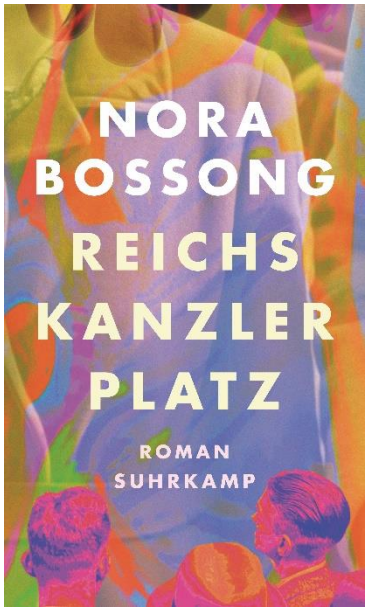

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Reichskanzlerplatz

Novel

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What you are now, we once were; what we are now, you shall be.

Cemetery inscription, Pritzwalk

1919–1927

Madame Quandt

I

For a long time, I didn't have any conception of death. The stories my parents told me as a child about clouds and angels and flames and demons were so foreign to me that I wasn't even afraid. Perhaps I simply couldn't grasp the import of such an utter loss since my grandparents had died

before I was born, and my mother had conscientiously hidden from me the fact that, for a few days at the end of my first year at school, my father was only tenuously connected to life.

And what I am thinking about today is really nothing more than a kind of remote experience. I am thinking about Helmut's mother. She died of Spanish flu shortly after the war, and I never got to meet her. Helmut arrived in our class a few months later, pale and small, as if he were ill himself. His mother's death was the first thing we knew about him, the second was that his father ran a large company, and during break we were sent by our teacher to give him our condolences, though none of us were really sure if it was for the former or the latter.

My mother was impressed by the surname, though my father said that on the General Staff no one had ever heard of any Quandt. She pushed me to write a letter of condolence, too, but I couldn't bring the right words to paper. Helmut's mother hadn't died for the Fatherland, like some of the fathers who hadn't come back from the war; her death simply did not make sense. That's what I wrote before tearing it up, it sounded like an accusation.

I showed Mother the sealed and addressed envelope with its black border, and she sent me off with fifteen *pfennigs* for the stamp. Once outside, I tossed the empty envelope into a bin. With the money I intended to buy a block of chocolate, but hesitated and in the end let it drop into a war invalid's tin can instead. I thought that maybe that way I could get away with a clear conscience.

Nevertheless, I avoided being alone with Helmut. In the changing room after gym, we were amongst the slowest. Whenever there were three of four other boys in that smelly room of talcum powder and children's sweat, I thought, I ran the risk of being left behind with him. If I didn't say anything, it would be as if I were condoning my own failure; if I did, I would be reminding Helmut yet again of the loss of his mother. The longer the time for condolences was past—soon it would be six months, and then more than one year—the more embarrassing it would become. Most of the time I left the room with my shoelaces undone. Then came the

week after Easter holiday, it was going on two years since Helmut's enrolment at Arndt Gymnasium, and though I had just turned twelve and didn't understand a thing about politics, I too could sense that the charged atmosphere in the schoolyard seemed out of place with the icy ground or our little clouds of breath. Shortly before the holidays the communists had attempted to overthrow the government with guns and bombs. President Friedrich Ebert had declared a state of emergency, and almost two hundred people had been shot during the unrest. Once again, I thought about death and how absurd and irrevocable it had to be.

When Helmut turned to me during class, I felt unwell. I tore a piece of paper out of my notebook and wrote the letter of condolence. Suddenly it all came very easily indeed. I wrote that I'd been meaning to write him for a long time, but that I couldn't find the right words. I wrote that perhaps there were no right words, but that he should know that I was not indifferent to his sadness. I would have liked to have made it a little easier for him, but at the same time I knew that that was impossible.

I approached him during the break. He was speaking with two boys from a higher form who, like him, lived in Haus Wettin during the week as boarders, and he reluctantly turned to look at me. I said that I was sorry and handed him the note.

Naturally, he did not understand what I meant; it was already so long ago. The two older boys smirked, and my ears began to glow. Then, as if to save me, Helmut's face cleared, and he assured me that it wasn't a big deal, they had been on a skiing holiday, and that we could catch up on the class material another day. He turned back around, but I remained where I was and asked quietly: Tomorrow?

No, Sunday, he replied, and, most likely just to get rid of me, added: I'll be at home.

II

Later I wondered why he hadn't taken care of our appointment in between two class periods. Perhaps he found the idea of my ever standing before his father's villa simply absurd. Back then I didn't think about it, I just told my mother about it in the manner I would have reported getting a good mark. She laid out my best outfit and gave me money for flowers. But no roses, she said, and so on Sunday I handed Helmut's stepmother a bouquet of carnations. At the time I was unaware of their being considered communist flowers, and his stepmother didn't let on. I was struck by her large, cool eyes, and her face reminded me of the marble Mary I had seen on a trip to Florence with my parents. Because she spoke French so well, Helmut called her Madame Quandt. I will not refer to her as Mother, just so you know. I found *mademoiselle* more fitting, but that, of course, wouldn't work, she was, after all, married, and to the master of the house. The wedding had taken place three months earlier. She was not even seven years older than Helmut. In November she would be turning twenty. It was April.

Helmut led me to his room, past the shelves in which his toys had been arranged as if on display in a department store. Hardly anything looked as if it had been used. I'm too old for all that stuff now, of course, he explained, taking down one of the model cars. But we could go outside and toss them all into the pond. Which would embarrass Madame Quandt, as she didn't know whether she was allowed to scold him or not.

