

My Father, my Betrayal

A Novel

by

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Alle Charaktere, Personen und Orte sind frei erfunden (außer den historisch-geographisch bekannten, die fiktiv ausgestaltet sind). Jegliche zufällige Übereinstimmung mit lebenden oder verstorbenen Personen oder Geschehnissen wäre zufällig.

Chapter 1 – Anika and Hulda

Taking a Stand

I wanted to defend my father—I finally admitted that to myself. And I did so page after page, document after document, book after book. I read, and read on. With interruptions. Yet they never allowed me to stop. They drove me onward, pressed me forward. But all of it was betrayal. Hulda Mannheimer loved him. Josef Maschka, my father, must have loved her. He had saved her life—risked his own for hers, staked everything upon it—and in the end lost both her and me. Perhaps out of humanity. Perhaps against her.

Munich, 1991.

I was on the verge of completing my doctorate. I had submitted my dissertation in Art History to the Institute and was preparing for my oral examination when the telephone rang.

Scarcely could I open my eyes. It rang and rang. The receiver stood on the bedside table, dragging me from sleep. By the time I reached for it, I was too late.

Silence.

I lay back down but could not return to sleep. Outside it was still dark. I got up, pulled on a pair of trousers and a shirt over my chilled skin. Beyond the road the petrol pumps were barely visible, so heavily did the fog weigh upon the street.

Then the telephone rang again.

A voice.

Brief.

Cutting.

Who could possibly want something from me? In the middle of the night?

A journalist, if I had understood correctly. Yet even had I wished to, I had failed to catch which newspaper he represented. His practiced voice questioned me insistently—not about me, but about my father.

Why him?

My father was dead.

My mother had died before him.

I had left Kassel behind, together with my brothers and everything that belonged to that earlier life. I was grateful to be living in Munich.

My head felt heavy. I had worked far into the night. No stranger had ever asked me about my father before.

Then came the accusations.

Monstrous accusations.

Complicity.

Participation.

My father: an Oberführer.

The deportation of Jews.

Communists. Freemasons. Homosexuals. Sinti and Roma.

His responsibility: the confiscation of works of art. Books. Music. Memories.

What did I know of all this? And what was I deliberately concealing?

I listened. And I felt something inside me buckle. I thought of standing beside his grave four years earlier. Could any of these accusations possibly be true?

The telephone call struck me like a blow across the forehead. I was speechless. I swallowed. But I kept listening.

Then I defended my father—and at the same time myself.

"I am a historian. I work on this period, on those who withdrew into what has been called inner emigration. If there is any truth in these allegations, I shall be the first not to deny it. I shall investigate. Call me again in a few days. By then I may know more."

The voice was gone.

The telephone lay before me, dead beyond recovery.

Dark upon the bedside table.

Drops fell from my cheeks onto the bedsheet.

Agitation. Grief. And then the historian within me began to insist.

Perhaps the allegations were false. Perhaps it was a case of mistaken identity. Perhaps the man had simply done poor research. But you have no right to ignore what you have heard. He spoke of archival material discovered after the collapse of the East. His account sounded, at the very least, plausible.

Even to you.

I searched my memory, yet remained convinced that I had never known anything of such a possible past in my father's life. Or had I simply never wished to suspect it?

Now, more than thirty years later, as I look back upon that telephone call, scenes return to me which I should interpret differently today—and, perhaps, could already have interpreted differently then. Yet what I saw was myself standing at my father's grave, weeping like a child, believing that I had lost what was most precious to me. The loss that followed, however, cut more deeply than death or parting. Over the years, something came to an end that I had never buried, while something that had never truly left me continued to live on.

Even now that conversation continues to ferment within me. I can still feel the resistance with which I met the assault that overtook me in that moment. In the days, weeks, and years that followed, I had to force myself to examine the documents and evidence which, more than anything, I wished to prise apart, flatten, and push quietly aside.

No sooner had I replaced the receiver than my thoughts caught on the rough burrs of the past and tore themselves upon them. Fragments of memory leapt towards me—my father, my mother, my brothers, moments suspended between us. My mind stretched out invisible hands, fingers spread wide, stumbling through the darkness, fending off those figures, trying to touch them again, yet finding them forever slipping away. I switched the light back on.

Inside and outside alike, it seemed darker still.

"Between Dusk and Dawn." I remember that this later became the motto of one of St. John's May Balls in Cambridge.

