping – and wept on his neck. Karl noted: she's bitter. As he led the elderly woman to the sofa, he asked: "I suppose Erich told you?"

"Yes. I'm glad you're not conceding defeat. You don't know where she's gone?"

"No."

"Sit down. Why aren't you out looking?"

"I ... had a lot to do today, Mother." (And I didn't make much progress.)

"So you let her run off. Of course, Erich never told you what sort of person she is."

"Mother."

"What sort of person she is, what sort of a daughter in law I chose. You will obtain a divorce, you will initiate divorce proceedings right away, so the children will be taken from her."

"Are you trying to add to my distress, Mother? Isn't it enough already?"

"Don't have the nerve, you men. You will most certainly not bring a scandal down on our family. Tomorrow it'll be the talk of the town: she's absconded with her lover, and she's even taken the children with her."

Karl glared: "Now please, stop talking like this, I won't have it."

"Will, won't makes no difference. She's run off, and what's more, run off with her lover."

Karl stood up, pulled himself together. "You've heard something?"

"Of course. Erich found out. It's José."

"José. That name ... Who is José. Ah, the attaché?"

“Of course you know him. Erich went off to the mountains, he suspected something, and he met her there, with him, with her fancy man.”

“José?” – “Yes.”

“And Erich, well now, he couldn’t bring himself to tell me. He could easily have told me. It would have shortened the agony.”

“I think so too, Karl.” José, a stranger, at Julie’s side.

They sat in silence on the sofa. The old woman turned her sharp gaze on Karl: “There’s nothing to think over, boy. Clear the table, throw the rubbish out of the house.” She rapped her knuckles on the table: “Divorce petition. Today.”

He remained silent, I’m not that far along, a stranger at Julie’s side, in my family. “Is it true, Mother? About José?”

“Divorce petition, Karl!” (She’s pulling away from me, she mustn’t get off so cheaply.) Very softly, so that the mother could hardly hear him, he declared: “She must come back.”

“You’re mad, boy.”

“She must come back, she belongs in my home, she must not demolish my family.”

“And him?”

“I shall strike him down.” He stood: “Don’t you see I’m right, Mother? She must be brought to her senses. Worst comes to the worst, I shall drag her back by the hair.”

“For God’s sake, Karl, you surely won’t lift a finger to bring a person like that back?”

“She’s my wife, she has to come back.”

“That’s crazy, and you can’t force her.”

“She must be made to see that she has no cause, that she’s in the wrong.”

“And the fellow?”

“I shall strike him down.” But he said this very softly. He pondered (just imagine!) and then asked his mother again: “Is it really true about José, she went off with him?”

“Erich overheard her on the telephone, sweet-talking.”

“Who was he eavesdropping on?” – “Julie.”

“And it’s true? With this man?” – “Ask Erich yourself.”

As if released from a thought, Karl suddenly slumped wailing over the table: “It’s so hard. You see, this is what happens to me, Mother.” They wept together. She hugged and comforted him. But he was more composed than she had expected. When she asked him, unsure how he would answer, whether they should eat soon, he nodded, he hasn’t eaten since yesterday evening, why not, we must stay strong, so she was very happy and she stroked the big man’s cheek.

*

But why Karl (who remained taciturn, but then he never was much of a talker) held together so well is easy to explain: he was puzzling over Julie and the bewildering fact of this José suddenly entering the picture. Karl no longer thought: unimaginable. In a tempestuous unstoppable stirring inside him, not desired and not to be ignored, the two of them merged into one: Julie and José, José and Julie, a single new entity, a mass churning dreadfully away within him. A strong, growing, monstrous energy emanated from this new thing he carried inside him: Julie/José. He could not account for it: did he regard this thing that had suddenly lodged itself in him with rage, vengefulness, or loathing? There was something prodigious, more than prodigious, about this thing he struggled with, that imposed itself on him, and he had no way of asking or puzzling it out. It sloshed noisily within him, and at the factory the swirling sensation harried him on through the well-known halls, it was a pillar of fire, Julie had never exercised such power over him. Wandering the streets was better. Then he entered a post office and flicked for José's address, he had to do it, she was there, that's his name, he snapped the address directory shut, see, it's there for anyone to see, José's name smouldering, concealed amid all those pages and the cardboard cover.

And Karl hailed a taxi, it took him near to José's apartment, he knew the building, he had often visited with Julie. There it loomed with its modern stone balconies, wide low windows, I've led her through that door and up the stairs, and afterwards she crept up all by herself while I was travelling or busy in the office, and *he* opened the door to her, what hat was she wearing, I saw it later, can't make anything out, and *he* was waiting up there for her. It started to rain. Karl took up position in an entry opposite, and watched the building. There, second floor, that balcony, they'll have risked stepping out onto the balcony sometimes, me in their thoughts, just to aggravate me. They're going to ... (wheels within were spinning, machinery stamping), they're going to ... (he's breathless, eyes fixed rigidly on the building, he's merging with the pair of them, ardently feeling their embraces; cramps bend his knees).

He left the entry, walked along the pavement. I must avenge myself on her, punish her. He saw her dainty tender figure, her red hair, cap askew over one ear, she's walking quickly, elegantly, hurrying to someone, he can taste it on his tongue, I must punish her, and see, it's stirring again inside him, it came from her, from them, a dreadful, cruel, acrid, intoxicating allure.

This is the rainy afternoon of the day when he found out about José. Karl took a taxi and surprised Erich in his pharmacy. Erich was so relieved, he had been calling the factory. In his parlour he was shocked by Karl's haggard features, but didn't show it, merely suggested that Karl really should take a trip, perhaps he will come too.

"Mother tells me you saw Julie in the mountains. Tell me about it, about José."

So, the name José has been uttered here too, it can start all over again, where will it lead. Erich tried to wriggle out of it, but Karl cut him short: "Tell me what you know."

"It's a mess," Erich began, and though he wanted to spare Karl, he had to tell about the phone call. "It's a mess, Karl, I don't know what the problem is between Julie and you, but

she didn't come across as angry, not a bad word about you, and the horrible thing is, the two of them really do seem to be in love."

And Erich, amazed at Karl's attentive, even avid demeanour, had to repeat details of the conversation. Karl was clearly committing them to memory. He drew on Ilse's report, how Ilse too was very moved. Karl's strange expression remained quite unchanged, he seemed to be listening to something else, something quite different. Erich thought: how he hates her, he's gathering material, he's actually eating this up. Then Karl's face relaxed, he patted his brother solemnly on the arm: "We'll get through even this."

He stayed a while longer, deep in thought, while Erich busied himself in the pharmacy. For a few months now Erich had taken his work a lot more seriously, it came upon him along with the fright when he noticed how the Crisis had affected his brother. There was dreadful pressure on the soft fat man: the affair with the Major, this calamity with Karl's marriage, Julie's love-talk, what was happening to his brother, to them all. It's such a consolation that the mother is still alive.

SUBURBAN HOTEL

José was to follow on behind Julie. In order to evade Karl's enquiries she had crossed the frontier, and was staying with relatives of her father in a small country town. She was waiting for José to be transferred, but there seemed to be ever more delay. She was afraid for the children. She wrote to José: he must be on guard against Karl, he's so terribly litigious and now feels seriously aggrieved, he'll be mulling revenge. José should come, just drop everything.

But it was not so easy. Julie would not take any money from Karl, but her parents were well off and stood up for her, though help from them would not last forever; divorced she would of course receive nothing from Karl, and once she married José the new couple would be without any means apart from his official salary.

Following a despairing phone call from Julie, he travelled to see her. "For God's sake, José, what are we to do. I can't come to see you in the city."

"I'm out of ideas."

Still, the visit calmed Julie. But then came a long phone call; his request for a transfer has been declined, he has been in his current post only a short time, his private motives were not well received, he explained he would have to work extra hard in the coming months in order not to find himself dismissed outright. When asked why he could not submit a fresh request, he mentioned how badly hit his own small country was by the Crisis, staff reductions were happening, everyone had to adjust their expectations.

"Adjust ... in what way?" Julie asked.

"That you should come back here." He heard a sob, and a "No," and she hung up.

She wrote to him: "I cannot allow the children anywhere near him. We want to build a new life, why are you doing this to me?"

Two weeks later, when he fetched her from that little flower-decked town and the blissfully warm May weather back into the city, she had almost reverted to her previous state. She still dreaded Karl. But José lodged her in a distant suburb barely touched by the modern world. They rented a cheap little cottage beside a little lake, into which he moved his books and some simple furniture. His elegant bachelor apartment in the city had been only a fleeting dream.

But now they were enjoying their first life together in the delights of an early summer, constantly on edge about Karl (sooner or later there would inevitably be a confrontation regarding the children and the marriage) – but now they really had no reason to fear him. He no longer knows a “Julie”. Did she ever exist for him? For him she was nothing more than a gift bestowed by society, and the pride and joy this gift gave him had all been wiped away. Julie is standing by this stranger, wrecker of their marriage, and they form that terrible image of the two-headed centaur he carries within him, a blend of allure and loathing. Every day it puts him to the torture. His inner being, his inmost being was dreadfully alert. He couldn’t understand what drove him on, he saw himself as a hostage to something that he was not, and yet still was. But it was society, the class whose life he had lived, whose goods he strove to acquire – they had abandoned him, thrust him aside, soon they would deliver a new unbearable blow (he sensed it), but now a power awoke in him that had never lived, that had no right to life, before his eyes it calmly allowed the house to collapse, while behind him it stretched its neck into open country. What could this power, this Will, do when it could not speak the language of this society, other than jabber sinister, confused, desolate sounds, babbling this and doing that.

In the apartment, Karl shut up all but the most necessary rooms. He kept the room keys on him. In the evenings he sometimes felt an urge (more than an urge, maybe a memory of the old inspection tours). The housemaid would be sitting alone in the kitchen. Then he would creep cautiously from his bedroom. He lit up room after room, so that they blazed in a splendour of light. He went through the big living room. He strolled around the big table, no one sitting there. His ghost-battle commenced.

He revealed himself to them. Chair by chair, across the room the nook beckoned, he went over and revealed himself, here he is. For they were more than furniture. All were gathered here just as he desired, he spoke to them smiling, mouth closed, leaning on the back of a chair. This is what they all are, Julie, the children, the past.

Then he directed his steps to the Museum, drew the key from his pocket, turned on the light. The spell gained strength. He proceeded around the long room, the companions of many years lined up along the walls, ornate cupboards, chairs, candlesticks, vases, lamps hanging down on wires (how silently they hang, present and correct even in the dark), and the tin knight, the man with the chain mail and closed visor. An even layer of dust lay thick on the tabletop, Karl tapped on it, drew a line. It was a sign that the secret was being kept. He greeted all of them with a slight twinkle. Then on soft steps back to the living room, here I am again, and facing him on the wall her portrait, he glanced at it, but only fleetingly, her time is not yet come, a signal shall be given telling her to appear, and *he* will follow.

Across the corridor to the children's room. The air was musty, he looked about, everything is here, a finger drew a line in the dust on the toy cupboard, he came to a stop, checked everything, was content, nodded, went out. At Julie's door he stopped, waiting. He had never once gone into her room, he no longer kept the key with him, he didn't press the bell, the room would keep its secret. Thus on silent evenings did the abandoned man achieve victory over his old abode, saturate it with his secret. For up until now the apartment had never seen its lord and master. He transformed it, enchanted it, so that it entered anew into his service.

One lonely evening, after he had done his duty by the apartment, he opened the balcony door – the weather was sultry – and stepped out. The planters were full of dead flowers, dry stalks drooped, petals lay strewn on the stone floor. This filled him with contentment. Then he looked down two floors to the street. He still lived in the area where the mother settled when they moved here from the country. He felt he had stayed loyal to the district, it grounded him. He looked down from the balcony. Occasionally a car passed up or down the street, but there were few pedestrians. The street began an obscure conversation with him, something confidential and long-lost whispered to him. As he turned back into the room it occurred to him: he must pass this test as well.

So he took his hat and crept downstairs, strolled along several streets. He was like a fish when bait flashes past and the head turns and it seeks the scent but finds only a watery swirl. He's been living among these streets so long and he has never given them a glance, it was enough just to have a vague sense of them. Now he drew near – rather, the old streets drew near (so many more!), wide squares (how they've changed). A black iron lamppost on a corner, if you look up to the top you – recall something, feel something, half-understand, and it's like when you're in the humid reptile house at the zoo and you see tree stumps, a damp motionless landscape, and suddenly a submerged trunk moves and it's a crocodile with jaws agape. So he saunters down long dark streets, farther and farther out, how good it feels here, you leave all your cares behind and return home refreshed. "I've taken myself out of the apartment," he told himself as he climbed the stairs. "Julie goes travelling, I go travelling." (It did him good to do whatever she did.)

One evening as he left the apartment, it occurred to him he wasn't suitably dressed. I'm heading off to a cure, he joked to himself, I should be wearing new clothes. And he actually entered a shop in a dingy suburban street and bought a cheap business suit and a coat and hat – for an old retainer, he said. He carried the package happily away under his arm, and found a small hotel nearby. There he rented a bare little room, he was almost beside himself, you can sit, change clothes. So now he was lured often out of his big apartment, he almost flew to the little room where he could come and go unremarked. His double life – his visible double life – had begun, though he hardly knew it.

Living beings are enormously tenacious. Fate can circle them with its hammer and rain blows down on them until it finds the breaking point, the shards then reveal their own life and try to assert existence on their own account. In the baggy suit and hat he had bought, Karl slipped late one evening out of the hotel, hands in pockets, and went for a stroll. From wretched buildings and entries women emerged like spiders, girls, young,

older, spoke to him, laid hands on him. It's a most remarkable thing you experience here, makes you shudder, this touch of an unknown hand and the way they look at you, eye to eye. They take you for a human being, nothing else, out for a stroll, a human being. All at once you're in another world, simply a human being. Like a scale you step on that only shows the weight, it doesn't care if you're prince or beggar, deep thinker or empty-headed, they mark you down as a human, a man, and they know a little bit about that. Maybe more than you know yourself. They have no need to ask, and so when they stare at you they're staring at loads of others. They are poor bad slovenly persons, women.