I followed him obediently and smashed the Romano race car against the drive. The wheel rims splintered, and a rubber tyre rolled off into the grass. Looking back up I noticed that April here already looked like early summer. The trees were blooming violet and purple, and the flowerbeds were covered with star-shaped bits of blue. Behind them, on the sandy ground of Babelsberg, stood the villa with its innumerable windows and eaves, clean, lifeless, monstrous. My letter had been odd, Helmut said, stepping towards the Romano. Kitschy, to be

honest. I looked at the rhombuses of the paving stones and considered apologizing, but Helmut continued: That's not how you write condolence letters. So honestly. People lie more than usual out of simple helplessness. Perhaps, he added, he'd liked it, but he wasn't sure.

At the pond he showed me how to hunt frogs with a net. With a quick move of his shoulders, he dipped it into the water. It came back up with a wriggling frog which Helmut held in front of my face. The animal spread its snakelike legs and stared at me. I found the way Helmut laughed attractive, even if there was perhaps something malicious there. Then he lost interest in the animal, tossed it into the bushes, and poked the net's handle into the frog spawn until the tiny bubbles were spread across the whole surface of the pond.

Do you know what her name was before? he asked abruptly, and I can no longer say how I knew it, but I replied: Ritschel, right?

Helmut laughed, just like he'd laughed about the frog.

Before that, he said.

I didn't understand what he meant. I could not imagine Madame Quandt's having been already married once and already being a widow. Naturally, thanks to the war, a lot of things were possible, at seventeen Madame Quandt could have received notice that her husband had died in combat, but that didn't fit my snap image of her, the one in which she floated in the air as pure as the Virgin Mary.

She used to be a Friedländer, Helmut said.

Is she Jewish? I asked.

Her stepfather is a Jew, and she didn't get a better name. After a short pause he added: We don't have anything against Jews, but you don't need to have them in your own family. People talk. And we've always got to keep our business in mind, too.

Right then he looked older, like a little adult, and I imagined him sitting in a Chesterfield armchair with a snifter of cognac and a cigar, pointing its glowing end at the window. Years later when I learnt about Quandt's takeover of the German arms and ammunition factory and then the construction of the barracks on AFA's grounds, I had to think of that image of Helmut with his cigar and wondered whether he ever could have done things differently from his father and brother.

He told another story about Madame Quandt, about how she had grown up in a Catholic girls' school, with nuns, that from morning to evening she'd had to kneel and pray, but that, in the meanwhile, she'd become a Protestant like everyone in the Quandt family. She's changed her name and religion so often, Helmut said, how on earth can I know what she really is? She probably doesn't even know herself. You know, he said quietly, Mama would have noticed that Madame Quandt is only wearing our name like a mask, too.

XXI

When I was granted my first leave, I followed in Helmut's footsteps and took language lessons on Willow Road with a certain Mister Bloomsdale, who was as pale as a ghost. Helmut was already frequenting high society and being kept busy by a certain Mr Lind, a business friend of his father. At Helmut's side I got to try out my new life in a world that wasn't weighed down by reparations or exam anxiety, but one that followed the beat of parties and *soirees*. Surprisingly it rained less than my mother had always feared, and even Helmut seemed to be less troubled than usual, relieved to be away from the permanent conflict between Magda and his father for a little while. They don't exchange a single word when my father gets home in the evenings and Magda is still awake, he said. But what's even more gruesome than the silence

is his recent cheerfulness. Like a rope stretched taut above the abyss. Don't think for a second I have any intention of returning to the villa after my time here.

He paused for a moment and pressed his hand against his stomach. Ever since he'd arrived in London he had complained of abdominal pains, and I teased him that he probably had a guilty conscience about Foxy, the girl from Chelsea he'd been going to parties with. Her name was Kathleen or Catherine, she had fox-red hair, an upturned nose full of freckles, and was pining away for him, while he wasn't the least bit interested. I can still see her before me, breaking into tears, which she was able to do rather heartbreakingly.

I'd be more concerned if British cuisine stopped giving me pain, he said. And I believe that my father's marriage will be over before I manage to get over the mint sauce.

And then? I asked.

Here he began to speak more openly about his feelings for Magda, but it had to have been clear to him, too, that, in reality, he didn't stand a chance. If she were to leave his father, he'd lose her just the same. He squinted towards the window, and his glance seemed as absent as his brother's.

Back then I didn't believe that the infatuation was mutual, maybe I simply didn't want to believe it. Today I think that, in some ways, she was in love with his being in love. He gave her what she had dreamt of receiving from his father: the feeling of being worth something, not simply a piece of jewellery or an opera performance, and she wanted to be more than an employee whose expenditures were checked and acknowledged with the note *approved—Quandt*.

You don't understand, Helmut said. Because you've never been in love.

Maybe *you've* never been in love, I shot back. You just want to be like your father.

He pressed his lips. Excuse me, I've still got to see Lind. We'll see each other later.

As I entered the party the Valkyrie-like Lady Brimstone was just admiring Lindbergh's Atlantic flight, which led the Prince of Hesse to remark that, had she been on board, Lindbergh certainly would have crashed. A waiter handed me a glass of Sekt, which I took in one go and placed back on his tray. I immediately grew bored so took a second glass.

I wandered around aimlessly, stood for a moment here, then there, by the eternally identical, centuries-old faces which appeared less prettied up than in their oil portraits and flushed from alcohol. If I'm honest, I was never able to handle these parties without Helmut. After the third glass, the fine society revealed itself to be a small circle which preferred to use its elevated position to be cruder than its lowest employees, and the only ones who around ten o'clock were still composed were the butlers.