My eyes wandered from the telephone to the window. Only a faint yellow glow from the street fell across the wall of my room. Upon it the shadows of branches, straining against the wind, swelled into monstrous forms.

I passed a cloth across my face.

My father.

A war criminal?

A man who was said to have stood on the other side—not on the side of those whose lives I had devoted myself to studying?

One year later. Cambridge, 1992.

My betrayal deepened at my table—far too small for the mountain of papers spread across it—on the veranda of my college lodgings in Cambridge.

I was writing my second doctorate—or, as one would say in Germany, a work roughly equivalent to a Habilitation. It dealt with women whose artistic work had been condemned by the Nazis as *degenerate* and who, as artists, had themselves suffered persecution. The project had at first been slowed by the telephone call and overshadowed by my growing investigation into my father's past. Yet my move from Munich to Cambridge had, almost paradoxically, enabled me to return more fully to my own research.

With every hour that I immersed myself in it, I drew a little farther away from that nocturnal telephone conversation and from the self-inflicted torment that accompanied every attempt to confront the injuries of my own past.

I did not want my scholarly enquiry to become an enquiry into myself.

Historical writing, I kept reminding myself, demands objectivity.

That conviction allowed me to breathe again.

The more deeply I entered the world of women artists in exile, the more I felt myself released from the nightmare cast by my father.

I had studied philosophy, German literature, and art history. I wished to pursue doctoral research, yet within the German university system one could do so only in a principal discipline. Had I been free to choose, I would gladly have devoted myself entirely to art history. Then I learned that, after completing a German doctorate in German studies, I could apply to continue my work in Britain and write a second dissertation in the subject I loved most.

Already during my first doctorate I had therefore begun looking for a suitable topic for the second.

Through research in Berlin and London, and later in the Colonial Archives in Nairobi, I came upon the painter and sculptor Hulda Mannheimer. Like me, she came from Kassel. There she had served an apprenticeship in a factory producing semi-metal conductors. Documents relating to her found their way into my hands—documents that gradually accumulated in boxes and on shelves as I struggled to assemble and arrange them.

Now I sat in Cambridge on one of those mild evenings. Before me rose King's College Chapel; and there too lay the still uncharted landscape of my material.

The sun was sinking over the College, gilding the tips of the dark green lawns.

I turned page after page without any clear sense of what I was seeking among the documents, until suddenly I noticed something that seemed only marginally connected with Hulda, but far more intimately connected with myself.

Among the folders lay a lengthy report without title.

I began to read.

Read on.

And with every sentence understood less.

I drank the green tea, now long since cold.

Opened another file.

Then the large folio volume containing the study of the Baoulé masks that Picasso had encountered in 1906 at the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris presented itself once more before me.

My supervisor in Cambridge had placed the volume in my hands when I came for interview. He had bought it years earlier from an antiquarian bookseller in Stuttgart and happened to remember it while we were talking at King's.

It bore two marks of provenance.

Across the shelfmark of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* a heavy deaccession stamp had been pressed in thick black ink.

Beneath it stood the signature of an official attached to the ERR—the *Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg*, the organisation charged with identifying and confiscating what it called the intellectual property of the Reich's enemies.

Below that appeared the accession record:



Die Hohe Schule
(in Vorbereitung)
- Bücherei –
Außenstelle Stuttgart
Institut für Biologie und Rassenlehre

The High School
(*in preparation*)
- Library -
Stuttgart Branch
Institute for Biology and Racial Science

The stamp stopped me.

Not because I had never seen one like it before.

Because I had.

The letters stood there with the cold confidence of official language, announcing themselves as though they belonged to the ordinary order of things.

The signature was unmistakable.

My father's.

He had been a civil servant all his life, I reminded myself. But how could he have worked—functioned—within an institution like this without ever breaking away? Was it the

university environment? Stuttgart itself? And why should a scholar of German literature have anything to do with an *Institute for Biology and Racial Science*?

Had he been no more than a minor official, carrying out the orders he was given? Did no unease ever trouble him? Not with a single stamp? Not with a single signature? With each one he deprived people of what belonged to them, appropriated their possessions for a National Socialist library, transformed them into weapons for a racial war against those from whom they had been stolen.

The questions would not leave me.

I wanted to understand the man—and the system—to which my father, and, as I was soon to discover, Hulda as well, had surrendered themselves.