And as a stare held him eye to eye and an unruly sensation ran over his gums and radiated into his teeth, Karl felt a touch on his arm, an arm inserted itself under his, it was linked to a body in motion and a female face beneath a small dark felt hat, and he followed. It was temptation. And they entered a fake-respectable room, it was cosy and the female asked if she hadn't set it up lovely, and was happy when the red lampshade and the tasselled throw on the sofa were praised. "I knitted the throw all by myself." She was familiar with him, like old friends, wheedled how much she expected from his wallet. But then the thrill when she vanished behind the bed screen and emerged from the blue matting naked but for shoes and socks and a brassiere and twirled coquettishly, pointed to her body and smiled. "You coming?" A girl like that, gestures like that, would once have left you cold, you'd never had purchased her wares. Now – you overlooked the broad pale face and the deep scar from an operation on the throat below. The white body dusted as if with flour is alive, skin, hair, hips, all alive, and she's made the same approach to lots of men, lots have sat here like me. It draws you like a powerful magnet, it's both possible and necessary to let yourself go, many thoughts disappear (in the background, in deepest darkness, strong importunate images of Julie with José). The woman, what's her name, she's in your arms, you exult, she hasn't run away, and you embrace her and all inhibitions are gone. She has to suffer – and inflict – love and punishment and abasement and degradation. All this to pay her back for deserting her place at his table and believing she can live without him.

The woman endured the man's savagery, then pushed him aside, kicked him hard, and he tolerated it and that too was in order.

This was the feed trough he was led to. In the mornings Karl sat in the factory, calculated, read, signed, went through the production halls, updated himself on the progress of the Crisis, in the afternoons had discussions with political friends. And every evening he left the apartment and vanished from sight. Erich noticed that Karl, when he came out to visit, was no longer so gloomy and broken. His chatter was animated, cheerful, clearly separation from Julie has done him good, amazing how quickly he's recovered. But then Erich was again disconcerted by his brother's unsteady flickering moods, the mysterious brooding, the cheerfulness was often forced, and then there were the wide empty eyes, long weary hours on the sofa staring straight ahead.

Karl already felt at home (a second home) in the little two storey suburban hotel. He often preferred to take his supper here, read the paper, he cheered the nasty little room up with his suitcase, clothes, night things. The owner thought him a cryptic but pleasant

enough character, who paid the rent on time and no doubt was up to dubious tricks somewhere in the city. Really Karl had half moved out, release from the overbearing apartment did him enormous good. Here he had all he needed, and women were always drawing him out. He convinced himself he had been too long alone, but then ever and again his battle with Julie made its mark on this second life.

Across the square she comes, slim and nice-looking, they walk on together, her place is close by, she says, but she led him on quite a way, at last they climbed a wide well-lit wooden staircase, the steps well-scrubbed, an amiable older woman was sitting in the passage reading under a lamp, glances were exchanged as she removed her horn-rimmed spectacles, put down her glass, opened the door to a long narrow room, gave it a rapid visual inspection and wished them a polite friendly goodnight.

Karl sat at the table, leafed through a newspaper, the girl spoke, of course she needs to earn a living, things aren't easy, not even for her, we all have our problems, what I would give to be in her skin. She had just told him, as she took off hat and coat at the door and tidied her hair, half dreaming, that she lived alone. But voices came from next door, a man's voice and a woman's voice, urgent rapid whispers. At first Karl was annoyed, then he couldn't ignore what they were saying, the whispered conversation excited him, the uncanny maelstrom stirred, the wild dangerous fountain hurled water, his hand became hot, his gaze uncertain, the girl, this Eve smiling hesitantly at his side, tried to catch his eye, she could see he wasn't going to scold her, this was no novelty. And when she laid her hand on his and the woman next door groaned, she reeled him in, his face ecstatically on hers, she giggled in his ear, and when his absent gaze landed on her she had already wrinkled up her nose, her eyes were closed to a slit, the tip of her tongue was visible, clamped between the teeth.

SECRETS

These days Karl was an unalloyed joy to Erich and the mother. She couldn't help him financially, her bold plan to persuade the aunt to put her money back into the factory had failed, the aunt wrote back almost gleefully: she is glad not to have any dealings with business in these turbulent times, Karl was so desperate to take over the factory and has had long enough to think about it, her late husband did enough for the family earlier, she hopes Karl will not at long last bring ruin to the old solid business, her husband's firm.

Now this was truly brutal. All Erich could do was brood morosely, the mother cursed. But at least Karl acquiesced in the end to their insistence that he go after Julie. Whenever Karl asked himself what sort of an ending was in store for him, he thought of Julie, and now he went to his lawyer and instructed him to draft a divorce plea.

"Finally," said the corpulent red-cheeked man with the gold-rimmed glasses, "I understand why you hesitated. Because even when a wife forgets her duty, she is still the one you were married to. But when it comes down to it, you owe it to your children to lodge this plea." They shook hands, Karl knew he would see her again, and the other man

too. The lawyer passed on her address that same day. He was shocked to find she was so nearby, he sat in his office stunned.

One Sunday he could hold off no longer, and took the train out. He set aside the whole day. Not until afternoon – he was lurking among trees – did they come along the narrow woodland path to her little cottage, with the two children. The children ran on ahead, the boy had a hoop. Happy shouts, and Julie hatless in a white summer dress came quickly along behind them. She no longer had the tan she brought back from the south, was again pale, but looked healthy and her stride was vigorous. Barely two minutes later they had passed Karl by, and vanished. For God's sake, he thought, so that's where I stand. The scene enlightened him, dazzled him. Then came a slower heavier tread. Karl was reluctant to peer out from the foliage, it'll be him, then he had a side view, and then a rear view until the bend in the path. They are happy peaceful people. For some reason he waited, then stepped out of the trees and on at once to the station.

Oh what a stupid plan it was to seek out Julie. No less bitter was the meeting at the lawyer's office, which occurred soon after. After much vacillation, against the pleas of the mother and Erich not to appear, for what is there to discuss, they sat face to face in the office. She came alone. He gazed at her, she's his wife, all the strong happy boomtime years, the factory, the solemn orderly unruffled life. A life already ended. Julie quailed at the sight of him. Karl had grown smaller, and lacked his usual vigour. He objected to none of her wishes. Perplexed and unsettled, she thought: I've made such an impact on him, I never dreamed I could make such an impact. How is it possible. She wanted to retain custody of the children, after negotiation he was allowed them for a few weeks. The lawyer was delighted. But Karl smiled, unmoved: "What would I do with the children? I'll be able to see them whenever I want."

"But if you marry again?"

Karl just barked a little laugh. But the lawyer (who hoped to string the matter out), for reasons which, he said, he preferred not to broach in front of the lady, wished to leave that matter open until their next meeting. Neither Karl nor Julie objected to another meeting – they would at least see one another again. The cause of the divorce, once money matters were swiftly disposed of (Julie renounced in advance any maintenance payments) was mutual estrangement. But this too the lawyer left open for further discussion; the question of blame and the children question could not be separated.

Before the next meeting – the lawyer had been unable to persuade Karl, and José had just spent a trying week with Julie – Julie had a private conversation with Karl in the lawyer's living room. Karl has already pronounced judgement on himself, he has separated from her, it is all over. The sight of him tormented her dreadfully, what has she done to him. She asked him: since the negotiations are proceeding so smoothly, will he not talk to her? "Are you not well, Karl?" He almost laughed: she's asking after my health. He searched and searched her face, it's his wife, he said Julie to her (the apartment, dining table, inspection tour), but here is another stronger Julie, how can he reconcile them.

"What is wrong with you, Karl?" she urged.

She took an hour's absence from the surprised lawyer ("one is always learning something") in order to sit with Karl in a corner of the empty restaurant downstairs. He was happy to tag along. At first they sat in silence (together we made such a precious home), then he raised his head and asked how things were going with her, and when he heard "well", he cheered up and something stirred in him. The small redhaired woman, chin propped, at first was only dimly aware of the enormous change that had taken place within him. This was not the Karl she once knew. Not her Herr Kommandant. No longer, so it seemed, did he dress with such care, he was wearing an ugly tie she hadn't seen before, in vulgar taste, a different shape of collar, what sort of taste was that. And the man himself, how easily he let himself be led. She was amazed, amazed. Did he feel humbled, was he submissive, or what? One can talk to him, ask him questions, he doesn't clam up! "So, Karl, what do you do in the evenings?"

He answered: "I walk around."

"Where?" – "In the rooms."

"Every room?" – "No. Not yours. The others."

"And what do you do there? Is no one else there with you, really?" (I can ask anything.)

"No one. I walk around. And do battle. And subdue them all."

She leaned back. He's mad. "You walk alone through the rooms? And the maid?"

"In the kitchen. I keep everything the same. But it was awfully hard. I subdue them all. Including you. And him."

"Who?" – "Him. The one you have now."

She lowered her head, her face flushed, it's affected him dreadfully, but I don't understand any of it.

He looked sidelong at her with his new changed gaze (what does it mean?), whispered: "You lot can do nothing to me. I shall remain in charge."

"Do you hate me, Karl? Oh, this is so exhausting! You know how it all came about. You would never speak to me."

"I know, Julie. But for almost the whole evening I have you, and him as well, and I shall remain in charge."

A shudder ran through her. "What are you doing? Why have I heard nothing from you?" As she pressed hands to her breast, he smiled down at her. It's not him, it's someone else, he needs a good shaking, he's unhappy, so horribly tense.

"But now I hardly ever go through the rooms, Julie. I don't have the time. I'm never there. I live somewhere else."

"But you still have the apartment."

"Yes, but in the evening I change my clothes and go somewhere else. To places when I was a boy. Out there, that district. I have a little room there."

“And?”

“I live there.” (His face is even more tense, and that smile!) “I’d really prefer to live there all the time. Best of all if I had never moved away. Then I would never have had a factory and you and I ... would have been spared all this.”

“What do you do there?” (She tapped his arm. He was in a reverie.) “Karl!”

“Nothing, Julie. But no, there are women.”

“Who?” – “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know her name?”

“It’s not just one, Julie. They’re not pretty, actually sometimes they are.”

“What happens with them?”

“I ... love them. It started after you went away. But it’s about you, only about you, but I hate all of you.” How his face twisted, it was morbid, avid, fearful. Oh he is ill. And ... he thinks of me.

She did not know this man, did not know him, what was she guilty of here, she was terribly agitated, this was no longer a conversation. She whispered: “Karl.” (She still said Karl, and it was eerie, but really it was still the same Karl who used to tread her down). “What are you doing to me, Karl?”

“Have you noticed, Julie?” His eyes glinted. “Have I touched you? Can you feel it?”

“Don’t talk.” There were tears in her eyes.

He said: “The waiter’s watching us. We must go back to the lawyer.”

She wept, laid her head on the table. Then sat up all of a sudden, wiped her eyes, powdered her face: “Tell the lawyer we shall continue the day after tomorrow.”

Karl was again dead to her. “Does he let you come so often?”

“Should I come to you, Karl?” What does she mean.

“You’d like to, Julie? Where? Outside?”

“I shall ... think about it. I must speak to you again tomorrow or next day. You hear?”

“I shall be here.”

When they stood up she gave him her hand. She had a sudden urge to press her face to his chest, but shrank from the strange staring gaze. (What is he doing to me.) She stroked his hand, her eyes pleading. For an instant his expression, which vacillated between cowering submission and hunger, relaxed a little, took on a steadier quizzical human look, she almost fainted, who is this, what have I done. They went their separate ways. He had no need to swear her to silence, she felt it was her secret too, a terrible marital secret between Karl, José and her.

She spent a happy evening with José and the children, lots of laughter by lamplight (but Karl is out there). Next morning, however, José telephoned to say he had to take a

work trip that same evening, she complained, but inwardly welcomed this act of providence. In the station restaurant after seeing José off, she wrote to Erich:

“Please excuse this letter. But I know your good feelings for your brother. I spoke to him yesterday after one of our awful sessions with the lawyer. I was dismayed by his state of health. You need to look after him. I beg you, please do not mention this letter to anyone.”

Then she was again out by the lake, alone with the children, and was able to yield to the astonishment, the enormous shock. What has come over Karl, who is this man, who had she been married to, perhaps she had misunderstood everything. Perhaps committed an injustice, and ... been wrong in everything, running away, abducting the children, yielding to José. Out here she has time to mull things over. He always made me feel small, kept me down, but now he lets the real Karl emerge, the disaster has done this, he's really not such a tyrant, but what could I have done. I had to see him, I've been too impetuous, he is my husband, after all.

She visited her parents in the city. Lots of contemptuous remarks about Karl, it's good that she's free of him, he's an unparalleled swindler, see how he ran rings around the Major after all the business he brought Karl's way, and now his factory is creaking horribly. They congratulated Julie for leaping from the runaway carriage in good time.

Julie thought: these are my parents, if they're putting him down there must be some good in him, I should have stayed with him, but what can I do now?

Julie was so disturbed that she could not bring herself to meet him in the restaurant, so they first saw each other again back at the lawyer's. The man was pleased to have found an opportunity to delay the final agreement, because Julie's father had notified him of amendments to Julie's inheritance in case of divorce, and all manner of agreements had to be prepared for signature. Julie was outraged at her father's insensitivity. Karl gave her a friendly loving smile, it cut her to the heart.

The mother still lived in her placid little domesticity, she vigorous for her age, though much shrunken. One morning Erich called on her, he was nervous, Julie's letter was burning his fingers. Karl was steering clear of him. And now Erich came out in his mother's presence with the story Karl told him about his boyhood, and what had happened. The mother listened aghast, uncomprehending: “Karl said that?” She remembered it clearly, but from quite another angle. The mother stared at him: “What's going on between you two? He tells you such stories? And you came here to tell me this?”

“I would have had no reason to, Mother, even if Karl did say so, that would not have been a good enough reason. But you must know things are not going well for him.”