After around an hour, capitulating, I allowed myself to fall into a chair. Next to me a young woman shuddered as she heard about the sooty faces of the miners, and a young man with a fur collar and nickel-plated glasses stressed several times that he was studying economics and that the wage of six pounds in the mines could no longer be maintained. Drips of spit flew onto his canape.

We should, he explained, break off relations with the Soviet Union in the name of God.

Not in the name of the king? the young woman asked.

Have you seen Charlotte already? the Prince of Hesse interrupted. You could hide bats in her décolleté!

I saw Helmut enter the hall. He looked around frantically and then rushed over to me. He pulled me out of the chair and smacked his palm against my chest.

Listen, Hans, you've got to take over for me this evening. I can't stay.

What's wrong?

Magda's in town.

I was confused, and couldn't think of anything better than to ask: And your father?

Gone to bed. He's got business meetings early in the morning. Maybe he's simply old. And so? Will you take care of my date?

I spotted the Fox in a group of girlfriends, looking over at us expectantly. I felt sorry for her, or I felt sorry for myself, but I knew that neither of us could win out against Magda, and so I just nodded. You're a true friend, Helmut said and hugged me. Then he hurried to the exit. In front of the door, he turned once more and raised his empty hand, as if toasting with an invisible goblet. That was when I noticed that I was holding his Sekt glass.

It was the last time I ever saw him.

XXII

I don't know what I hold against him more: that shortly thereafter he went with her to Paris or that he never came back. Over and over in my mind I arrange his days there like a puzzle, and even though the pieces remain the same, the image always seems a little different, as if I just couldn't get used to the sight.

Ever since then I've avoided Paris. But I often dream of it. Magda and Helmut walking down a boulevard, hand in hand. I don't know in which *arrondissement* or if it is even anything more than a backdrop covering over a series of barracks and wasteland. Sometimes I manage to wake myself up; sometimes, however, I have to keep following them. They giggle, and Helmut puts his arm around Magda. The street is completely deserted, only dimly lined with cars and trees, and, after a few hundred metres, the two swivel into a doorway.

It's a small wooden door between the magnificent portals of the town houses. In the dim light I recognize worn stairs, and I am hit by damp air even though I am still a few steps

away. Right when the two of them cross the threshold, Helmut turns to me. His face is distorted in a grimace. Without any natural movement I run up to him and push him down the stairs. I hear the crash. Silence. It is so dark that I can't see a thing. Magda is standing next to me, alone, in the doorway and reaches her hand out to me.

When I wake with a start, I have to turn on all the lights in my room. I lie there in bed, feeling my sweat-cold pyjamas and do not risk trying to fall back asleep. Then I attempt to put the puzzle together again once more, placing one piece next to another.

They arrive in Paris at the beginning of July. The heat is trapped in the narrow streets, and Helmut's stomach pains grow worse, but he'd rather be in love than go to the doctor. His father loses himself in business, and Magda doesn't notice Helmut's suffering either, that, or she passes over it as she'd rather be seen by him than lose him to a hospital ward.

At Café de la Rotonde they drink champagne and eat oysters that have been brought from the coast two hundred kilometres away. Of course I've considered whether they've slept with each other, in his hotel room or, if the concierge is too strict, in one of the better hourly hotels of Pigalle. I don't believe it. Not really. But I like to daydream. Both of them did, too, and following a summer shower the waterspout of a cathedral spits the rain out before their feet. It doesn't cool things down, and by the time Magda leaves the following day, Helmut can hardly stand because of the pain, and he eventually allows them to call the hotel doctor.

Magda and Quandt are past Brussels when the doctor instructs Helmut to go to hospital with an advanced case of appendicitis. They slice open his stomach with dirty surgical instruments, and a little while later he awakes in a small, cold room. The pain is different, but still there. A nurse comes then goes once again, her French is too poor to really understand his, and over the course of the night his fever increases until he is hallucinating.

It's only in Berlin that Magda learns of the sepsis via telegram, in the foyer of the villa with too many suitcases and a Herr Quandt who at that moment isn't any help either. Worried,

he doesn't know whether to go here or there, and it's Magda who drops her suitcases and husband and goes back to the station for the next train for Hannover and then onwards to Paris. Her husband follows her later that same day.

She hurries from Gare de l'Est right to the hospital, an old schoolhouse behind Canal Saint Martin. I see her there one last time as Madame Quandt, whose French is quick and hard in order to give the impression of possessing more authority than she does. She reproaches the young nurse until there are tears in her eyes. Madame Quandt demands a second doctor, but it is July 14th, and everyone is busy celebrating with fireworks on the Champs Élysées.

Exhausted she sinks down by Helmut's bed; she hasn't slept in thirty hours. Now and then she runs her thumbs over the back of his hands. Is it pity or absent-mindedness that leads her to take the little tube that Helmut had hidden in his night table years before out of her handbag and tap a pill into the palm of her hand? She can no longer stay awake, and he cannot either. They can no longer look at each other like that.

Everything grows quiet, and around that still centre everything is rushing. Never give someone who's just had intestinal surgery barbiturates! Perhaps she didn't know any better. And why would she anyway. With a botched enema the nurse just makes everything worse, and both can feel him slipping away. Magda continues to hold his fever-wet hand, his eyes already seeking out the emptiness.