I was still working through the first archival material I had gathered in Kassel, in England, and by comparing holdings in the National Archives at Kew with those in Nairobi.

What I already had was disturbing enough.

In Kew, for example, I came upon a memorandum that chilled me.

Once again I laid the folder upon my table.

Date: 17 May.

Place: Arusha, Kenya.

Provenance: Paris.

Contents: Lists. Names. Tick marks.

Report on France: *Economy. Semitic infiltration. Supranational powers. Collaboration with the Pétain government. Jewish subversion.*

Signature: Josef Maschka.

Again—

my father.

My father's words opened not only a historical wound but a deeply personal one.

I had read the report dozens of times.

One sentence pursued me into the night:

"...that, by blood, all Jews, homosexuals, Negroes ... be eliminated ... carried through to the end."

I knew what those words meant. Yet I could not understand them.

Or perhaps I refused to.

I mean not merely the report itself.

My father.

Above all, him.

Night after night I lay awake.

My father appeared on my left.

Then on my right.

Then above me.

As though he were slowly pressing the air from my lungs.

The documents had torn open something far older than history. They reached back into my own home.

Into the fear that had always accompanied the coming of night—not when the lights were extinguished, but when my brother wanted them left on because it heightened his pleasure to watch me struggle while his stories drew me into a world that became mine against my will, my hand imprisoned in his, a hand he needed, and mine abused.

What I had buried—

I had bitten back with a tongue grown coarse from silence.

Swallowed my disgust.

Closed my eyes to him.

And to the whole family.

Now I had to fight my way back through it.

I was the sister of three brothers.

The youngest.

The darling of the household.

The doll that seemed too defenceless to resist.

Now, at every step, I found myself searching for the other hand—the one that should have protected me.

I was also a daughter.

I carried the same blood.

I had grown up under my father's guidance, and under my mother's.

I had been born into shadow, and grown within it, in surroundings from which, for a very long time, I could not free myself.

And yet the question returned, drilling into me once more.

How could the same man who had raised me, who had walked with me through the woods and taught me to read the world, who had delivered the memorial address in Kassel on the anniversary of the desecration of the synagogue, who had later been buried as an honorary citizen of the city—

how could my father have written what now lay before me?

As my research continued, I came upon something I simply could not believe. There was a connection between the artist whose life I had begun to reconstruct and my father's crimes.

At first it seemed almost inevitable.

They both came from Kassel.

They might easily have crossed paths.

But then I discovered that theirs had been more than an acquaintance.

There had been a relationship.

Alongside my mother.

That, more than anything, defied my understanding.

How could this man—

a National Socialist,

part of a movement that spread antisemitism, invaded countries, reduced cities to rubble, murdered millions,

a man who in Paris participated in the dispossession, persecution, and destruction of Jews—

how could he, at the very same time, have devoted himself to Hulda?

To Hulda,
 whom he loved.
 Hulda,
 who was herself Jewish.
 At my mother's expense.
 At ours.
 And how could my mother have lived beside such a man?
 Had she never known?
 Or had she known—
 and endured the younger woman in silence?

This is where I would begin to let Anika's scholarly voice become increasingly transparent to Hulda's. The register remains Chadwick-like, but there is already a slight shift: the documents begin to awaken a living person.

I had begun to follow Hulda's later life, tracing the story of her exile, her journey from Germany through England to Kenya, as part of my preparation for applying to Cambridge.

At first I had little more than the municipal records of Kassel available to me.

Later I travelled to London and Kenya myself, discovering a handful of additional documents while realising, at the same time, that I had scarcely scratched the surface.

The telephone call the previous year had compelled me to prepare answers which, above all, I demanded of myself.

I continued my research.

More telephone calls followed.

I endured them with knowledge that was still painfully slight.

At first I promised myself that one day I would pursue every trail in a separate study devoted to my father. But after my doctoral examination in Munich, and with Cambridge before me, I had to concentrate on Hulda.

To my relief.

More than anything, I wanted to continue my studies in Cambridge, and I devoted myself to that task as faithfully as I could.

At the same time I still had to prepare my Munich dissertation for publication.

Whatever hours remained I threw into uncovering Hulda's fate, never imagining—still less hoping—that at every turn I would find myself face to face with my father.

Although I dreamt of precisely that possibility at night, and dreaded it whenever it came, I never hesitated.

Cambridge lay before me.

Hulda's life had to be unearthed.