“And I know you take Julie's part and find excuses for her, did you tell him that?”

“Yes, Mother. He knows all about it. And he makes no excuses for what he has done.”

The mother was angry, she struck the table with the flat of her hand. “Why should he make excuses? Will you stop your nonsense? Erich, it is really not your place to sit here

offering insights into the actions of your relatives. She runs away and *he* has to find excuses? She's an adulteress according to justice and the law, steals the children from their home in broad daylight, and *he* has to find excuses? But why?"

The fat man pulled himself together, though he too was angry: "I didn't mean to upset you, Mother. I'm simply reporting our conversation, what was said there, it wasn't I who said it, it was Karl."

"And what did he say next?"

"For example, he spoke about his younger days and how hard it all was for him ..."

"For God's sake, why was he saying all that?"

"He said that all the joy, that all the love had been stripped from his being."

The old woman on the sofa banged her fist on the table and roared: "And he said that to you, the scoundrel? And for that I raised you both and walked through dirt with you, just so you can fling filth in my face? Wasn't he always my good boy, who always looked after us? Did he not know where his duty lay, know it better than his father? He was a good boy, he helped us, all the things we did for you, Erich, and now he says his joy was taken away." She coaxed: "He's had bad luck, and he shouldn't try to blame others for it. Did he tell you how for years he moaned at me because I wouldn't let him run about the streets with rogues and rascals who planted crazy notions in his head? Where would he have been now, the great factory owner?"

"He's not happy being a factory owner."

"Nonsense. The whole world is in a mess. That slut, that Julie, has driven him mad. So what joy am I supposed to have stripped from him?"

Erich's head was low: "It's ... that he can't feel any love inside him."

The old woman stared, speechless. But at these words a memory stirred: she herself, out there in the countryside, the husband jovial, irresponsible, she stern, dour, longing to make herself love him, and then he died. And Karl? Her son, her heir?

Softly she asked: "And what should I have done, Erich?"

"I don't know, Mother."

But Julie's plaintive letter (she too has lost) burned his fingers. Erich sat there unwilling to yield. He felt dreadfully tangled in his beloved brother's misfortune, he has to help, it's his turn to help, he will not go from the mother, he must know everything.

After they had sat a while in silence, he asked about the father, of whom he no longer had any memory. The mother nodded, hummed and hahed, told the story: who the father had been, a frivolous man who went his own way, brought children into the world and never concerned himself with them. "As for me, I was invisible, he could step all over me." Her eyes were screwed up as she assembled her memories. "I never in my life ever came across such a man again, a petty lord, and we were a respectable family."

Erich, tentative: "You were a good match."

"He wanted me for his Cinderella. He went through all my money. And then he died. Karl had to earn something. Did you know Karl actually looks like him? He too tried to run away, and if he's made something of himself, he has me to thank for it."

"And how did you get on afterwards, Mother?"

"Now Erich, that shows what a good son you are. Do you think he ever once asked me how I was getting on? It was hard for us, but we recovered. Why shouldn't I say it. In the big city you can be free, my boy."

She sat deep in thought, this old woman, with a smile on her face. "And if there's one thing I need to say to you: if I had met your father again ten years later, we would have been a much better match."

This jolted Erich. So Karl was sacrificed, he was forced to believe that the mother was stronger, though for sure she wasn't wicked, she was human too and needed his love. But he was her son. The family: plunderers and the plundered! The mother sat with a smile, lost in her memories, not noticing that she had just lost another son. (And like a prisoner he sat shackled there, no help to Karl, he crumpled Julie's letter in his jacket pocket.)

DECISIVE MEETING

In this age of violence, cluelessness and enervation, when whole industries were crippled and each country shuffled its suffering off onto another, demented structures were erected which, like the Pyramids and the Tower of Babel, would become symbols of an epoch: invisible monuments of tariff walls, strongholds of regulations, so high and strong that not even the most essential goods could make their way across.

To a few was granted the illicit good sense to be able to help themselves. Many (actually not that many) fled if they could from one place to another (but everyone sat behind passport walls, and once you made it over there you were in a new maze of walls), from one profession to another, maybe of a lower status, the lowest (but you're only dreaming, others have already beaten you to it). Money, accursed money, had already made the most audacious escape, it flew on papers and in envelopes over land and sea, it had become a new species of migratory bird, everywhere bird-catchers rushed about after them, wings flapped, flapped, sought a new abode. Only the industrialists sat heavy-headed in their splendidly equipped factories, they can't fly away with such awfully big machines.

One day Karl received at the factory a remarkable, indeed fantastical visit from the dear Major and his noble consort. The usually over-loud old gentleman and his passionate lady were unnaturally stiff. They had brought a document along: the contract between Karl and the Major, which stipulated that the Major was entitled at all times and in any manner to take an interest in the factory's business and seek from Karl clarifications of any kind. They had heard bad news of the enterprise's situation, and had to turn up in person to show Karl that they would not be denied their rights.

Karl's appearance shocked them, but his tone was jovial. The visitors, who kept looking around to see where their dosh might be stashed, were a source of enormous fun. Karl offered an unsparing analysis of the deplorable situation, but they shouldn't worry, for he is securely lashed to this spar and when it strikes land he'll still be there with it – but his unkempt green-grey features provided little consolation. With ill-concealed anger the lady lectured him caustically on the necessity for adherence to a contract arrived at through connections, and if those connections are not maintained, or even ... then one must not be surprised.

So Karl invited her, as a shareholder, to put those connections to work. The lady threw back her head in silent contempt.

What they wanted now, said the Major, who had no high hopes for this conversation, was to visit the factory floor. During this inspection they learned something new. Certain unprofitable production lines had been abandoned, and he was in contact with a foreign friend regarding production over there. On hearing this the lady jabbed the Major in the ribs. Karl provided no further information, indicated evasively that the matter was still at an early stage. Half an hour later, once they had left those very inhospitable spaces, the lady confronted her Major vociferously: does he realise, Karl is dismantling the factory! He's squandered all our money, now he's shipping out whatever's left! The factory belongs to us, we're shareholders. Both were outraged, they imagined the entire factory hollowed out, as if they still had something to lose.

Karl had been indiscreet. What he told them might come back to haunt him. When the ill-used pair began to whisper the secret around (nobody thought of their own plans for securing their money) hands were clapped together and a single voice cried out: Treason! Our property plundered, and a man whose fields yield no harvest can just head off abroad with it (who wouldn't want to, if he only could). Major and Mrs Major can rest easy: Karl won't slip away, there are connections with people in the Revenue and the Customs, and if there aren't any you can set some up. Karl was a rebel against his class, he must feel its power. (And why, people wondered in secret, had the Major and his missus not been lured into the plot, because that would have been icing on the cake.)

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Much was in motion along the poor streets narrow and broad which Karl went down in the evenings. Here, better than in the city centre, you could see what was afoot. All around could be heard the curses and bloodcurdling screams of a humanity crushed as if by a pitiless machine of war.

Karl toiled away at the factory in a state now of energy, now of hopeless lethargy, always seeking an escape route. It was in dire straits, the enterprise he had outlined to the Major and his lady, that desperate and (as he well knew) illicit effort to transfer certain machinery and fabrication methods abroad, where they might earn more profit. Until recently it had still been feasible, but now it cost enormous outlays, when not expressly prohibited. Taxes and customs duties loom over you, you try every which way to evade

them, set up subsidiaries, send machines off allegedly for repair. But it was all make do and mend; no new ideas came to Karl.

He led his double life. At the factory he was the earnest chief beset by problems. In the evenings the very thought of his dead apartment turned his stomach. His features, his comportment changed, he breathed slower and deeper, his voice took on a softer tone. Now and then his secretary came upon him in the office laughing dreamily, impishly to himself, and he would engage the chief accountant in conversation about personal matters, which had never happened before. Sometimes when Karl stared out of the office window, he was horrified to think he really was lost, no marriage, no family, no home, only this, neither alive nor dead, the wheezing moribund factory. Then the obsession flared up again, he flung himself into it, it lent wings to his feet, Julie, José. José-Julie. They mesmerise, they are to blame for everything, down with the pair of them – and then to the woman, a woman, no matter if she looks like Julie, or not. (For his urges were fuelled by no love rising up out of him and connecting him to the world, they had to lurk in him raw and squalid like a disgusting lump of offal, and only rarely did something of them come into view, distorted, distorting, oafish, ridiculous in the dignified garb of a married gentleman – how Julie had flinched back in horror. The dignified clothing was tattered, it devoured him, he was the sacrifice.)

It exhausted him, I don't want, free me from it, someone absolve me of it, you can't let me rot away like this, it's what makes people assault others, or cut their own throat.

Wandering, shivering in the heat, coat collar turned up, down streets where the hopeless misery of another wretched state (had it not the same roots as his own?) once set up its quarters. He strode and strolled down these streets, failed to see how thousands and yet more thousands do likewise in this district, in other districts, other towns, all belong nowhere, only the buildings stand silent. The thousands all believe they are alone, but that is this epoch's mark of Cain, acknowledged by no one on the brow of others. Crippled humans, truth annihilated! Violence, and the vanity of science triumphant.

Karl soon realised: drinking is good, heavy drinking.

Night. The poor harassed human body lies, one leaf of all the many in the great leaf-fall, curled up, shrivelled. Nothing can touch Karl now. But in the darkness a tiny silent flame flickered in him. Week by week it burned more clearly. It was the flame that bore the actual name "Karl" before the mountain toppled onto him. Karl dreamed, lovely intimate dreams, and held himself still. He dreamed of a strong stern figure that sat and walked and did all sorts of things and spoke. Its face was thunder-dark, and it could see inside him. Was it male or female, this strong being that exerted so much strength?

The being that stepped out at night had a broad lionlike mane-fringed face, its voice honey-sweet and forceful, all you can do is follow, its expression is storm-black.

Have you ever walked in a forest in late autumn? Foliage brown-yellow-red lies ankle-deep, but here and there the green of grass and weeds pokes through. You think the fallen leaves must be smothering the greenery. No, they rot, decay, nourish.

It was rather late one evening when in a sudden dreadful crisis he took advantage of the maid's absence to vandalise his Museum. He took a hammer to the mosaic doors of the ornate cabinet, then swung the hammer randomly at pictures, vases. It brought him no pleasure. He undertook the task with an artisan's concentration. One after another he dealt with the items, he knew what he was doing, there was no wanton cruelty. Fragments of the wonderful antique lamps fell clattering onto the table. With one blow he felled the tin knight. It clattered so loudly that he paused and listened in case someone came. He stood tall, went into the living room, listened in the corridor. All quiet.

He took off his jacket, hung it on a chair. He bumped in passing against the grand piano. He turned, stared at it, grabbed the big sumptuous cover Julie had made, vases and picture frames crashed onto the carpet, he gathered up the cloth with its long tassels, draped it carefully over his shoulders, and stomped gravely through the apartment. He sat on a chair in a corner of the Museum, from there he could see the whole room. It was completely calm. He made sure that everything on the floor kept still, that nothing moved on walls or ceiling. Then he pulled the cover over his head and his face and sat there utterly rigid. He kept his eyes closed. Fifteen minutes went by, half an hour. He slumped. Weariness came. He brushed tassels from his face, stared ahead, yawned. He stood up, dragged the cloth along behind him. And as he stood propped up at the table, pensive and exhausted, out of the blue there came once more the thought, gaining rapidly in uncanny force: show mercy to all these things here, fetch paraffin from the kitchen, slosh it over them, let fire devour them, throw off the cover, fetch the can, matches – and then open the balcony door, look down onto the street, bend down, right down, just try it, climb over the railing, and if your hands let go ...

A bell rang. The apartment door. No one went to answer it. The maid was not yet back. Who can it be. He waited in the living room, gathered up the piano cover, shoved it in the piano stool, put on his jacket. Another ring. Who might it be. No one looks for me here. It's late in the evening. I shall wait.

Again the bell. Not frantic. After the same interval. Will they go away. Strange visitor. I too shall be gone soon. They're so patient. I wonder how long they'll keep ringing.

And now the fourth time. Karl moved slowly towards the door. Let's say: twice more. If it rings twice more, I shall open. He pulled out his watch. One and a half minutes' pause – it rang. Again, one and a half minutes, it rang.

He put the watch away, so, we shall open. In the lighted corridor he took the brush from the mirror and dragged it across his hair, wiped his face, and opened the door.

Out there was a tall lean gentleman in a straw hat, not young, clean-shaven, age uncertain, holding a light hiking pole. He raised his hat, revealing a low forehead, sparse blond hair, asked if he had the honour of addressing the master of the house. He had a foreign accent. Might he step in. What is it about? Not easy to explain, on the stairs. Karl let him in. The maid was still not back. If he's a criminal, he might murder me. Karl went on ahead, the visitor – hat and pole in his hand, upright, head thrown proudly, vigorously back, long slow strides – followed through the open door into the living room. Karl

checked to see if the door to the Museum was shut, he can't let the man in there just now. The lean blond man stood in the middle of the room, turned his body from side to side. He studied the room. Karl straightened two chairs at the big empty table. The man said: "The picture is not there."

"What picture?"

"The house blessing. 'God holds you daily in His sight, And guards you well by night.'"

Who is he? The visitor hasn't introduced himself. The man continued in his harsh guttural tone: "But perhaps it's hanging in another room, a bedroom."

As Karl stepped closer, the stranger gave an ironic roguish wink: "We can't possibly have thrown away such a lovely old family heirloom."

It's someone who knows me. The stranger nodded: "Correct. You may speak frankly." His tone was formal.

"You are ..."

"Correct. And I would never have recognised you. Twenty, twenty-five years are no triviality. A quarter of a century."