Sometimes I try to imagine Helmut at this last moment, where his heart ceases to beat, he no longer exhales, the air simply drains away. Then I think back once more to the young boy in the schoolyard to whom I offered my sympathies on the death of his mother so many years ago. He nodded earnestly and distractedly, as if the flu had already pulled him a bit out of life and as if he already secretly knew that the great task for which he was predestined was not the competent administration of an empire, but to let go of everything, even that which he wanted to love.

1927–1931

Reichskanzlerplatz

I

Ever since Helmut's death I hadn't been sleeping well, sometimes less than three hours a night, and, lying awake, I'd look at the curtains in the lights of passing cars before all went dark again. It was as if my life were taking place on that screen, burst into two, in one half I hadn't received what I needed, and in the other, what I yearned for was no longer there.

Maybe I just would have needed to fall into a deep sleep just once, something I could have held on to the next day, but even in my sleep I stayed in the retired major general's apartment, that is, my father's, on the *bel étage*, 230 square meters between the entrance facing the street and a servants' staircase facing the inner courtyard, which I used once a week.

Coming back early one Sunday morning around four or five, my mother was sitting in the laundry room, her chair arranged so that she could look out into the little entrance hall and door to the servants' staircase, and she'd been staring out there for hours, pale and tired. I walked quietly up to her and kissed her on the cheek.

Go wash, she said, you smell on female.

I nodded and crept to the bathroom, threw water on my face, drank a few glasses, and rubbed off my mother's perfume with a towel. She had never gone looking for the old vial I had taken out of the cabinet. From the bathtub came the smell of my father, tallowy, fermented, his smell was permanently in the air. I opened the window onto the inner courtyard, down below I could already here the clatter of milk cans, and tried to call an image back to mind which had been right next to my face not even an hour before, but people in Berlin disappeared too easily, they retreated like shadows at daybreak, some lured me into the dark, others, most

of them, simply dissolved, but naturally, as if they had never been anything but an illusion. I was the loneliest person in the city. Like so many others. Down below I heard the milkman whistling.

The following week I attended my first legal lessons like a machine, without any interest whatsoever. Only when the cast-iron gate to the Tiergarten was open to me again on Saturday evening did something come to life in me. A destitute queer guarded it like Peter his heavenly gates, with the difference that it was not for our souls but for ten *pfennigs*. Anyone who paid without haggling was given a warning about the abductors who, in the form of orderly Prussian officers, were trying to make ends meet in Moloch by enforcing Paragraph 175, their actions as futile as trying to establish a sea in the desert.

The art exhibition was seated on the round bench beneath the Luise monument, a little group of prostitutes and homeless, and between them the urban invalids, whose missing limbs were not the result of the war but the endless streets of Berlin. They bought and sold themselves for just a few marks a go, and a cagey figure crept out of the darkness to offer up, for a donation, little pictures of naked men next to Doric columns. He exuded a strange smell from his mouth and as soon as he approached me, I quickly moved on to the officer's path.

There the cavalry troops' sabres glinted beneath the light of the gas lamps, I allowed myself to be drawn ever deeper into the shrubbery-lined pathways, the problems of which the President of Police believed would be solved by better lighting. He probably had never been here, or if he had, then during the day, when the day-trippers in their naval uniforms and 'proper' children made their way through the area in order to forget that inflation had eaten away at their homes like woodworms.

The Tiergarten really began to live only at night, when the gatekeeper took up his position, the beech hedges began to come alive with rustling and groaning, and a frightened rabbit would dart past. Young men, as slender as Peter Pan, smiling in the twilight, and a heavy

man with a men's handbag driven off for secretly trying to shoot photos. The darkness never retreated enough not to absorb us at least partially, and during those morning hours, my body exhausted to the innermost, my groin complacent and over-excited, I understood less than usual why you were awarded an academic title for a few sentences about the consular intricacies of a long-ago conference while the real thing was lost with the dawn.

II

During my military service the war remained as distant and incomprehensible to me as the moon was to others. I did not for a second believe that it had any reality, and the martial gait in the fantasy uniforms was nothing but a prelude to my weekend outings. These forays left their traces, so much so that one day Annie took me aside and said that I had to be a little more careful with myself. What she meant, of course, was that my studies would take too great a strain on me, and I reassured her that my second semester would allow me more time to relax.

In the barracks every minute was spent in the company of my superiors' violence. When I moved into my own apartment in Winterfeldstraße, I no longer had to worry about my mother's sleep, and I certainly didn't worry about my own. I'd go to the Kleist Casino and the Eldorado, drinking Sekt amongst pale faces arising out of silk outfits and elegant suits. They hardly seemed to have anything in common with the shifting and yet eternally constant shadows of the Tiergarten, though several of them had to be the same people.

I met a diplomat who gave me tips for my future and who then felt into a tirade against the Nazis, who were far too dumb to see through the devious Jews. I ordered my cocktails from Otto and talked with the two children of a novelist about Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* and the *Berliner Tageblatt*'s miscellaneous section. I liked one of the transvestites, Lukas, known as Lulu, in particular. He'd wave to me after his performances from the bar and sit down next to

me, knee to knee. He had long lashes and rouged cheeks, which made him look vaguely consumptive.

One time I ended up in an argument between a social democrat and an SA man, who explained that Germany's corruption was due to welfare programmes and women's right to vote. The social democrat stood his ground, and it would have come to blows had Lulu not taken the SA man aside to lead him to the steam rooms where he could let off his own steam with one of the many young men.

I continued to visit my parents in a reasonably ordered fashion for Sunday afternoon tea. I'd suck on peppermint candies to mask my somewhat sour breath, which, with the strawberry cream torte, was a somewhat dubious pleasure, and would leave two hours later, before the tiredness of my liver was too obvious to me.