On the very night of the celebration following my doctorate in Munich, with my friends around me—Feeny among them, together with her husband René—I had already begun descending more deeply into the exile of this remarkable sculptor and painter.

I believed I was stepping backwards from the present into history.

In truth, I had long since entered my own history.

Indeed, I found myself standing in its very midst.

During the days that followed my examination I worked through yet more boxes and lists until, in another department of the municipal archive of my native city, someone placed a file into my hands.

It reached further back than anything I had previously gathered.

Registry Office of Kassel Birth Register, 1920

No. 147/1920

Kassel, 14 July 1920

Before the undersigned Registrar there appeared today the violin maker Ernst Mannheimer, residing at 128 Wilhelmshöher Allee, Kassel, of the Protestant faith, born on 22 October 1888 in Hamburg, son of the married couple Abraham Mannheimer, merchant (*of the Jewish faith*), and his wife Johanna Mannheimer, née Albrecht (*of the Protestant faith*), last residing in Hamburg,

appeared before the undersigned Registrar today
and declared

that to his wife Rebekka Mannheimer, née Hirschfeld, without occupation (*housewife*), (*of the Jewish faith*), residing with him, born on 9 May 1892 in Kassel, daughter of the merchant Heinrich Hirschfeld (*of the Protestant faith*) and his wife Malka Hirschfeld, née Spiro (*of the Jewish faith*), both residing in Kassel,

there had been born,

on the thirteenth day of July in the year one thousand nine hundred and twenty, at a quarter past eight in the morning,

in Kassel,

at the residence of the informant,

a female child,

who had been given the forename

Hulda (*of the Jewish faith*).

Read aloud, approved, and signed.

(*signed*) Ernst Oppenau

The Registrar: (*signature*)

The sheet lay before me. Its tone was like cold water running across my skin.

At one moment accusatory.

The next strangely reassuring.

It told me far more than I had expected. An entire family began to take shape before me.

I realised that Hulda's artistic gifts seemed to have come through her father's family, while her commercial aptitude and mathematical ability—qualities that, as I would later discover, proved no less essential to her survival than her gifts as painter and sculptor—belonged to her mother's line.

Although her father was Protestant, as were many citizens of Kassel, he too came from a family shaped by both Christian and Jewish traditions.

For Hulda, as perhaps already for her grandparents, was the mother's religion the decisive inheritance?

Then I noticed something else.
 There was no record of her death.
 The life that official documents withheld began elsewhere.
 Hulda's diary emerged.
 Or rather,
 fragments of it.

Some pages I already knew from my first investigations. Others appeared little by little during my searches in London and Nairobi. Still more surfaced in galleries and private collections. Unfortunately, the material resisted chronology.

There were gaps.
 Dates were often uncertain. I did what every historian eventually learns to do.
 I tried to impose order where life itself had left none.

1939.

1940.

1941.

Then I discovered that my father had not taken notice of the fair-haired artist only towards the end.

They must have met much earlier, probably while he served as Party official responsible for the Hitler Youth, the various youth movements, and—because of his knowledge of languages—for the *Reich Federation of Jewish Front-Line Soldiers* and its associated youth organisation, the *Black Banner*.

Among Hulda's daily notes I repeatedly found hints of ideas that had once united them.
 Turning still further back through the pages, I came upon a brief entry.

"Leader Principle now adopted in the *Reich Federation of Jewish Front-Line Soldiers* and the *Black Banner*, and in the German Vanguard—German Jewish youth in loyal formation. *Black Banner*. March. Colours to the front."

Words in Hulda's own hand.

No more than a summary.

Beside them a hurried scrawl—

perhaps a tiny flag,

perhaps only haste.

I can see her.

Fourteen.

Perhaps sixteen.

Slender.

Her fair hair tied back from her face.

Marching in step.

Singing.

War drum—hard as iron—beats the song.

Ash-wood sticks leap, calling ranks along.

A thousand battles—courage! Blood!

The drum keeps time.

Victory when the banner's home.

Step by step. She marches on.

Young.

Proud.

Far too certain.

And wholly unaware of the storm gathering around her own convictions.

My father must have admired that.

He would have approved of the Federation's ambition to achieve the *true physical formation of youth*.

These young Jews, it declared, were to attend training camps, receive military instruction, and become fit to serve in the *Reichswehr* in defence of Germany. It was, they were told, their *highest honour and highest duty* as German Jews.

I sat motionless,

exactly as I had sat with the telephone receiver in my hands that night.