It was Paul. This tall lean man with the ironic smile, he was scrawny, but what a profound gaze from those wide hard blue eyes! Did he have such bright eyes back then? Karl (who was he now, Karl? A manufacturer? A forty year old? A married man, a somebody, a boy?) – Karl hesitantly held out a hand (the same hand that wielded a hammer not half an hour ago). The stranger shook it calmly and at length, put hat and pole down on a chair, but Karl took them out to the cloakroom in the corridor. As he hung up the hat he stared at it, thought: amazing, who? Paul? It's almost funny, what am I to do with him. Everything upended, the market crier, Paul in my apartment, the world has gone mad, does he want money, is this a squeeze? The stranger – but it was Paul – sat at the big empty table, both long arms planted on the shiny top, in Julie's place. But Karl, instead of taking his own place, sat down opposite him.

"I shall be careful not to scratch the table, it's your handiwork, this wood, the lovely veneer, and it hasn't warped. Are you expecting someone, am I disturbing you?"

"Expecting someone, yes, I was waiting for the maid, but obviously she has gone out."

"Of course, lovely weather. You should be outside. What are you doing all alone in here? I came up on the off-chance. How amazing you never moved west, to the new district."

"My brother and my mother live out there."

"They're right. The air is fresher, you don't feel so shut in. Even when you're not able to move, you should at least insist on some elbow room left and right, no people around for a while, just flowers and living things, even if only ants and spiders."

"Have you been far away, out there?"

“You mean my accent? Yes, I’ve wandered here and there. And sometimes not, just ten paces in a square. Our kind make swift transitions between rambling in the open air, and prison. But at least we don’t live our whole lives in prison, like others do.”

He gazed calmly at Karl, Karl listened without reacting. The visitor laughed: “And you are now a considerable man, rich, respected, powerful.” (Karl waved this aside.) “Perhaps you will explain to me one day, it doesn’t have to be today, how it feels to be powerful. I was able only now and then to observe powerful people from afar, or stand before them as a poor sinner.”

“One gets along,” said Karl, “and I’m not really rich, and there’s no question of being powerful. You must know there’s a Crisis. One has to do what one can.”

“And it’s worth it?” Karl shrugged and gestured with a hand.

The visitor sat upright on the chair. “Back then, you will recall, I went away. It was not easy, but they never caught me. I was amazed at your courage in staying home. They were after all of us, two of my best friends had their heads cut off, only you were kept for other purposes. I tried hard as I could to make contact with you, out there in other countries, eventually across the ocean, they often caught me but they never broke my spirit, I’ve met marvellous people, sometimes they seemed to just fly to me, other times it was like chance encounters in the desert. And now here I am, for the first time since all those years ago, on account of the Crisis that has caused such grief to you – and me. You’re the first on my list. Please excuse my persistence with the doorbell. But our kind are stubborn.”

Karl bowed stiffly from his chair: “But it’s a pleasure to refresh old memories.” Actually I have nothing to say to the fellow, he must be an agitator, we’ve had our fill of them. The man’s eyes were fixed on him. Perhaps I shall stand and explain that alas I’m indisposed.

Karl asked: “Is there anything in particular you want from me?”

“In what respect?” – “In any respect.”

“Thank you. I land on my feet wherever I am. And I’ll be staying with your brother.” Again the ironic smile. “Yes, your brother Erich, the pharmacist. A young friend arranged it. Seems he often takes in strays. The young man also led me to you. He’s downstairs.”

I shall stand up, this fellow’s intolerable, Erich’s crazy. “I really must apologise,” said Karl, “for your having to lodge with my brother. I shall certainly have the pleasure one day, but just now I am engaged on an important task.”

The fellow doesn’t move. “What kind of task?”

He’s shameless, totally ignores the rules of courtesy. (I’ve been busy destroying the Museum.) “That’s not really relevant.”

“But I really wanted to see, close up, a rich and powerful man, who in my opinion is facing a crisis. So how do you spend your evenings?”

What cheek (I’ve wrecked my chairs and cabinets). Karl swallowed, his mouth tightened, hoarsely he came out with: “Writing things, reports.”

“You’re tireless, tireless. So it’s not enough to drudge away all day. Is the prospect of the Crisis really so attractive that you gladly devote even your evenings and nights to it? I don’t mean to upset you, but perhaps as an old acquaintance I may be allowed to say: what you achieve during the day really should be enough. At night you should leave the world to its own devices.”

Karl forced a smile: “You’re joking.”

“Whatever. Won’t you rather give yourself a break? These last few weeks, as I roamed across the country, I gained a most remarkable impression: that here there’s been boom and Crisis, recovery and development, enormous development, well done! Yet nothing has changed. These people grind and grouse, toil and hang about on street corners, and no one talks of anything but work, work. No one laughs. When they drink, it’s to get drunk. You see. So it is, and so it has always been: an incorrigible people of draught animals, lambs, vultures.”

Now Karl stood, his voice rasped: “Sir, you are speaking of my country.”

The man regarded him with surprise from his steel-blue eyes, and rose slowly to his feet: “Mine too, sir. But it remains to be seen whose country it really is.”

“We won’t settle that point here.”

“Anyway, you are on the other side.”

“There is only one side, and then the malevolent.”

The visitor’s left eye closed, wincing as if he had received a blow. Karl: “I have no fear that you will drag up all those bygone matters.”

The stranger, very quietly after a pause: “Scoundrel.” And long steady paces to the door, and down the corridor. Fingers on the handle, he turned to Karl, who was at the living room door: “And do not forget: you can expect no mercy!”

STRIKE ACTION

When Karl looked in on the Museum later, he frowned, considered what might be repaired, and on what excuse. When he saw the ornate cabinet, he bit his index finger in a rage. He set the tin knight upright. Restlessly he waited for morning, work at the factory, he must (so he thought) catch up on what he had neglected these last few weeks. That same evening he called two political friends, and in a bar talked with them over-animately late into the night. Exactly why this man, this agitator Paul, had arrived in the city just now dawned on him as he spoke with the two friends.

The State was girding its loins for a new assault on wages. The private economy insisted that the State take the lead as a major employer, the relevant decree for the public transport system would be issued any day now, all the signs were that strike action would follow, to what extent no one could predict.

*

Next morning Karl woke very early. He could tell that the visit from this man, this agitator, had proved a tonic. If only he'd turned up a bit sooner! The long decade of grief that fellow inflicted on me! He and his ridiculous notions! Incredible. I must have been mad. I can't thank Mother enough for seeing through him on my behalf. And he pondered last evening's discussion with the political friends, the consequences to be drawn. He vacillated between two possible courses of action: one, send an anonymous letter by express post to the police (that'll give him his comeuppance!) to advise the authorities of Paul's presence (cf. earlier terrorist actions)– for some radical action would surely ensue now that the fellow had turned up at his door (just as I was wrecking my lovely Museum, oh yes, in the end he's to blame for that too, he shall pay, he must pay, for a whole long life and the impact on several people) –

Or else: give Erich a call, and warn him.

But at noon in the factory he received a summons from the Customs to attend an interview. The summons was marked Urgent, his appearance was required the very next morning. Karl knew at once what lay behind it. To establish the foreign subsidiary, he had arranged for more machinery to be dismantled and sent abroad. Someone had given him away. Who? The competition, a chance Customs inspector, a malicious employee? In any case Karl wasn't bothered by the summons, the matter could be set aside, he went at once to obtain a sick note from his doctor for the next few days, and sent his chief accountant to the Customs Office to settle the matter privately, if necessary with a silver handshake. He meant to keep his hands free ... to settle accounts, he was not quite sure with whom, for what.

His next actions – overexcited, drinking, unable to keep still, he tries to exhaust himself, but his body is strong – had something maniacal about them. It was he who, through his lawyer, sought a meeting with Julie; the notion came to him, a backsliding, she's his wife, she must help him, disgust at the debauchery he has fallen into leaves him no choice; in the lawyer's living room where they are left alone, he implores her to save him. It's her husband sitting there beside her with the grey frightened face, big bags under the eyes, fiddling with the tablecloth, can it really be Karl. He no longer says strange and puzzling things about his dreadful battle to keep her, once he asks about José (not a word about the children), she sees how his eyes glitter, glint, so there's still that inside him, and she shivers, if only he doesn't do something to José one day. But she senses other matters in play, it's as if for him their entire life together has been swallowed by the abyss, what on earth is this leading to, where is it taking him.

She let him whisper and complain for a whole hour, she even managed to let him kiss her hand (horrible, I don't like this), he's calmed down, he had an emotional spasm, he needed me, now he'll slink away, but why did I come, why can't he find someone else to help, I can't be the one, no, I want no more of this.

And so they stand up, they can stay no longer in this unfamiliar room, she asks about the apartment and the maid, he says nothing, head tilted as if he's listening, then all of a sudden, very quietly, his expression frank, he asks about the children, his eyes swim with

tears, she says something, he utters some words like a person lost, dying, as they leave he forgets to offer his hand, shyly she holds out her hand, he shakes his head and says: "Oh, Julie, you mustn't touch me."

After this conversation she cannot go home, struggles to think who she can turn to for advice, someone outside the family, not Erich. Then she thinks of her former headmaster, now long retired, he used to visit them often, a well-meaning clever man. She turns up outside his house, it's early afternoon, the old bent man is in an armchair by the window with a book on his knees, she recognises it, a de luxe edition of an ancient philosopher, a seventieth birthday gift from Karl. He is surprised and happy to see his pupil at the door, she won't let him get up, pulls a chair closer or herself, they chat and soon arrive at the nub of the matter.

The old scholar nods, he and others had seen it coming, something had not been right for a while between her and Karl, what a calamity, especially for the children. He is relieved, or pretends to be, to hear how well the children are now situated. As for Karl, listening to her lengthy account he gazes sternly at his former pupil: "Karl is a warrior, a bold man, who fought his way through to the position he now holds. Now he's assailed by demons that the gods send down to mankind. Maybe he'll prevail, maybe he'll be defeated. Any help from us will be to no avail."

Julie stares in bewilderment, she can't understand. "So what should I do?"

"Take care of yourself. Stay out of it."

"But that's so cruel, headmaster!"

"Not cruel. He's not cast in the same mould as today's scoundrels. Don't be cross with me, Julie, I hope distancing yourself from him will bring you happiness. You were a misfit there at his side, for a long while."

"I don't understand," Julie stammered. "But he's ill, he's gone mad."

The pale man with the wrinkled parchment skin glanced at the open volume on his knees: "That's what people in every age have said in such cases."

Julie drove home. People can't help each other, they all avoid each other, open a book and forget who they've just been talking to. But what really is wrong with Karl. How spookily strange he was today, stranger than ever. She hugged and kissed the children, who were waiting at the door for her. So glad I took them beyond his reach.

She wrote to José: she still has a few little matters to deal with, but under no circumstances can she and the children stay here much longer.

*

At this time reports appeared in many newspapers – and were picked up mindlessly by every tabloid, exploited by some for their own purposes – about dreadful events in other countries (and who knows, here as well?). This time the news was not of fires or murders or floods, but rather of alarmingly abundant harvests, surpluses the year had brought forth in grain, wine and every possible crop. The Earth had no insight into the sorrows of

mankind, the appalling over-supply of labour, processing machinery, motor vehicles, ships, freighters. A monstrous curse was in the offing, about to descend on human beings already so long in torment. Even reapers in the fields watched in dismay as the sheaves were stacked, harvest festivals were held, attended only by children and the utterly clueless, the traditional dancing and singing dampened by the sour faces of older folk. Along sultry riverbanks in the south, where vineyards offered verdant flanks to the sun, the delight could not be suppressed. Whoops, laughter, high jinks by young and old swept through villages and small towns, people gave themselves to the divine new vintage. But then they sat in cellars, in wine caves, curses echoed, vat after vat, the cellars couldn't hold it all. The pressing ceased, some vineyards left their golden fruit on the vine so that the birds might have a share, and when the first auctions were due to take place, people came together, thought it over, and (feeling ashamed, even though the whole world knew, ashamed of the sun that created these heavenly libations) for several nights they poured vat after vat of the blissful ambrosia into waters that ran murky and raging.

Then fish could become drunk and reeds and water plants along with frogs and toads and dragonflies could sing to the sun a paean that had never before been sung, and they praised people for thinking of them and handing down some of their riches. Ah, but the people were suffering punishment, they were not rich, and those who poured wine into muddy waters by light of moon and lantern's gleam were gloomier than any who only later came to hear of it. They felt the shameful necessity that drove them on. But if they don't empty the vats, who will pay for wine when it's as abundant as water? And if no one pays, how are they – the vintners, their assistants, their workers – to earn a living?

What happened to wine this fated year happened to many other crops. They were burnt, perhaps, or dyed a nasty colour fit only for cattle feed, while the poor in their millions filled the streets. But it had to be done. Because people lived not by harvests, but by money.

As dimwitted newspapers spread the word, a profound unease rocked every country. The novel phenomenon caused a sensation among the simple-minded, who spoke of exaggerations, or a hoax. But the reports dug the ground from beneath their feet, and the clever people and experts who appeared on the scene and delivered their opinions on the events and found them quite explicable – they only made matters worse.

Then a feeling spread that for goodness' sake, things can't go on like this, help must come, even if from the Devil. The royal palace stayed in the background, but its government proceeded as usual with the cold severity characteristic of this nation's governing class, for it had entered into a satanic pact with the people: it promised and guaranteed peace and good order, while the people paid with their souls. When a state of siege threatened, and a new Cabinet of unmistakable character was appointed, where were the Opposition, where were the new faces, the Radicals, who once brought a breath of fresh air? They had "evolved", become a party, complemented by their own trade unions and newspapers, and understood their task in good time: poaching members from the other parties. What help could come from that quarter?

Paul was at work in the city. He differs from those other men not so much in respect of ideas, but in the way his ideas determine his will, his actions, his tactics.

He roams about in gatherings of tram workers, bus drivers, ticket collectors. No one knows him, he is thought to be a foreigner, a fugitive, some suspect a police spy. He never gives a speech, but his old talent of gathering people around him who will do as he says is still effective. He focuses on younger people, on those whose energies are not yet spent. This is the city where in his younger days he had people with him who knew how to fight and die; now he hopes, not for victory, but to force the enemy into a corner. The government has set out its plan, advised the organisations, and now disillusioned quasi-military radical groups have formed a battalion around Paul, from the provinces new members arrive who know how to procure weapons. In the intervening years Paul's ideas have not changed. The only organisation worth anything on the other side, he says, is the Army; for, he laughs, "what one man says is nothing worth, you need both sides to find the truth."