Following one of these Sunday visits I ran into Lulu in the above-ground train. At first, I didn't recognize him as he was in a grey suit and wasn't wearing any makeup. Standing alone, like an abandoned child. I hesitantly approached him, stuck out my hand—and was immediately dragged into the next bar. Beer foamed across the top of the battered table, decades of cigarette butts swam in the ashtrays. Someone laughed, from somewhere or other came the sounds of a small brass band, a hand grabbed my leg, the sound of the performance bell ended the scene. Onwards! A small private room behind wine-red curtains. The air smelt on sausage, magnolia perfume, and sweat. I was growing giddy. There was a whisper close to me.

At Lulu's side I could escape the sadness that had accumulated inside me for months. Accompanied by the smell of musty swim trunks we would chase swans at Krumme Lanke lake, dance over the Ku'damm at four a.m., worm our way to the head of the line in front of the soup kitchen, sink sugar cubes into our Monopole champagne, and generally just ignore the world beyond the two of us. Lulu's conversation alternated between expressing a desire to die, second-class jokes, and lofty plans for a future in Paris.

Everyone I met in Lulu's orbit depicted their futures as being full of fame and riches, though most likely because their present was too shabby to settle into. During the inflation years once-bourgeois apartments were cut-up into third-class lodging houses, and all the scuffed floorboards reflected was faded prosperity. The jobless mathematics PhD with whom Lulu shared a floor in the basement used his know-how to calculate the best ways to save coal. We measured his success by the dampness of the walls and his bleating cough. All kinds of people made their way in and out of Lulu's narrow room. One time I woke up next to a young woman with razor-short hair sitting on the side of the bed. I asked where Lulu was. Oh, he's gone to buy bread, she said, before beginning to regale me with stories of how great Berlin was, how Babelsberg was going to the new Hollywood, and how she was working on a script that was just about ready. Her name was Helen, which she pronounced Hélène, and she was dreaming of a night with an actress whose name she couldn't remember but who would without any doubt become a superstar and, with her at her side, the scandal of the century.

Lulu came back with bread, eggs, and cigarettes, we ate and smoked, and by the time we made it onto the street, it was already growing dark again. On the corner the gas-lighter was on his ladder. The days at nights at Lulu's side flew by. Time went by so quickly that I can no longer say how old I was or if I'd even been born at all.

It was endless.

It was 1928.

Just a few months in spring and early summer.

Then Lulu disappeared. A short time before we'd seen each other in a biergarten where, amidst a prolonged laughing jag, he explained that our shared journey had come to an end. His eyes were glowing with such friendliness, they were like Christmas balls. At night I'd go to the Eldorado, but no one could tell me about his whereabouts. Even the mathematician whom I'd

decided to look up didn't know a thing, though he did show me a precise invoice for the missing rent. I pressed five marks into his hand and left.

Together with Lulu the gauze veil which had blurred everything was gone now, too. Berlin lay before me, cold and empty. Children running behind coal wagons to collect the crumbs that fell off the back. Women in worn cotton aprons lowering their gaze so as not to be recognized in their poverty. I leant out the open window, to my right the busses made their way up and down Potsdamer Straße and then on past the Sportpalast; on my left I could see all the way to Winterfeldtplatz, which is from where I'd let myself drift off into those nights of intoxication along its side-streets. I leant forward a bit more, on the edge of my toes. At the Eldorado we'd had wings. But maybe, I thought, we'd flown too high, and the sun had melted all the wax. At some point, we'd have been shot down one way or the other.

III

In July I went with a bouquet of lilies to the Quandts. It was the anniversary of Helmut's death, and I didn't know where else I was supposed to take the flowers, Pritzwalk was just too far away. Magda was surprised to see me. For a moment she considered sending me away, but ended up asking me in. Herbert was with the housemaid at a doctor in the city, the other children were up on the top floor, and so we were all alone in the vast kitchen, where she pulled out a vase from the sideboard. The tops of the trees beyond the windows shimmered a bright green, while a balloon which had got caught on a branch glowed a pale orange.

Magda offered me tea, and we made our way over to the salon. It was bright and modern and it seemed as if all the furniture had been placed on the parquet to allow even more light to shine on the pillows and mahogany. I said something about being light-hearted, friendly, approachable.

Yes, a friendly boredom, so to speak, she replied and looked out the large window. She told me about the Mexican pyramids she had visited with Quandt, and in Puebla they'd experienced an earthquake. I've been afraid before, but you really notice that you're alive.

Then she asked me about my military service (it built character), my studies (they'd expand my horizons) and if I had a girlfriend. I eluded the question and said I was too picky. Her smile betrayed her vanity. She probably assumed that she had just as much power over me as over Helmut. Sitting across from her it was as if he could walk into the room at any moment.

The next thing I did was nothing that I'd considered or that was even remotely connected to reason, and I most certainly was not in love with her, but the fact that she thought I might be touched me, so I encouraged her by batting my eyelashes and then looking shyly to the side. I let my glance sweep the room in search of something that could delay my departure.

The piano stood in an oriel niche that was covered by the slant of the stairs above it. I leafed through the notes and found a four-handed piece of Schubert's. Magda was playing *secondo*, I was playing *primo*, but, in fact, we were only playing with each other. She admired my slender fingers, she rebuked me for a mistake, but whenever she thought she'd caused me to become embarrassed, I would withdraw my attention from her, giving the impression of being completely caught up in the movement of my hands.