The documents the journalist had later sent me had already shown that my father had joined the Party at the beginning of the 1930s, soon afterwards entered the SS, and risen rapidly through its ranks.

Then, in Hulda's diary, I read:

My voice hoarse from shouting.

Girls in a circle—boys among us—

ej haj haj!

Kisses in the shadows—aj lomir tantsn!—

the night, the world! No Zion. No Palestine. Only us.

Then she added: *Came home late. Saw Joschi on the staircase. Good that he didn't ask. He never asks. That's why I love him, my brother.*

Pasted beside the entry were newspaper cuttings.

"Reich Youth Day in Kassel—new Jewish formations."

"Military bearing and the Jewish faith are not incompatible. A disciplined sporting youth, trained in firmness and order, professes, at the Festival of Lights of heroic ancestors, the soldierly virtues of hardness."

Sheer mockery.

Or was it, at last,

an act of rebellion?

Below them another line.

I wanted to prove to Mother that I was not dreaming. That I acted.

The handwriting was awkward. The sentence broke off. A blot of ink.

Then another entry:

In my dreams I hear Arie—as we call Father—and Mother, who always agrees with him, except that from time to time she sings softly: "Palestine! On to Eretz Israel!" I resist it. I struggle against it. Zion does not draw me. I am German, and I am already looking forward to our next Youth Day: Germany, our country, our blood! Aaron, our youth leader—I can see him before me. He has blue eyes unlike any I have ever seen. I do not want to lose him... Smells of youth already burning.

The last sentence chilled me. Not because Hulda knew what was coming.

She did not.

But because history, looking back, had placed in her hand a sentence whose meaning neither she nor my father could yet have imagined.

Further on I found a later entry.

1937. *"Paris. Exhibition. Jussuf Amun."*

A shock of unruly hair.

Angles and lines.

An expressionist self-portrait, signed simply J.A.

I laid the sheet aside. For the moment I found myself less occupied with what followed than with everything that had led to it. I worked my way through further archival inventories. I found material in Moscow's Special Archive. Then in Kyiv. In London. The most fruitful discoveries, however, came from a second investigation in Nairobi.

How had my father first come into Hulda's life?

Why had he become involved with her, placing both her and himself in danger, and with them his own family?

The answer lay scattered before me, still in fragments. Only much later would I succeed in fitting them together.

Suddenly my dissertation on women artists persecuted in exile had become, against every intention of my own, an enquiry into my own family. The subject I believed I was investigating had begun to investigate me before I could investigate it. What I had hoped to examine objectively had fallen directly at my feet.

Between Dusk and Dawn

Cambridge, 1992.

The more I discovered about Hulda, the deeper I slipped into my own history. I had begun looking for Hulda no longer simply as a researcher, but almost as a witness to her voice—and, increasingly, to my own.

Day after day I tormented myself, digging through the seams of memory, trying to follow Hulda's trail while repeatedly stumbling over my father's footprints, which I could neither ignore nor avoid.

At night they followed me of their own accord.

There were so many crossroads on the road into the past where I was forced to stop, although nothing tempted me more than to run straight through them.

Yet I had to make myself pause.

To ask.

Which way did the trail lead?

Had I only just lost it?

Or had I wanted to lose it?

Even more than that, I found myself haunted by another question.

Why, at this crossroads—

at that one—

at the thousand others where I found myself compelled to stop—
 had this story taken no course other than the one I now had to follow?
 Why only this one?

Were my brothers already reflections of the twisted relationship between my mother and father?

Or were they simply who they were?

The eldest, nine years older than I.

The middle brother, three years younger than him and therefore much closer to me in age.

He came close to me.

Again and again.

Closer and closer, if memory serves me rightly, from the time I was six, perhaps seven, perhaps eight years old. When I managed to free myself from him, he tried again.

By then I was eighteen.

The other two encouraged him.

They made room for his assaults.

Sometimes they watched.

Sometimes they laughed.

Today I know it was more than that. They derived their own pleasure from it, though not in quite the same way as he did.

Only I had to watch.

Only I had to play along.

Or rather,

allow them to play with me.

I was not made of straw or wood.

Yet for them I was never a victim. For no one in the family was I a victim.

Although no one truly saw me, neither could I make myself invisible.

Not for years.

I suspected even then that my father knew. Whenever he entered the room, he would quietly tell my brother to leave me alone. He sent him away. Sometimes the others as well.