Erich, who put him up for the first two days, gaped at this man who arrived with two young fellows who seemed to be bodyguards. He wasn't happy about taking him in, because the presence of the two scouts made it clear that this was a man of some importance, and Erich, careworn and highly strung as he was, reluctantly provided a lodging until he found other accommodation (which he secured the very next day). The stranger showed an interest in Erich. He had him show them around the pharmacy setup, and talked and drank half the night through with Erich and the two young fellows. He was a charming much-travelled man. Erich sat at the piano, the visitor sang along in his hard but musical voice, he was insatiable for news of the theatre, of new books, the two young fellows seemed to owe him blind obedience.

A few days later he came back with the two lads, questioned Erich about his brother, he wanted to know how Karl had turned into such a mischief-maker and raving lunatic. (He had not yet revealed his past relationship to Karl.) But Erich was scared by the imperious way this man turned his penetrating gaze on him, and explained how frightfully close he felt to Karl, how much the family had to thank him for, as far as his own family situation was concerned, things weren't alas quite so well.

"I hear the wife has scarpered with the children."

Erich was shocked. The man clapped him on the shoulder. "The affairs of celebrities are public knowledge. You should warn him. He should retire from the firing line! It's high time."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"We are not vengeful. We do not envy elite men and their troublesome wives. Give him a sign. Tell him who you got it from."

And with that, the remarkably arrogant domineering man made himself comfortable on the sofa and seemed to take an interest in Erich. How did Erich come to bring under his roof all kinds of people not of his class? Sheer philanthropy? Erich admitted: it

happened without any plan on his part, he has no political convictions, people turn up, he likes some of them. The visitor approved highly of this, nodded to his companions: "No political convictions! That's right. Just stand your own ground. But if they put the screws on you and you have to make a decision, as they say, what will you do?"

Erich laughed: "I'm too fat, they won't come at me, we overweight types never have to decide."

"And you're not married? No woman?"

"Women yes, married no. I've avoided even that decision. I'm totally unreliable. I can't demand it of any woman, I mean any particular one, I have to spread the load."

Roars of laughter. The visitor noted: "Heaven knows, you're a very different type from your brother the industrial magnate, he's been taken by the Devil that so busily lays low the great and the humble, and he has to be the one in charge. He enjoys it. Just that people aren't a plank of wood, and won't submit to endless planing and polishing."

And then they embarked on a wide-ranging conversation initiated by Erich, for he intended to pass on to Karl as much as possible about this entertaining visitor.

"So tell me, Mister Pharmacist," said the comfortably sprawling guest as he savoured Erich's schnaps, "you've studied, you had to for your diploma. That's probably how you came by a large part of your healthy understanding of people, which is all to the good. So are you able to see a human being unfiltered by the thousand ideas funnelled into you? Impossible. That would mean a pharmacist would also have to be a doctor, and a doctor a pharmacist, and, pardon me, I don't think much of your chemist's shop here."

"Neither do I," Erich sighed. "There are precious few customers."

The visitor smoked. After a while he continued: "You have to be born with hatred inside you, or grow up with it, that's our ABC, and no one should be allowed to scrub it. For hatred is a tender and precious plant, and no one should water it with foul substances like compromise and love and so on."

Again the conversation turned to Karl and industry. Erich said he'd be happy to spy; the visitor fixed him with his gaze: "Anything's possible, there's a motive for everything, I lead you not into temptation, you might for example be tortured one day to reveal what you know, and in any case I advise you: don't ever utter a single word about me. Take a look at those grandees your brother worships, why they built barracks and prisons so close to their palaces, whether they could survive without oppression and wickedness. They have to keep people in an abject condition. Because they're a fraud, a hollow shell, and yet there they are, up there basking in bygone glories, living on an inheritance from long ago, resting on the laurels and ideas of other men. The force that has a goal and a commonsense task is called power. But force without intellect is violence, has to be violence. The grandees have no legitimacy, and hence no sovereignty or authority, and so they have to surround themselves with canons and rifles and muscle. Oh, it's such an ancient evil ploy, you can exist a long while under it, you can survive a hundred years after your own death. Now they have industry, finance, trade. You can't criticise the profiteers,

you just have to give them a kick now and then so they know what they are. But that's exactly what no one is capable of. That bunch, the profiteers, have become the real ruling class. Profit seekers, the stupidest and most loathsome vermin the Earth has ever brought forth, those robbers, those criminals and their sidekicks the journalists have given the grandees a free hand and thereby feather their own nest. And that" (louder now) "is their unforgivable crime, and they shall pay."

"And the masses, the little people, the workers?"

A frown ruffled the visitor's brow beneath the sparse blond hair: "A sad business. Being so long serfs and semi-serfs – and that's worse than being an actual serf – has been their ruin, all the way from the scholar to the shoeshine boy."

"But without the masses it's impossible, think what you like about them, but they are there."

Paul stared at Erich: "Who told you that?"

"You're right, I'm just saying what others have said, but it's hard to argue against it."

"Hard? I can tell you there's nothing to be done with the masses, all you can do is carry them along. You say it's not possible without them. What is not possible? Did anyone know yesterday what's possible today? Who knows, tomorrow you could be king of this land, and today's king will let you pin a medal on him."

Seeing Erich's smile, the visitor became enraged. He yelled: "I tell you, he'll let you pin a medal, that's just as possible as the fact I'm sitting here drinking your schnaps! It's only the cowardice that afflicts you serfs that makes you doubt it. Stop doubting, my good sir, then you'll change your thinking. Trying is the thing, first of all you just have to try. This wasn't true earlier. Here we have lots of unknown quantities. We shall provide an opening for them to become known. All their organisations, their armies, their civil service! Just wait, don't place your bet too soon.

"And those masses, I really wish they were better than they are. They're not doing well, but they're not suffering enough. The little bit of freedom they've wrested for themselves, they've used it just to ape their former masters. You shall see, Mister Pharmacist, which way the wind is blowing. Matters are truly coming to a head. What do they do, these masses who are supposed to be the main thing, and their leaders and their parties? Do they flex their muscles when the selfishness, incapacity and flimsiness of the ruling class cries out to high Heaven? No, they carry on with their squabbles, they whine and protest about unemployment, bad wages, and basically want everything to be as it was yesterday. The slave is content in his pen. And yet, what strength and courage some of them have. But those are pushed aside. The parties are too much a lovely going concern for the leaders to risk it all in a fight. The situation can be a thousand times worse before they'll lift a finger – unless they're those enemies who know well enough when their hour has struck. In the end, even the few will be infected by the general rot and scabbiness. And who in the end knows what a human being is, or even a head of cattle."

At this point one of Paul's companions sat up and beamed at him: "I think I know."

“You think so, lad? You’ll have a chance to prove it soon enough, then we shall see.” Said with a touch of scornful harshness; but the youngster maintained his beaming smile.

*

Erich headed next morning to the factory to tell Karl all about it. Karl made fun of him: he shouldn’t turn into a parliamentarian: “You can expect no mercy.” Then Erich described the strange visitor. Karl listened: “Is he dangerous?”

Erich told him all about the night, the young fellows and how they clung to him, they hung on his every word and action, no matter how banal. “I like him, I’d be lying if I denied it, but then he sends a shiver down the spine. Remarkable how he ordered the young fellow to prove himself, and he accepted the challenge with a big smile.’

Emerging as if from a whitish mist, the thunder-dark face from his dream stood before Karl. The maned lion, shaking its head!

Karl – who once raged because that lean calm man was apparently the one who tore him apart, it was all for nothing and I was just a stubborn child, a weakling – Karl grew ever quieter. His brother was still talking about the curious soliloquy. Erich was puzzled when at the end of his tale Karl’s eyes clouded over. Does Erich know where this amazing man might be found. Erich advised him, seeing him so vexed, better not seek a meeting, but eventually made a promise – with no intention to keep it – to arrange a time and place. But before that happened, Karl himself encountered Paul, outside.

REUNION

Because, having heard the report, Karl could not wait. It was the vision of Paul speaking to those young people. The call! His insides cramped, and from a pale swirling mist emerged the thunder-dark visage (was it actually Paul, actually human, and not rather his own will, now laden with death? Where should he go? Here was a way out, maybe more than a way out, a hope, maybe, what madness, and yet fulfilment.)

Paul was not easy to find. But he caught wind of him in various dreary discussions. How the organisations hated him, they would like nothing better than to strike him dead. Paul no longer used the old conspiratorial methods, but with a handful of aides, people like himself, he formed military battalions, enemies of the state one and all! What a dreadful situation to find oneself in, between that lot and their enemies – the wielders of power, the ruling class, the organised. Other than hoary printed words constantly reprinted, theories pronounced and only ever impotently repeated, what weapons did they have to counter Paul’s proudly ringing declarations?

“This country belongs to us, the grandees and the rich are ruining it, we must wrest it from their hands. They have conquered our homeland, our soil and our cities, and made us their slaves. Free yourselves! Help liberate the country! They speak of a Crisis. There is no Crisis. Do not believe them. The hunt for profits no longer pays, but that is not your problem. They want you to come to the aid of the bloodsuckers. The criminals have fallen

sick, the sooner they quit the scene the better. Like a lump of meat gone rotten, it poisons us, clings to us and brings us to ruin. And so our country with its wealth of fertile soil, mines, machines, strong men and women could yield whatever is needed by way of coal, iron, wine, grain – yet no one is fed, warmed, made rich, because *they do not want that!* Who gave such power to that crew? Look at your protectors up there, how they know everything and keep their mouths shut. See the villainy, the shamelessness, the cruelty, the madness. See the disgrace. Be rid of it!”

Karl recognised Paul. Was he convinced by what he read, did he take in the lesson? He really didn’t read, only heard the tone, a human figure emerged more and more clearly. He had to talk to him, see him. Strange, he no longer thought of him as “the stranger”, “the visitor”, but after hearing Erich’s report he again thought of him as “Paul”. And whereas before, when he set out from his apartment early in the evening to go down those streets intent on vanquishing Julie and José and proving his superiority – rage still quivers within him, he senses that his bestial behaviour will culminate in annihilation, it has to, it’s an inferno – now it steered him towards something called Paul. Searching, and for a long time never finding him, he berated himself and was appalled that the recent scene at the apartment with Paul (just think, with Paul) could ever have been possible. A determination smouldered in him to cling to this, to justify himself, and if possible, be cured by the very thing that first made him sick.

Karl dared not visit the factory every day, the letter from the Customs was belatedly causing him anxiety, the lawyer’s face had dropped so alarmingly when Karl showed him the letter. But it meant not much by this stage, oh it’s all true what they say, all the bad acts they accuse him of, evil deed after evil deed perpetrated (but by whom?) over such a long period must come home to roost, the mountain is falling, it’s no longer just one loose boulder. Around the time when the police searched the factory to check whether certain mechanical installations were still in place, and found at the apartment that he was not in his sickbed and never had been, his search for Paul grew desperate. Until early one evening – streetlights were just coming on – he saw him close by his little hotel. For Paul’s image flared imperiously within, there was no way he could fail to find him.

Amid the crowds that thronged the district – groups clumped together at every corner, outside every shop, debating the coming fight – there strolled a tall lean well-dressed man in fur coat and lambswool cap, he had a gold-rimmed pince-nez, his brown moustache drooped. At his side, one hand in his pocket, an elegant younger man. The fur-coated man’s gait drew Karl’s attention as he chanced to come up behind them, and when he overhauled them and they squeezed on through the crowd, he knew that it was, again, Paul in disguise. He followed them, had to duck and weave and endure shoves and curses until at last in a wider street he watched them ten paces ahead disappear into a rambling tenement. Maybe he lives here, maybe he’ll come back out before long.

But an hour later the young man came out alone, cigarette in his lips, tried to push past Karl, took him for one of the locals. Karl spoke to him, he frowned, shrugged, pretended not to understand. When Karl asked him to say the name of the older gentleman in the lambswool cap and the fur who had gone into the building with him,

the young man stared, took the cigarette from his mouth, pondered, then gestured to Karl to follow him into the entrance passage. There he studied Karl very carefully, pondered, and finally told Karl to wait, and vanished through a back door. A few minutes later he returned with another man of the same age, again Karl was asked who he was, clearly they knew the name, but the clothes he was wearing seemed anomalous, they wanted to know why he was there, had someone sent him, one of the men went out to the street, no doubt to check whether Karl had company, whispered something out of hearing. One of them stayed with Karl while the other disappeared into the back. When he appeared again in the doorway he nodded to the other, they exchanged two words, and Karl was allowed to go with them.

They led him across a courtyard, in a passage he had to submit to a full-length pat down, they tied a handkerchief over his eyes and led him through the big building up and down stairs and along corridors. A door was opened, and when they removed the blindfold he was in a squalid kitchen where gas was burning, the two young men were there with around five others, some older, all strapping fellows who looked like soldiers, or officers in civvies. They were standing or sitting around a kitchen table piled with papers, street maps, ink, pens, pencils. Karl was left waiting until a blond young man tall as a tree emerged from the next room; as he came out he was studying a written paper in his hand, and marking it up with a pencil as he went. Now it was Karl's turn, the door was still open, someone told him to sit down at once on a stool by the stove.

So the shattered man sat down, and was only a few feet from Paul. He was not at all put out by these lengthy preliminaries. The man on the other side of the table – no moustache now, he's sitting on a red shabby-genteel sofa under a picture, the stern lean head is laid comfortably back, questing eyes, mouth shaped as usual in an ironic smile – could be recognised at a single glance. Yes it's Paul, the bold cavalier face, comfortable pose, stern tense expression, low forehead, long sparse blond hair, and eyes that now opened wide with an incredibly steely gleam. For an entire unforgettable decade his thoughts had orbited around this face, this mocking smile. Again Paul half closed his eyes. Like a snake watching its prey. A faintness came over Karl, almost like the moment he received that letter from Julie. For several moments he was unconscious of himself. When he came to and sat up straight and cleared his throat, the lieutenant on the sofa leaned forward, regarded him with a beady eye.