She was clever, by which I mean to say she could see through people quickly, and if she could not see through them, then she had a feeling for what someone needed and, even more, what they desired. With me she was unable to grasp either immediately, and I noticed that, while her fingers glided over the keys, she was considering me from out of the corners of her eyes like a puzzle. She did not enjoy the mystery, no, she yearned for the solution.

Looking through the sheet music for another piece, Magda thought of a train ride she'd had when she was young. She had been five, and, at that time, the distance between Berlin and Cologne must have seemed endless. Alone with only a sign hung around her neck she had

travelled from her mother to her father, and not one of the adults cared to accompany her any further than the station entrance.

Did she trust me at that moment? Or did she just want to bind me closer to her? Even later on, once I understood her more, I was never all that sure. Sometimes it seemed as if she didn't have any centre of her own, that's how much she dedicated herself to my worries and vices and goals. She made things comfortable for me, she did everything she could to make herself indispensable to me, to make me feel empty when she wasn't around. And yet it just never quite worked. Maybe I craved her like everyone else—Helmut, Herr Quandt, and, later, the Propaganda Minister—that is, if I craved women at all. Who knows. I was nothing special, which means that, like everyone, I thought I was.

I closed the sheet music and looked up at Magda. I told her that it had been nice to see her again and stood up. After a short pause I corrected myself: It had been lovely. She turned red, just slightly, but red all the same. She silently accompanied me to the door. Making my way down the entrance steps, I turned to face her one more time. With her arms folded across her chest, she stood in the doorway, and I thought of the young woman in a club chair I had seen years ago, who had been as ill-suited to that piece of furniture as a five-year-old girl is to a sign sending her off on a long journey. The entire trip, all eight hours, Magda must have been afraid that there would be no one waiting for her on the station platform when she arrived.

1933–1938

The First Lady

XVII

Colonel Faulberger sent his condolences to me via telegram and had the Reichskriegsministerium send a wreath for the funeral. Taube squeezed my hand. Only a small group of people had come together at the cemetery, and I think most of the mourners were acquaintances of Annie, who had asked them to come so that we wouldn't be all alone. Standing with my mother beneath an umbrella, the two looked so lost, as if they had been the ones to disappear.

After the funeral Mother dragged Father's chair to the window, sat down, and began staring outside. She did it so determinedly, it was easy to think she wouldn't have any other plans for quite a while. Now and again, Annie would pause her steady back-and forth to run a consoling hand across her shoulder. *Clothes make the man*, Jean le Bon, she murmured, *Clothes make the man*, and I had to think of Helmut's mother and of that young boy who, almost twenty years ago, had come to our class, pale and small, as if he were ill himself.

In the days following the funeral I was agitated and so strangely awake that I felt like I could hear all the city's whispers. Maybe I was simply more careless and speaking out of a constant state of anger. Sentences spilled out of me, and no sooner had I finished one conversation than I could no longer remember what I'd said or whether I'd made myself suspicious somehow. Late one evening my doorbell rang. I wasn't expecting anyone and cast a glance down at the street. For a moment I considered remaining still. I knew that someone could go home in the evening and not be there in the morning, and in retrospect I wonder if she had deliberately chosen that hour for the visit.

Ello Quandt's round face shone under the ceiling lamp in the hall.

My condolences, Hans, she said, reaching out her hand. I was so surprised that I took a step to the side, as if inviting her in. Ello paused a moment, then stepped into my apartment, dragging the Reich into my private spaces behind her. I pointed to the sofa. She sat down at the edge of the cushion, handbag pressed against her stomach, and observed me for a while.

Every so often I've thought of you, Hans, she began. You were a good influence on Magda. She's not doing so well, you know.

I see, I said.

Her heart. When things get bad, she has herself taken to hospital. She stays there a few days, then she goes back to Schwanenwerder. Sometimes I bring her to Dresden for a cure, but things don't change. Between us, she added in a whisper, as if someone else were listening, she's drinking too much as well. The housemaid fills the carafe in the salon back up, but Magda goes secretly to the bottles in the kitchen, as if we wouldn't notice. I don't hold it against her. This …, Ello searched for the right word, this person is destroying her. Her husband.

I would have liked to laugh out loud and say that she had indeed pursued *him*, had imagined herself at his side. But even though I was tired, I wasn't that careless.

She asked if I'd heard from Baarová recently.

That's not exactly the best-kept secret at present.

Magda repressed it for a long time. We all knew, but she simply overlooked it. I offered Ello a cognac. She declined and I poured myself a glass, drank it down, and filled it right back up. Ello told me how the Propaganda Minister had Baarová brought to Schwanenwerder, how, between two appointments, he'd rush to see her, how he would needle Magda by imitating how, in the past, she'd been short with Baarová—the new, second most important thing to him after Hitler.

I filled up my glass a third time, drank, and closed my eyes for a moment. The waterspout in Paris. A glass of hot chocolate on the nightstand. Magda's eyes looking for the barbiturates. I saw her standing in the doorway to my room. She'd been there the whole time; I just didn't want to believe it.

Ello's childlike mouth chirped on about Goebbels' rhapsodies. The same ones, she said, that he'd once sung to Magda. This man is a terrible romantic, and that doesn't make things any better.

I thought about the pitiful *Gauleiter* Goebbels I'd observed in the wall mirror a decade ago, his fingers making their way through the air. His expression, which could change from too sweet a smile to cold condescension in a split second. I could smell his aftershave, as if he'd been bathed in perfumed alcohol. Today it seems that even back then he had the aura of the undead. I didn't want to believe that that person could indeed be in love. But did I really think you needed a good heart to fall head over heels? That was the first thing they taught the people, it sanctified all means and made hatred all the easier to direct. Complete devotion freed individuals from their unconscious everyday lives as if from a hardened cocoon. People were ripped into the heights. That fixed way of seeing and thinking and doing had drowned out all other sensations and taken the whole country in its grip. And this had actually happened to the Minister, too. He had fallen in love terribly with Baarová.