Then he closed the bedroom door.

Without a word.

Softly.

He was never a man of many words.

He did not teach at the dinner table.

I never dared speak to my mother about it.

She was proud of my brothers. She pointed to them as examples for me.

They would teach me how adults behaved, she said.

They would show me what it meant to become a woman.

She made use of me differently.

I became her substitute in the lending library of the Protestant hospital. It allowed me to read everything the library possessed on history, together with its small collection of books on philosophy, history, art, and a handful of novels and classics.

Or on Saturdays, when there was no school, she ordered me to wash the windows.

Sometimes all morning.
 They were never clean enough.
 There were always streaks.
 Even when I could see none.
 My brothers saw them.
 My mother saw them.
 Only my father was satisfied once one could see clearly through the glass.
 But my mother decided.
 So I had to begin again.
 Every family, she used to say, needs its Cinderella. That cannot be changed.
 The only person in the family by whom I never felt used was my father.
 My Papa.

On Sunday afternoons he would invite me to explore the city with him, usually just the two of us. Then he became almost talkative. He showed me the statue of Louis Spohr. He lamented that scarcely anyone in Kassel still remembered this honorary citizen of the city.

A great violinist.
 Composer.
 Court Kapellmeister.
 A faithful Lutheran Protestant.

It was Spohr, he told me, who had invented the conductor's baton. Without order there could be no music. Least of all in an orchestra, which could function only if someone gave the rhythm.

When he himself later delivered the memorial address commemorating the destruction of Kassel's synagogue, he spoke of Spohr because Spohr had admitted Jewish musicians into his orchestra despite criticism from many in the city.

I listened.

Without realising that my father was explaining not simply music, but his own understanding of the world.

Not mine.

Or rather—as I would discover many years later—mine as well, though at the time I could not yet recognise it.

When, standing before an information panel in the museum, I asked him why the Spohr Society had been dissolved in 1934, he remained silent for a long time. Eventually he explained that the various musical organisations had been brought together into one national body.

He believed this had been entirely in keeping with Spohr's own vision, for more than a century earlier Spohr had founded the *German National Association for Music and Musical Scholarship*.

That, my father said, had been Spohr's conception of musical culture. A public servant of music shaping creativity through obedience. Just as, in a classroom, a teacher could never produce historical understanding from the chaotic clamour of overexcited children, but only from attentive listeners willing to concentrate.

At the time his explanation seemed perfectly reasonable to me. Perhaps because so much that should have appeared questionable did not yet seem so.

Only the slightly forward-leaning, severe head of the bust, with its narrow cheeks and even narrower lips, intimidated me. It allowed no music to arise in my imagination. Yet my father's words continued to echo within me years later, when, after his death, I walked alone through the Karlsaue.

I watched the Fulda flowing quietly beside me.

Felt Papa walking there as well.

And with him those brief moments of freedom, in which I could forget the confinement that awaited me at home.

Even if it was not always like that.

My brothers were not only the monsters of the night. They also gave me the feeling that they cared for me, that they wanted me to belong to their world.

They painted freckles across my face, dyed my hair red, twisted it into stiff plaits with pieces of wire, piled it high upon my head, set me dancing on the table in my little skirt, made me play Pippi Longstocking, gave me a wooden horse as Little Old Man and a stuffed monkey as Mr Nilsson.

Or they invented tests of courage.

They lifted me, still in my dress, into the branches of the cherry tree, urging me to climb still higher. Then they caught hold of my ankles and left me hanging upside down from a branch until I stopped screaming and, as they said, had conquered my fear of heights.

At other times they wedged my little bicycle between their racing bikes, and from early morning until late afternoon we followed the Fulda as far as Hannoversch Münden. Once, before the final stretch—which climbed steadily uphill—I fell asleep from exhaustion and toppled, bicycle and all, into the roadside ditch, knocking out one of my front teeth.

When we returned home that evening by train, carrying my broken tooth in my hand, it was not my brothers who were scolded.

My mother scolded me.

I should have taken better care of myself.

Looking back, I ought perhaps to have learned that lesson then: to watch over myself more carefully than I ever did later in life.

The pressure to leave home became irresistible.

After finishing school, I volunteered for a year at a residential institution for what were then called *difficult children*. Within the first weeks it became obvious to me that most of them deserved no such description.