People were peering in from the kitchen. Again Karl cleared his throat, stuttered, he wanted to apologise for the poor reception he gave Paul the other evening.

"Would you like some water?" Paul asked. "Are you not feeling well?" When Karl declined the offer and again apologised, Paul nodded curtly: "Is that why you're here? Did your brother send you?"

"No, no," Karl stammered, "I just wanted to say sorry." It took enough to say even this much. He leaned back, I want nothing, it's all good, and his drunken gaze swallowed an overlarge gulp of the plain room – a living room with gas lighting, sofa, table, wall clock, cupboard with picture panels, open door, Paul, and it was once again the scene imprinted

on his memory: eating lunch together in the market tavern, the rowing party when they stretched out on the grass, Gustav, the sky flecked with white chasing clouds, empty boats jostling at the jetty, Paul telling about a pastor, they'd laughed and grown serious and it was all so murky, so true and yet translucent, that even then grief had welled in him and he'd lamented: "If only I'd never tasted this." His throat constricted, what a momentous hour, he swallowed, sobbed softly, it's done, I've grown old, I couldn't prevent it.

The quiet man on the sofa said: "Your apology is delivered and accepted. Is there anything else?"

"Please excuse me, my nerves are all shot." It's ineffably good to sit here, don't spoil the moment, soon I'll have to leave and then there'll be Julie again, the factory.

"To the point, then." The man on the sofa kept still. Karl tried to compose himself:

"Please, I implore you, be patient with me for a moment, I'll soon be myself again. You don't know the situation, I just wanted to sit with you after our unfortunate meeting. Allow me this, we were friends once, I was so very attached to you – it's hard to put into words – to you and everything you used to say, you have no idea, meanwhile thousands have crossed your path, you don't know me, I'll hardly ever have crossed your mind, but for me just sitting here is a huge occasion and I can recapture what our friendship meant to me. And what happened then."

He clenched his fists, sat hunched over gazing at the ragged green carpet, pressed the fists to his forehead and murmured: "Shameful how my life has unfolded. But no more of that now. I shall just sit here quietly for as long as you let me." (Am I really sitting here with him? I have Julie to thank for this.)

Cool voice from the sofa: "But it's a mistake to think you can sit quietly here. I have matters to deal with that are not exactly for your ears."

When Karl kept to his seat, he raised his head, and said, insistent: "Please?"

Now Karl feared he would fluff the opportunity, and he burst out: "This setting doesn't make it easy for me. I really want to explain everything. Must the door stay open?"

"If it disturbs you..." Paul called a name, one of the earlier pair appeared at once, they whispered, the youngster shut the door and went to stand by the window.

"You may speak freely. My friend here hardly understands our language. Anyway, no explanations are called for, there's no need to get worked up. Why do you wear those funny clothes? In my honour?" The lieutenant indicated Karl's overcoat, the limp grubby collar, the loosely knotted tie. Karl blushed to his ears, rubbed his chin, said softly: "I'd like to explain that too." And he embarked on a halting story about a street corner, things he'd mentioned to Paul a thousand times in his thoughts, and some of it he had recently told to Erich: how he had tried to run away, the mother locked him in, how he searched for Paul, and then the factory (oh, now that he said it out loud he saw how weak he had been), and then things just happened and the marriage and the Crisis. Karl kept his head down as he spoke, he didn't see Paul's cold expression. Years ago this same sentimental

man dragged up long-dormant history about his father, their farm and the inn, and how his mother tormented herself, maybe he'll start blubbing.

"Overall, you've made an excellent career. Out there in the world I used to hear about your factory. You yourself became a powerful and influential figure, a man to be reckoned with. The Crisis is carrying you off? You're unhappy that your good lady wife is going her own way? Without a husband."

"When you left – let me speak plainly – my life was over." (No holding back, Karl can feel the time is ripe.) "I'm burdened by a great sin. I'm a murderer, a robber. I stole years of her life from the wife who has deserted me, I brought children into the world and had nothing to give them, I've trampled my own life underfoot. Why? I never learned what it means to move freely, and when I acquired the power to do so, I acted in the service of others, of outsiders. It was never about me, and I never want to think about myself, I felt horror whenever I thought of myself. They talk about exploitation of the workers. I've been suppressed, robbed of my entire existence, they pounced on me like a spider and sucked me dry, and they could get away with it because I was weak and helpless. I don't mean to rake it all up again. Back then you waited for me in vain. Now here I am."

"So that's what you wanted to say. But you're forgetting something. Until the very last moment, you provided outstanding service to your class." Karl bit his lip. The lieutenant again half-closed his eyes, studied the visitor. "So that was the formal confession of a penitent sinner. Will you enter a monastery?"

"I'm glad it's all come to this, the factory, the family, it couldn't go on, it was no use, it would all come to light. I'm happy to sit here in your presence and tell you everything. At last, after all these years, I feel at ease."

"Glad to hear it, even though I think you're a fool to despise what you achieved. You are living proof that the ship is sinking and the rats are swimming away. But do not think that something has happened just because you sit here feeling at ease. You are still the man who bears your name."

"Have been."

"And you believe that because you express regret, something has happened? For example, that the federations opposing us, from which you have received funding, will lay down their arms?"

"What should I do, tell me, please, I beg you, don't nail me to the past."

"My dear sir, those are big words, say them to the dead whose bodies tomorrow and the next day will lie in the streets – and you partly to blame."

"Don't nail me to the past, you can steer our conversation ..."

"It is your conversation."

"I do so want it to be yours too, please listen, you no longer know me, I was a big peasant lad, we met at the markets, you were good to me, can I find no forgiveness in you, you see how I abase myself."

"Your innocence, sir, is distressing, . The conversation is taking a serious turn. You say: don't nail me to it. But I shall nail you fast, I will not listen to your private troubles."

"I cannot bring myself ..."

"No, you cannot bring yourself. Let me explain why I paid you a visit. I wanted to sound out a leading industrialist about the current situation. This country is crashing into the most lamentable conditions. Some see what a disgrace this is. What do people like you think, what will happen next, or do you think it will just roll on endlessly?"

"I don't know," Karl stuttered.

"So I see. Then expect no praise from me. What do you wish for now? That I rustle up credit for your factory? Or bring your wife back?"

"Nothing."

"Are many of you in the same boat?"

Karl sat up straight, wiped his forehead: "When you ask about industry, you know very well: we're fighting for our existence. Some think they still have something to defend, but no one with any insight believes it. We are drifting. But people still have money to pay others of the same mind, who are willing to defend them."

The lieutenant grinned a big grin: "That's good to hear."

Slowly Karl got to his feet. The hour was up. He looked again around the room, this is where he said his piece, the youngster kept in his place by the window. The lieutenant said: "Stand still, the lad doesn't understand games."

"I imagined this conversation would go differently."

The lieutenant shoved the table aside, stood up, exchanged a few words with the youngster, who went quickly to the door and closed it behind him. Paul stepped under the gas lamp, face to face with Karl. "Now, old boy, we've never met since that day so long ago, you betrayed me. What if I were to take this revolver and put a bullet in your head?"

"I'd really prefer to straighten things out between us." Karl stood firm facing him, he had overcome his weakness.

Paul held out his hand: "Adieu, old boy, I have things to do, there are difficult days ahead, shame we didn't stay together."

As soon as Karl left, the young man presented himself in the doorway awaiting orders. Paul, still standing there, nodded and smiled: "In this country, they believe in a god who rejoices more over one penitent sinner than over a thousand righteous people. I think my old friend would do better to pray to his dear god."

BATTLE COMMENCES

It really was a difficult day. Hostilities began that very night. Given the instruments of power wielded by strikers and by the police and military, what took place could only be

described as battles. The streets around the big tram depots were filled by growing crowds of unruly people; no one knew what they intended, many women and children were present – a surprising number of children. When the first employees turned up and approached the gates to start work, they were set upon and beaten, so only insignificant numbers gathered inside the huge sheds, and at most depots there was no hope of despatching any trams. But the menacing crowds outside lay in wait for the first tram. Meanwhile police reinforcements arrived, slowly the crowds were forced back, they let themselves be shoved about like a lifeless thing, but any gaps were filled at once.

As the day brightened, crowds gathered not only outside tram depots, but at every possible spot in the city with the exception of the centre, where the morning traffic was unusually light and became even sparser towards midday, when large contingents of police turned up to secure the big stores and public buildings. Smaller businesses, especially jewellers, closed early. The department stores dared not close, but lowered their big protective grilles, an act that did nothing to entice customers. By late afternoon the crippling of tram and underground services brought unfamiliar scenes. Streets and squares, including in the city centre, heaved with people of a genus that had never before enlivened these thoroughfares in such masses and at this time of day. They formed long processions, huge numbers growing ever denser towards evening, filling and blocking all the city's traffic arteries, and all the while the show windows of the big stores, restaurants and cafés blazed with light. The crowds seemed to surge aimlessly back and forth as if on a Sunday stroll, but the roadways remained alarmingly empty, a few cars, not too many, and even fewer delivery vans. Mounted police patrols rode down the carriageways, big clattering horses, in the saddle a man with a rifle slung over his shoulder. In the afternoon the district of palaces, museums, government buildings was blockaded. Rumours flew: troops have been camping in there for days already.

It was evening after a gloomy damp autumnal day, newspaper boys cried their wares, few papers were bought, no one cared what was happening in the wider world, and what they had in mind would become clear soon enough. It was evening, an hour after the big stores closed, their employees mingled with the passing crowds, the central streets no longer blazed, the smouldering mobs gradually melted away, soon mounted police were all that remained of the menacing insurgent crowds on the elegant streets and avenues beneath their garlands of electric light.

It was evening, night must fall, and everyone in the city sensed this night would be momentous. The sacred quarter of the Hall of Victory and the palaces lay utterly dead, the grandiose city centre of theatres and department stores and cinemas was almost deserted, fear scattered the crowds back into their dwellings, in vain the cinemas flashed their neon billboards, this was not the time for voluptuous magic dreamed up by idlers in their studios, not the time for being carried away, present reality was calling with a powerful shrill voice. Ears were filled by fleeting sounds – a clatter of mounted police, many feet running. This city, whose ruddy nocturnal glow normally formed a dome visible miles away across the plains, now emitted only a pallid gleam from its streetlights. Working-class districts heaved with people, every hall packed with union meetings,

unruly crowds gathered in every square, police wagons whizzed constantly by. Rumours flew of arrests, soon it was absolute fact that the iron and steel industries had joined the strike, but then it was doubted; what were the railway workers saying.

The difficult night passed – and nothing had been achieved! By early morning it was clear that forces were working against the strike, exploiting it. Shops, factories and department stores were not on strike, so their employees needed transport, and so overnight the big city was set back by three decades. Instead of electric trams and the underground and motor buses, now charabancs and horsedrawn carriages and rattling hay wagons were brought out of retirement. Lines of cars appeared, including luxury limousines, groups of whooping shop workers escorted by police, and students too, pupils heading to class. The street scene came alive, basic needs hadn't gone away. The quiescent night that had just passed, the missed opportunity of the sense of panic, had damaged the cause. Newspapers were already reporting negotiations with strikers at the Economics Ministry under the personal direction of the Minister, also that political interests were inserting themselves in the strike, clever types from here and there who set the wellbeing of the economy above personal benefit and differences of opinion, and who considered the moment too serious for bickering over matters of principle. And by early afternoon it appeared that feelers had actually been sent out by both sides, given the gravity of the situation and the risk of the railways being drawn into the strike. Representatives of the Ministries of the Interior and of War had taken part in the meetings and had declared, fists pounding the table as it were, that the country would not let itself become a football for egotistical passions and despicable partisan interests, the Crisis had already knocked the country about enough, and if the striking parties believed they could go on with their game of property destruction they had another think coming, in this situation everyone was on the same damaged vessel and all those aboard bore joint responsibility for its fate, no mutiny tolerated.

At any other time such strident rhetoric would have antagonised the striking parties. But now even representatives of the organised strikers were not displeased by the situation, each sought to make a name for himself, and every flysheet providing updates on the strike featured bold black headlines about threats from the military, no one will flinch in the face of these, the sabre-rattlers are mistaken if they believe the strikers will provide the signal for violent suppression, the clear headed commitment of the working class is unshakable, the all too familiar megalomania of arrogant generals will not celebrate a triumph. Keep the peace! Do not be provoked! Do not listen to the slogans of your enemies!

What lay behind this attitude? Obviously, exploitation of the strike for political gain. From the second day, placards plastered on every wall made this abundantly clear. It seemed that a third hyper-radical group had popped up suddenly overnight alongside the two Workers' Parties – and by now everyone had had their fill of those! Calls for action were pasted over proclamations by the moderate and radical organisations: Reject organisational discipline! Supporters and friends of these older and more recent organisations stood outraged at such slogans, declared that men were being paid to post

them, observed how the authorities reacted with evident satisfaction to this third party (“they’re paying for this stuff,” was the cry), and spoke of plotters showing their hand.

The wording of the organisations’ posters was serious and increasingly strident – they spoke of hunger, the last morsel will soon be snatched from the mouths of the poor, a dreadful winter is approaching – while the newcomers’ language resonated with scorn and pride. Here was a different spirit. It was hard to connect the new party with the other two, even though they were obviously (or not?) fighting the same battle. They were the Fighting Battalions, greeted with fear and anger, they called themselves Freedom Battalions. Everyone familiar with this country’s history knew they could not have sprung from native soil, a century had passed since the country last experienced open conflict with the government.