No, it's worse, Ello said. He's not just *in* love. He actually loves her.

XVIII

The scent of pines and brackish lake water. She was standing at the gate of her property. The closer I came, the more I could see her haggard face. The Nazi papers' bright beauty had grown pale, with deep shadows beneath her eyes, her skin grey and taut. In the newspaper pictures she still shone, as if someone had drawn a fine, white border about her, the same one with which Vermeer had already deceived the viewer. The gravel crunched beneath my feet, I attempted to smile and could smell that she'd already had something to drink. Apple trees grew along the slope of the hill.

Meeting her had not been my decision. The SA were busy making their way through the bars, through the neighbourhood, into offices, and they divided those they arrested into seducers and seduced. The seduced were brought in in accordance with Paragraph 175, and the seducers went directly to preventive detention. Ever more people failed to fit into this first-rate *Reich*, a land in which milk and honey and munitions flowed off the assembly line.

Magda handed the roses to the housekeeper and led me into the salon, where tea had already been served. As if out of habit she told me about an argument with Quandt. He did not like how Harald was being spruced up into a model Hitler Youth. But her son enjoyed it.

He makes his contribution. Don't think we are being favoured. We all make our sacrifices.

The fact that her stepfather had been taken to Buchenwald was delivered curtly and without any emotion, and I knew she could drop me just like she had Richard Friedländer. That is precisely what she wanted me to understand, I thought. That's the only reason she mentioned him at all. From outside came the singsong of children's voices.

Lida Baarovà visited last week, Magda said. We were out on the lake on our yacht, and then we went swimming.

I nodded and thought about Friedländer, and though I'd never met him, I thought I could see his face in front of me.

She's got an offer from America, Magda continued. And if she goes, he'll go with her. He'd even become a diplomat in Tokyo, anything as long as he can be with her.

That would be the best thing that could happen to you.

For a moment the thought seemed to relieve her, but immediately thereafter the steeliness was back.

If he leaves me, it's all over.

The determination in her voice frightened me.

I knew from the beginning that being at Goebbels' side would demand a lot, she continued. I thought I'd be strong enough. But I'm too small, Hans. I was always too small for him.

She was sitting upright. Through the window I could see the waters of Wannsee behind her. I thought I could detect the smell of musty swim trunks.

A song drifted inside ... *If I were a little bird / And had two little wings* …

I'll endure the situation, there's no other way. As long as she doesn't bear him any children. She's got to promise me that. She must stay here. There's no other way.

I said to her directly that it was demeaning for both of them. She denied it. My modest morals would only be understood by modest souls, she said. Then asked whether I'd heard about the latest show trials in Moscow. Unimaginable what Stalin is doing, she concluded.

She looked to the sideboard, with its row of pictures on top. The family photo was not amongst them, it was only taken later, in October, shortly after the Munich Agreement, and before Lída Baarová had been banned to Prague. Chamberlain, Mussolini, and Daladier had conceded Germany all of the Sudetenland, and in the process broken Czech president Beneš. What had previously seemed like gloomy clouds heralding a storm had vanished, and in the

picture Magda and her husband were standing on the Obersalzberg, smiling. Helga and Hilde snuggled up against their parents, great big ribbons in their hair, and knock-kneed Helmut in lederhosen holding his father's hand. Behind them, with something almost like a smile beneath his moustache, Hitler *the pater familias*, and the archway curving about his head like an aureole.

When a knock came at the door, Magda ran a hand across her forehead before calling out, Come in! A blonde girl entered the room. At first I thought it was Helga, even though her hair was shorter than in all the newspaper photos. In a well-behaved manner the girl asked about a toy before lighting her gaze on me. She had only come over to see who was visiting. Magda told her to give me her hand, the girl curtsied, and introduced herself as Hilde. Then she was sent away.

Hardly were we alone again when Magda began to talk about the Sudeten Germans, her voice was so monotone, it was as if there were no difference between a crease in a family photograph and the threats against Czechoslovakia.

Germany will no longer tolerate any weakness. If only Beneš weren't so obstinate, she said. The Führer is prudent, thank the Lord, but he cannot put up with everything. Beneš must also understand that. He's risking getting himself into a war with that attitude.

Whenever she talked about Hitler, something lively entered her voice, and it seemed to me that she drew everything she could still find within herself from the connection with him. As far as Goebbels was concerned, she had grown boring and irritating, for Hitler she remained the Reich's First Lady, the blonde mother, though in the meantime she was having her darkening hair bleached and her doctor had advised against any further pregnancies. She was the female extra. An integral part of the performance like the torches, the flags, the masses.

You'll have to give Hitler an audition, I said.

What will that accomplish? she said helplessly. Jupp talks everything down, and he is even ready to renounce his position.

Hitler won't let him go. He needs him.

She looked at me for a while and nodded.

Later I wondered whether it really would have changed anything had Goebbels really left Germany to become a diplomat in Tokyo or a seller of souvenirs in front of Sensō-ji-temple. If the idyllic facade had been broken, the photograph on Obersalzberg would never have come to be. But he needed the masses more than Baarovà, and, even without my counsel, Magda would have gone over to Hitler, everything would have been the same: the Munich Agreement, the photo on Obersalzberg, Hitler as peacemaker, and shortly thereafter, two days before Magda's birthday, the burning of the synagogues. It was already too late. Just as Chamberlain and Daladier wanted to believe they could tame the hungry beast with concessions, so we believed in the idyll, and I'd even believed Magda. I would never have forgiven myself if she did something to herself.

You know, Hans, she began quietly, they always say that life is a gift. But whoever says as much hasn't really lived. She raised her teacup and held it in the air.

Your stepfather has no doubt really begun to live, I said and thought, Now she's really going to throw me out. My muscles were so tense that I began to shake. I have no idea whether it was rage or fear, and if the latter, for whom exactly. But she didn't seem to have heard.

Why didn't she immediately go to America? she asked. We'd have different concerns now. When he calls her, she drives over here in the middle of the night, I can hear her car down on the drive, who else would be coming over here at half-past one in the morning? An actress, a young, dumb little thing. But she loves him.

Does she?

I can only tell you for sure when he's still just a tie-seller in Tokyo. But before that I will take my own life.

She put it out there in the way other people mention they already have plans for the evening. I grabbed her hand; it was the first physical contact between us in years.

Isn't it strange, she asked, us sitting together again? To think I found you in Helmut's bed once. And what dealings you have had with certain men since then is well known.

Maybe she could not do anything but threaten me at that moment. She could see that had lost control over everything else. Her eyes had grown larger and rounder due to the smallness of her face. There was nothing mysterious about her anymore, it was as if someone had painted over the light inside of her, and I thought back to the museum guard in Lucerne. There are few things we want as much as to be deceived, and mastery means nothing but knowing how to deceive in turn.

1943

Orderly Relations

I

They were playing Beethoven, the second movement of the fifth symphony. The quiet tones ducked between the cheerful skips and effervescent bits, then came the crescendo that always swept me upwards in a heroic rush. This was immediately after learning of the collapse of the 6th Army at Stalingrad. Until their last breaths the soldiers had remained true to their oath of allegiance, the speaker in the special announcement of the OKW announced, and under the exemplary leadership of Field Marshal Paulus had succumbed to the enemy's superior strength and the unfavourable conditions.

I could see little zum Stein before me, his red hair in the mud of a West-Russian winter, gasping, faltering, six weeks too soon for being a hero. His fiancé had really loved Beethoven.

Ever since coming to Italy, I told myself, I'd left Germany behind, and yet the news caught up with me over and over, and two weeks later the Allies bombed Milan rather heavily. Through the window of my study I could see the dim glow of fire from the direction of the station. I mechanically began to polish my shoes, that's what I'd learnt about war. Nevertheless, it was always better than north of the Alps, I tried to make myself understand, but my memory betrayed me, and in my mind's eye I saw the trusty streets of Schöneberg as peaceful as ever.

In Milan the British were bombing the factories, Alfa Romeo, Breda, the aircraft manufacturer Caproni. During one air raid they'd even bombed the cemetery, but that only caused me a moment's pause. In battle, carrying out a pointless order was ultimately better than discussion. We civilians had had enough time for discussions. I don't know if we took

advantage of them—Rubinroth and Karl perhaps—or if they would even have had any effect at all.

The sirens went off again, and in the stairwell the sound of hurried steps. Someone drummed against my door and told me to come downstairs. I followed obediently, and down below, in the light of a single bulb, the war was suddenly close. It smelt on coal dust and damp cellar walls, on my neighbour's sweat, someone who, up till then, I'd only greeted in passing. We were wedged in next to each other on a small pallet. Her wide, olive-brown hand enveloping her young daughter's arm. If we were unlucky, that hand would be the last thing I would ever see of this world.

At some point the girl fell asleep, it might have been thirty minutes later, it might have been two hours, I avoided looking at my watch. The others, too, nodded off briefly, only to be frightened awake again, and I thought about how Kollyachek would clean the latrines, as dully and frantically as a mortally wounded animal. Then I saw Karl waiting for me in front of the barracks, and I was filled with shame.

When I stood up, a neighbour held me back. He appeared to be in charge of that bomb shelter and forbid me from leaving, talking about danger and all. I can assess the threat level myself, my father was a major general, I replied. His glance, which just a second before had been hard, as if covered by lacquer, suddenly seemed moved.

Stalingrad? he asked.

Neuve-Chapelle!

Since when have they been fighting in France again?

He was a veteran of the first war. At the front in 1915.

World War? my neighbour asked and grabbed my shoulder, as if he wanted to shake me. Do you know what's going on out there? Wherever you go, go with God.

I closed the shutters to my apartment. I felt sordid, as if I had let the others down. For a while I sat at the dining table, motionless, looking at the photo which had stood on the mantle at Villa Quandt years ago, I'd cut it up so that it would fit in my wallet, only Helmut and Magda were left. Then I wrote three letters, one to my mother and one to Karl, I don't know how many I'd already written him, and I wouldn't send this one either, of course. I folded them up and placed them into envelopes, which I left lying on the table.

Out on the street it was quiet, not even a bird was singing, the dawn light was already appearing as a dull glow over the rooftops, or maybe it was simply the glow of a distant fire. Here and there I could see individuals climbing over the rubble, and a child cowering at the side of the road. As soon as it saw me, it bobbed up and disappeared, limping into the darkness. I continued walking down the demolished street, past the buildings' ripped-open stomachs, the buried basement rooms. The Pallazzo Reale and cathedral towered hazily into the sky. Never had the square seemed so vast. Beneath a lantern there was an injured pigeon. I walked into the middle of the square, stretched out my arms, and yelled into the breaking day.