The leaders of the Freedom Battalions called on the people to defend the country and its culture. The country has been betrayed by its current government. The State has abdicated, has handed the country over to a gang of property owners, dealers, speculators, industrialists; all that happens, happens by their design. So-called State interventions have always proved fruitless – because they were never sincere. “The current powers-that-be have no authority, because they are unmasked as pawns. They must now be seen as one of the parties. They have driven the country towards the most terrible class warfare. Who allowed matters to reach this point, where the struggle for justice, common sense and human dignity is descending into class warfare? Shame on the powers-that-be and those who own this country, who have saddled the poor and the poorest with this struggle! The country and its riches must be torn from them, the hour of need requires this, the people demand their native soil, their rivers, lakes, their mountains, forests, and all that stands upon them, their cities, railways, factories.” Appeals were made to the enslaved citizen, the hoodwinked businessman, to all who toil and produce. There were reminders of the wonderful creations of culture, achievements of the great exemplars of humanity, now set at naught by the powerful and their government. Faced with bayonets, the attitude is one of craven fear and apathy.

“To arms!”

The appalling bluntness of this appeal caused everyone in the city to tremble. Plastered on every wall, it met with various reactions. Most were torn down in fury, were pasted or painted over, but all concluded with the dreadful cry: “To arms!” For sure the strike is a bitter recourse, the Crisis grinds along on its endless grim way, no solution can be seen, but is civil war the answer? It’s fomented by madmen, agitators. Ridiculous to think the masses will follow them! The organisations assured their counterparts in the negotiations that “their people” were well in hand. But when small assault groups of the Freedom Battalions popped up here and there and were clearly exerting pressure and a certain attractive force on the still-reluctant masses, and when fresh posters appeared with scandalously rabble-rousing texts, negotiations for a united front against the striking parties were pursued at high pressure. The transport unions, who naturally had a clear view of the other side’s weakness, could comfortably maintain a hard line and eventually reach agreement on a few minor points. Representatives of the strikers had to

put these so-called concessions to strike meetings through gritted teeth, so that the necessary pacts could be put into effect. The fight for wages was stabbed in the back.

But on the second day, in the evening and through the night, shots were fired.

On this day, Karl's fate was sealed.

When he emerged from Paul's building that cold windy evening, it seemed to him that for the first time in a long while he was walking on his own feet, seeing other human beings. Everything was new, he was brisk, strong and cheerful, he was interested in shop windows, individuals, posters, groups of people. He was hungry, ate contentedly in a pub. When a woman outside looked at him and he went out towards her, he could feel how different and well balanced he was, he almost pursued her in order to beg forgiveness for his past acts, for all the unhinged viciousness. There is really nothing more to look for here, basically he can head home now to his big apartment and deal calmly and decently with whatever turns up. But for the moment the only certainty was that he could not leave this district, that he would return to his little hotel, and fall asleep.

Soon he was there, sleeping a calm deep sleep. In the early hours the thunder-dark visage appeared, we belong together, he told the visage, it's a done deal. When he stepped out onto the apprehensive street dressed in his business suit, it was the first day of the strike. He thought he would pay Erich a visit, sit with him for an hour, all kinds of matters needed to be resolved, what they were was unclear, but he wanted immediate decisions.

When he entered the pharmacy he was greeted by the dispenser, his brother has been looking for him, telephoning since yesterday lunchtime. The brothers came face to face in the laboratory, at the sight of Karl the fat man in the white coat slumped onto a stool and kept murmuring: "Thank God!" He held Karl by the arm and stroked him. He led him into the parlour, closed the door behind them.

"Were you at home, at your place? You weren't there?"

"No," Karl answered, puzzled. "But I hear you were in a panic, you kept phoning."

"Sit down, Karl, please. Your accountant phoned me yesterday, after supper, asked where you were, I didn't know, he'd been asking at your apartment and everywhere and then I began looking for you as well, you were nowhere to be found."

"My accountant?"

"Someone tipped him off, Karl, from the police, he has several contacts, they trust him. Something about goings-on at your factory, I don't understand."

"And?"

"You need to phone him, he's there now, or I'll give him a call and then you can talk to him. You didn't take anything?"

"Take what, Erich?"

"You have to talk to him, they're going to prosecute you."

“Let them, damn it, you’ve all gone mad.”

“There’s a warrant for your arrest.”

“I see, I see.” So they’re taking it that far. “Did he tell you that? Go on, then, call him.”

It emerged during the phone call that in the matter of the Customs breaches and the transfer of machinery abroad, when they found that he was not actually sick a restraining order had been issued, which given the circumstances entailed his arrest. The accountant added (he spoke very softly, clearly felt he was under surveillance) that he had visited Karl’s apartment personally and – what? – had seen that the coast was clear.

Karl asked for a coffee. He was furious. The absolute villainy. The hypocrisy. Of course he had transferred production abroad, what else was he supposed to do, no one here is buying, what good do empty production halls and rusty machines do for anyone. Removing machinery that no one has a use for is a crime, you can go to jail for that? And others, what are other people doing?

“You shouldn’t have, Karl,” Erich insisted. “That’s why we were looking for you, I went to see your lawyer.”

“What did he say?”

“He will act in your defence and do all he can” (how nice) “but he thinks that at the moment the case in a formal legal sense is tricky, as he has already indicated to you. In short, while we try to sort out the matter, you must go away, abroad or wherever you like.”

Karl laughed: “Give me a drink. Then I shall spare you my presence, or else they’ll be on to you for aiding and abetting.”

Karl sat down and drummed on the table, his face still furious. Once they had finished their drink, he glared when his distraught brother sighed: “What happens now, Karl?”

“To whom?”

Erich stared vacantly before him. Karl pulled out his watch: “First I’ll go to the lawyer and give you a call from there. Don’t think I’ll give in so easily. Not by a long chalk.”

Erich silently pushed a newspaper and a poster across the table; Karl had already noticed them. “There’s a transport strike, Karl, you’ll have a job getting through.”

“Strike, so let them strike. Icing on the cake.” It was the angry boss of old speaking, wearing the same suit, sitting in the same place where he’d sat so often before, with his brother in the pharmacy that he had funded. He skimmed the newspaper, frowning. Annoyed, he tried to brush away the scrap of paper he recognised to be a poster, but after reading a few words he turned the sheet around, found the curious signature. Then he read it through, calmly and at length. His face lost its tension, his shoulders relaxed, his breathing became slow and placid. His blood no longer raced, he read line by line, could hear the tone, and when he looked up at Erich, poster in his hand, his puzzled brother noticed the change without understanding the cause.

Karl smiled: “Have you read this, Erich?”

“Oh Karl, why bother with that now.”

Karl kept smiling, pulled himself vigorously upright. “I agree.” He stood. “Now, what was I going to do? Oh yes, the lawyer.” (What am I to do there?)

“Take care, Karl. I’m glad to see you take it so lightly.”

They hugged. “Erich, you’ll hear from me, and for sure not from prison.”

“You have money?”

Karl laughed: “That’s new, you helping me out! Thank you, my boy, and tell the mother not to worry.”

Erich stayed where he was, stunned.

Karl made his long way back on foot, checked every street from a corner, nothing suspicious. The maid was not in the apartment, he opened all the doors, he’s lived here many long years, it’s his home, he built it, the life of a man called Karl. How he had tormented himself here. Here dwells our poor friend Karl, he thought. He opened the windows wide, the maid had neglected her duties, the apartment was falling to pieces, at the Museum door he reeled back, such devastation, he felt embarrassed, it’s enough to make you despair, it has to end. When he stepped into the room, her picture was on the desk, beside it she had turned his picture face down. He wept for shame and remorse, whispered a plea for forgiveness. He gazed at her picture, yes it’s her, he’d let it pass him by, now he pressed it grieving to his breast. In the children’s room he sat on a bed, hope you two will come out of this well, at the little school desk he wrote in pencil in an open arithmetic book, to Julie: “I do not know how it will turn out for me, but I shall do nothing to bring you shame. Thoughts of you are always in my heart. Anything bad I may have done to you, Julie, was unintentional and not what I wanted, please believe me. It makes me happy to think that you are well.”

Another one, to the mother? Why not, why not the mother too. He tore a page from the exercise book: “Dear Mother, in haste. You have heard from Erich what games they’re playing with me. They want to ruin me, I am not a man to knuckle under. I shall keep out of sight for a short while, you shall hear from me directly or via Erich. Love as ever, your son Karl.” (What if, he doodled, I really were to go abroad and attack the villains from there? I have the funds. The thought caressed him, then faded.)

Then he crossed slowly over to his bedroom, opened one of the steel safes embedded in the wall, took out a revolver. It lay cold and heavy in his hand. Not for me, old friend, not for me. Then calmly out of the apartment, down the stairs, and with firm strides and vigorous breaths into the cool damp autumn day.

STREET FIGHTING

The day brought no decision, his little hotel room sequestered him during the afternoon hours, thoughts of the factory and flight abroad intruded constantly, the revolver lay within view on the table. But every notion evaporated beneath the rays of profound

emotion from the previous evening's encounter. There is a better path than mine, there are people who follow that path, there are (just think!) lives lived in freedom and joy, there are people who live and will die in that happy state. This whirling mass of feelings stirred him to a kind of ecstasy. He couldn't move, there was a dreadful back and forth within him, he reckoned he would first have to slip into this new skin before he came aright. The room darkened, evening came, he turned on the light, he was assailed by a blizzard of wonderful unfamiliar sensations, maybe I'll never live that new life, but I'm allowed to feel it, the gloomy chasm of an inauthentic life is behind me now, I'm safely across and I'm owed a triumph. Filled with quiet pride, he cradled himself in daydreams, there was a heavenly choir, he reclined to its jubilant singing and fell asleep. Deep in the night he awoke, at once sat up, Paul's words ringing in his ears: "We shall give it a try." The call! This time he shall not be found wanting.

When he looked out onto the dark street, he saw movement. Something was afoot. Shots. Howls from both street corners. Police patrols running, people fleeing in panic.

He waited for morning. The old shabby garments he shoved aside with a grimace, dressed with care like he used to at home. He felt he was in armour, I am I, and at this moment shall also be what I was, I am across the chasm, have nothing to be ashamed of.

When he came onto the street and found a café to sit in, the chasm threw up one further peril. In the newspaper the waiter brought him, on the front page, below reports about the strike, mobs of strikers, violence in the streets (fear rising in him) – his own name, in bold, and then: An arrest warrant has been issued, and a long communiqué that read like officialese: this marks the commencement of a major sweeping up operation, industrial treason is as little to be tolerated as the political kind, Karl's case has been seized on because this man believed he could conceal his personal lack of conscience behind a political stance. That was the communiqué. In the local pages was another notice, which to Karl, who happened to spot his name, seemed nothing short of a hallucination: as well as industrial treason, he also stands accused of blatant fraud. A retired officer, approached at the start of the Crisis by Karl, who had insinuated himself into the best society, was cheated of half the assets which he had invested in Karl's factory. Instead of deploying the assets, the fugitive industrialist simply smuggled them abroad!

Karl's hands shook as he put the paper down and folded it neatly. A chill came over him. This is my thanks. With gritted teeth he stared straight ahead. They want me to fall, I went to so much trouble for them, that's who they are, they're sacrificing me, the Moor has done his work, the Moor may go.¹ Shame, shame. Again, in a fury: go abroad, seek revenge, torpedo them. But (his eyes opened wide, he spat on the floor), they're in the right, they have to do this, they're all in the right, Julie, the Major. But he was so deeply affected that he stayed almost an hour in the little café, immersed in his thoughts he was oblivious to the tumult outside. Once again he sensed the cruel grasping power exerted over the weak, the defeated. The inappeasable malevolence of power, the unfathomable viciousness. They could turn up here and in full view of the crowd shoot someone down

¹ From Schiller's play *Fiesco's Conspiracy at Genoa*.

and then come in and drag me away as the murderer; as I sit here they could set that building over there on fire and claim I set it on fire just by looking. They can do that. Once again he felt, with a shudder and a surge of anger, that he was defenceless. After a while he suddenly remembered the poster Erich had handed him. He pulled it from his pocket, flattened it, read it through, now he read it differently, with close attention to every accusation and threat, it's true, only this is true, this is what I am, this cause is mine, here I stand, here I take my stand, his fists clenched, I shall show them who I am.

The waiter asked him to go into the back room if he wanted to stay on, they're closing the front or else the windows will be smashed. Karl paid, and left.

*

Street fighting has begun. While the sacred quarter of palaces and museums sank into a deathly torpor, and in the business and pleasure quarters antediluvian means of transport were greeted with halloos, on the periphery mobs of people old and young, women too, came together, and barricades began to be erected outside buildings. Children and the elderly were evacuated to other districts. Weapons appeared in huge quantities, people with armbands and badges in their buttonholes issued orders, tight little formations of armed civilians passed by, no sign of police, there were rumours that some police stations had locked their doors and were under siege. Panicked families fleeing the district reported seeing canons, machine guns. Towards evening the gas lamps in most streets had been shot to pieces, so that whole rows of tenement blocks lay in pitch darkness, while elsewhere streets were lit by giant torches from leaking gas. Then the gas supply was cut off by the central gasworks, and the entire district became dark.

All through that first night and the following morning, no one knew where the main mass of insurgents was located, because of the activity all around the periphery. But by the afternoon of the second day the front was in the northern sector. The police, supported by an alarmed Civil Defence, tried to confine the blaze; the military had not yet been called in. Truly this is a big city, for while actual warfare is taking place on the periphery and to the north, cinemas and theatres are still open in the pleasure quarter, and in the better suburbs the first balls of the year are proceeding as scheduled.

Towards evening, Karl tried in vain to enter the battle zone. During the day he had witnessed riotous throngs and minor scuffles, had stood indecisive and torn and been driven on with the crowd. Flysheets were passed from hand to hand, they fluttered onto the streets from passing bicycles and vans, declaring: Enemies of the people are at work, madmen are fomenting insurrection and leading thousands of unfortunates to their ruin, freedom and hard-won civil rights are in the greatest peril, for what better excuse could the old powers-that-be find for installing the worst most violent tyranny over the people.

On the periphery, ominous activity persisted unabated. Civil Defence units gathered at assembly points predetermined long ago, men of all ages, not all armed. Apparently they were to be consolidated into larger assemblies. Into one such disorganised troop – he had helped set these up – Karl inserted himself as it departed from a square in the city centre, marching in fours past silent crowds. He suspected that these units would be sent

to the war zone. He was accepted into the troop without challenge, and marched along in step. They were all dressed like him.

Now, just when it was granted to him to march along with this formation, his old curse made sure there could be no escape, even this moment of his life had to be sullied by the other side: as the marchers set off, he became conscious of a physical paralysis, and those behind swore and jostled him. He pulled himself together, he will go along with them, they're his omnibus, I shan't pay a penny for the trip, and maybe I can put a spanner in the works. And then he marched vigorously ahead.

Was there anyone in the city who might even now have saved Karl? Had not at least three people close to Karl heard from him alarming indications of his plans and the peril into which he was falling? The maid at the apartment found the master's scribbled notes in the children's exercise book – he must have returned while she was out – and was at once in a dreadful state (has he done something to himself, is his body somewhere in the apartment – shot, or hanged?); she fled at once to the pharmacist brother. No less shocked than she, he made a thorough search of the apartment, but now, what, what can this poor feeble man, so timid and harassed, do at this moment? Inform the police, who are anyway searching for Karl for other reasons? Take the note to the mother? Karl might already be fleeing abroad, his scribbled words so horribly suggest bad news, but maybe it's only on paper. And anyway, whyever had he returned to the apartment? And what had happened in the Museum? The maid knew nothing, that room was always kept closed. It looked like there had been a struggle. Who with? And then these notes. In his perplexity, all Erich could think of was to stick the notes in an envelope, address it to Julie and post it. But he hadn't reckoned with the strike, the mail service in the city was also in chaos, days went by before it reached her. Erich was, and will be, the only one who suspected what was up with Karl, and he ran around, questioned the chief accountant, waited, listened, calmed down, grew agitated, avoided the mother, despaired, took tranquillisers, let the long empty horrible hours spit hail down upon him.

At first they marched in silence, then they struck up squaddies' songs. It was late afternoon. They left the city in a north-westerly direction, other contingents joined, and along the big highway long lines of trucks with armed police, machine guns, field kitchens rolled past, there were even mounted troops, a full-scale martial squall. But then the volunteers were led on an endless diversion through woodland towards the northern edge of the city. Word was they were to advance from the suburb into an industrial zone, to the south everything is barricaded, once out of the woods they will be fed, and issued with weapons.

What a lovely long calming hike it was. They stepped out beneath the last of the sun, it hung white in the pale blue sky, long tree trunk shadows lay on damp ground. It was boggy, they splashed through puddles, everything yellow-brown from heaps of fallen leaves, undergrowth and trees, occasional bushy islands of green grass. For a while there were telegraph poles, agitated messages speeding down the wires, cries for help, orders. A light cool breeze blew, a few birds still chirped, listen, trains still on the move, the railways aren't striking, and those are factory whistles.

Sky turning grey, with difficulty they cut a path through undergrowth, oh we're not equipped to do battle with vegetation, then suddenly the blank white plate of the full moon. It stood quite passive and alone up there, and a thrill went through Karl when he observed it through the fantastic tangle of black branches. For it was the symbol of night, his night, he knew it and was not afraid. And the sunlight that still lay across the darkening sky faded, darkness fell, they had to close ranks or risk going astray, no more birds chirping. Now the woods were enveloped in pitch darkness, while over the trees with their dense canopies the pale moon beamed ever more strongly. Its light lay in the wide pools, and behind it the sky was a reddish glow, that's the city, the troubled embittered city, my children are asleep there, the factory is there, the mother, Erich, Julie.

And as they marched and marched, his thoughts turned to the past. Never in his life had he felt such a sure firm sense of existence. Back there were Julie, the children, the factory, all good things, he had never really caught hold of them, there was nothing to apologise for, but for that reason they were good and strong and he had no reason to feel ashamed. Julie, tender redhaired Julie, delicate little doll, she had lain so often in his arms, cuddled up to him, lips to lips she had been his, oh she was so delightful, a blessing on the Earth, a joy to some man, I could fight José for her, but I had my share of her, he's a good man, he'll stand by her and the children, they can build a nest together.

They marched through the woods, trampled piles of dry dull brown horse chestnuts, the insides were pale yellow-white starch, dead leaves squelched beneath their boots. Silent loathing for those over there, the Major and his tribe, the fine gentry fled away, they are what they are, I huddled with them under a blanket, now I'm out, they're my enemies, we shall cut them down. Water splashed from puddles, men hooted. He saw himself as a young lad working away in such puddles, pitchfork in hand, the father climbs on a horse, spins around and gallops off and away, it was good in the fields, you had to exert yourself, but they managed. And always that inescapable face through the canopy, the beaming moon. It sits there so high you can never escape it. Dark features emerged on the pale plate.

Now came suburban lanes, lit by dozens of pitch torches. Low village church looming hard-shadowed, fenced graveyard beside it, and on the broad marketplace before it large numbers of people were being fed, among them police, field kitchens smoked, people carried enamel bowls and laughed: well look here, see who's joined up! Rifles and ammunition were handed out, armed men formed up and marched off in good order, soldiers opened a way through the double line of a barbed-wire barricade and here we are, we've arrived. They were to peel off in small groups. The lanes and roads that started here were completely dark, but the moon was still overhead. Karl had loaded his rifle, now we're all set. The roads went on and on, many houses, mostly scattered, all closed up, the troop kept together, Karl must wait until they come to narrower streets and fan out, maybe they'll send a bullet after me as I run off. On this wide street, houses closer together now, armoured police wagons were moving ahead, their glaring searchlights probed the dingy low housefronts, square after square of window caught the glare, steep roof and chimney, long stretches of factory and barrack walls. No people to be seen, they

cower in darkened rooms filled with fear and loathing, just hours ago they flowed out of factories like liquid iron, now in the houses they flinch at every shot: who's been hit?

They crept in small groups along the dark rows of buildings, nowhere any resistance, houses they burst into, yards penetrated by the searchlights, all lay quiet, everywhere the population seemed to be waiting, passive and afraid. Was it possible that the insurgents had left this whole northern front open, inviting an attack from the rear? Cautiously they pressed ahead, avoided narrow lanes, waited for the first reports of barricades, already the main military forces had occupied the complex of roads in the north; they were probing towards the city centre when scattered shots came from behind, then machine gun fire and cries of alarm, take cover, retreat, hold fast, police wagons suddenly drove the wrong way, clearly the lead units had fallen into a trap.

Karl was in one of these units. Like many others he had lost his hat in the forest, the moon, now shining down from a milky sky yellowish and exceedingly bright, was the only light apart from the searchlights.

As shots whizzed by, machine guns rattling, taking advantage of confusion among the creeping troops, no one in charge, he felt: this day, that began with the unpleasant morning and then joining up with the volunteer detachment, is at an end. The road that confined them was lined on both sides with trees, shots from the insurgents cracked from the roofs behind, the firing became more intense, a ribbon of fire from the north all the way down the road. Now to escape, get away, nothing can stop me. He huddled in the angle between a gatekeeper's booth and a factory wall, he laid his rifle on the ground, two comrades beside him flung themselves down and peered along the road, cursing the moon and the inadequate cover provided by the stupid bloody factory wall for a retreat. Maybe best to head across this wide bloody road to the other side where there's buildings.

Karl felt in his coat for a handkerchief, here it is, big white cloth, he'll wave it as he runs, wondered with horror: will they recognise the sign? I'll have to stand still in the light, railway workers signal like this, but they have lanterns. I must go across, he shouted his fear down, a momentary twinge of despair, I should never have come with these dogs. Crawling at first, then rising, the two beside him began to move, along the wall for a bit, then arrow-swift across the carriageway. Karl was still with them as they crossed, then he uttered a cry, they heard him scream, they glimpsed his wild raving face in the moon's bright light, and then to their bewilderment the beefy fellow with the almost bald head dashed along the row of houses, rifle butt raised as if he meant to beat someone down, but he's running in the wrong direction, towards the insurgents, to where a few scattered men were retreating in haste, house by house. They shouted warnings to him, he yelled something, seemed to encourage them to follow him. They saw him wave a white handkerchief over his head, must be signalling to us.

The first side street, where at just that moment he overtook two retreating men, he took at a run. But on the other side, in pitch darkness, was a strongly defended corner building where lightning flashed from the windows. There they are, he exulted, I've managed it after all, no shooting behind me, how can I fix the handkerchief to my rifle

barrel. Flashes, salvos from the windows. Karl turned as he ran, a cry had come from behind, he saw one of the retreating men fling up his arms (leave him) and follow his rifle crashing onto the paving. At the same moment a blow to the head (are you crazy?) and at once another to the throat. His left arm lifted to investigate, keep going, I'm coming. The crack of another salvo from the corner house was the last sound to reach his ears.

And with those red flashes, so incongruous beside the blissful yellow smile of the moon in the cloud-flecked heavens, the corner house slipped away like a loose carpet, lay askew, dissolved into a tall blue jet of flame that devoured his consciousness. The net of transformation was cast over him, it swept rustling overhead as he spilled his blood onto the hard kerb. He sped like a fish into it, twitched only a little.

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Two days later, when the district had been sanitised, Erich was summoned by phone to a school where several bodies were laid out. Dreaded summons, the dispenser had to come with him. They were led into the art room, where a dozen human-shaped bundles were laid out on bare floorboards. Coffins were being knocked together in the corridor. A respectful police officer accompanied Erich into the room. A small civilian lifted the cloth from the face of one of the long bundles. It was Karl. I wasn't able to help him. Once I would have started screaming, now I can't scream, I can't feel anything. No wound on the head or at the throat, so what actually killed him. And how strange, the corpse isn't actually lying, its back is arched and lifted a little, the head is bent rigidly forward, a dreadfully menacing motion. And there at the back of the skull was a black scab of blood, that's where he was hit and called away from life, but still he angled the head forward. Black stubble had grown all over the horribly collapsed sallow face, the uncanny figure gazed up at them until it was covered again. The assistant glanced at Erich, the police officer touched him lightly on the sleeve, Erich in a state of shock nodded, and his bloodless face managed a forced meaningless smile. As they went out he looked back, there, third on the left, that was Karl, he's left lying there. Outside the officer squeezed his hand very firmly: "Your brother conducted himself manfully in our ranks, he tried to rush a dangerous position singlehanded, it was no use, that's how he fell." Erich listened. The corpse in the room raised its head menacingly beneath the linen shroud.

Erich had to go to the mother, she had read about his disappearance in the newspaper. Even though Erich had no idea what to say, even though he really wanted to avoid the mother at this critical time (how to say anything without it sounding like a complaint), he had to see her. She could tell what had happened before he even opened his mouth. She didn't scream, didn't weep, but she knew her youngest son. The old bent woman sat mute and dry-eyed in a corner of her sofa. After a while she pronounced curses on Julie and her entire clan, and the Major who had driven Karl to his death, she threatened to start legal proceedings against them, clear Karl's reputation. But by evening this turned out to be unnecessary. Among the newspaper reports of the ongoing battle were extensive accounts of Karl's death, a trapped detachment of government forces, how it was forced to retreat, but Karl stood death-defying against the stream of retreating men and at last fell during a daredevil forward dash. The headline: "A Hero".

“Let it be, mother,” Erich said, restraining himself, “we can’t change anything, people will read this, there’ll be no more talk of his transgressions.” The mother’s eyes flashed scorn: “Phooey, what a rotten society, they can all sink into the earth. And that wicked slut keeps the children.”

The fighting lasted ten more days, several regions of the country were drawn in, until at last the insurgency was bloodily quelled. But that was only the external result. The lethargic masses had for the first time in over a century revolted against their serfdom, they had been set moving, a powerful new sense of freedom streamed through them, the yearning for human rights had been lifted from its usual refuge in the dreams of poets and isolated warriors and taken hold among the masses, never to be relinquished.

They waited in their black clothes on the platform of the big urban railway station, the old bent mother beneath her veil, and Erich. The autumn day was misty, the station was as busy as it used to be, streams of people from the suburbs alighting from the trains, the life of the big city beginning to pulsate again after those horrible strangling weeks. The mother wanted to leave. Although she had received every consideration, especially the uplifting ceremony at her son’s funeral, she now hated this city. It was no consolation even to shut the door in Julie’s face when she came to her apartment to weep with her. She had bought herself a place in an old folks’ home in her native region.

Shouts along the platform, rails hummed, the locomotive’s black iron shield loomed higher and higher, the rails juddered in time to its pounding, the train rolled mightily in, its breathing slowed, it lumbered, panting heavily, to a squealing halt. They climbed aboard, the mother’s trunk was handed up, Erich carried his and the mother’s cases.

And then the big city lay behind them, the city she had stepped into decades before, young, with three children, lay, like her life, behind her.

On and on it rushed, plains, woods, villages, fields. They sat alone in a soft-seat compartment, podgy totally mute Erich and the old woman who had flung the mourning veil back over her shoulder. Dusk was falling. The plain was monotonous, faded meadows, fields of stubble, little islands of bare trees, miles and miles, stretching away interrupted by lakes and streams.

These fields, arrayed around the towns of a desolate humanity, lie ready to receive the myriads of warriors who, whether innocent or guilty or complicit, allowed the times to grow until they too must lie in the ground. For all the abundant harvest this soil brought forth every summer, it was superfluous for the fields to produce good grain when soon they would be filled with wooden crosses.

They alighted deep into the night, and early next morning were at the father’s grave. White sky, muddy paths, small graveyard, the proud marble slab behind the iron railing, dense ivy creeping over it. The old woman dressed in black clutched the railing in both hands and gazed down from behind the veil. “If only he had been more like him, but he was a good boy, he deserved better.” Her whole body shivered, no tears took pity on her.

Erich was the last of the family. Julie left with the children to another place, and no longer shared in its fate. Erich remained in the city at his pharmacy. He married the girlfriend into whose care he placed himself. He kept very quiet.

THE END