Some returned from weekends at home having scarcely been parented at all. Their parents were away at work, divorced, or simply had no time for them. Others came back on Sunday evenings emotionally exhausted, overwhelmed by too much attention, too little affection, or by being passed constantly between father, mother, and siblings.

I had the unsettling feeling that I recognised something of myself in each of them.

I escaped that pressure because I became friends with one of the youth workers, Helmut.

For the first time I did so without guilt. True, I was already hopelessly in love with someone else.

But he was far away.

Besides, he was a Catholic priest.

I had first met Bruno—as he introduced himself to me—on the school playground while I was taking children to Protestant religious instruction and he was accompanying another, a Catholic class.

We spent no more than a single night together, in the room of a school friend who boarded there.

Years later our paths would cross again.

I told Helmut about that brief affair. I could never have hidden it from him. He responded with forgiveness, patience, and extraordinary tenderness.

We reconciled.

We understood one another.

We became very close.

We spoke for hours about the events of each day, argued about philosophy, and tried together to make sense of the lives unfolding around us. Unlike my brothers, he never made me feel inferior because he was a man.

He listened while I played the guitar.

He came with me to a Pink Floyd festival. When the rain began he wrapped his jacket around my shoulders. During the storm he pitched our tiny tent almost single-handedly, and through the night we lay pressed closely together, listening to the rain beating against the canvas.

Yet towards the end of that voluntary year I realised something I had not wanted to see.

He was too kind.

Too devoted.

Not in the suffocating way my brothers had clung to me at home. But he needed me. Needed me so deeply that my growing distance caused him real pain.

He wept.

He begged me not to leave.

And when he finally threatened to kill himself if I ended our relationship, he severed the last thread that still held me to him.

At that age I scarcely knew how to distinguish closeness from dependency. But I trusted one thing. The quiet voice within me that insisted separation was the only kindness left—for him, certainly, but above all for myself.

Once again I found myself standing in the street, uncertain where to go.

Not because I did not know what lay ahead.

Rather because, with the last of my strength, I had escaped yet another form of captivity. This time one I had helped create myself.

I had to leave.

Leave Kassel.

Leave home.

Leave myself.

I wanted to discover who I might become.

I applied to study Philosophy, German Literature, and Communication Studies in Munich.

I was accepted.

By the second week I already knew that Communication Studies was not for me. But I met an English student from Cambridge named Veronica. She spoke with such infectious enthusiasm about Art History that she persuaded me to attend one of her lectures.

I was enchanted.

By her.

By her identical two twin sisters, particularly Valerie.

By the subject they all studied.

There was still time to transfer into Art History as a subsidiary subject.

Without quite realising it, I had fallen in love twice.

The following weeks passed like a kind of intoxication.

Philosophy taught me to question certainties, even those I had never known I possessed. German Literature immersed me in a marathon of reading through what were said to be the hundred greatest works of the previous two centuries.

I read them.

Almost all of them.

But Art History introduced me to an entirely different world. A world in which, perhaps for the first time, I encountered myself. A world of bodies and minds, of form and perception, of colours, spaces, textures, and ideas.

As a woman I found myself entering it creatively.

We learned to curate exhibitions.

We spoke with artists.

With designers.

With publishers.

With photographers.

Munich itself became our studio.

Our classroom.

Our playground.

Night and day dissolved into one another, more often than not meeting in the pale light of dawn as we wandered from parties or exhibitions straight into the morning lecture.

Often the nights proved longer than the days. Relationships shifted as easily as the weather.

Veronica had a boyfriend.

Together with him, Veronica, and her sister Valerie, we explored the city, talked endlessly about England, spent evenings in the student bar, shared beds, smoked, drank, and swallowed aspirin on our way to the university the following morning.

Then, a few weeks later, our group from Art History was studying selected works in the *Alte Pinakothek*, making notes in front of the paintings.

A young man stood beside me. He was older than I was.

Absorbed in my notebook, I turned without thinking and walked straight into him.

We laughed.

Apologised.

Yet neither of us moved on. I stood there, transfixed.

No encounter had ever reached me so completely, as though a flash of lightning had struck somewhere deep inside me, all the way to my feet. I no longer knew what to say. Whether I wished to move at all.

I simply looked at him.

He, too, seemed unable to continue.

He appeared to be studying the painting behind me.

Or was he looking at me rather than at the picture?

What was he searching for?

And what was I?

When our eyes met we both began to laugh again, remembering the night we had shared. He asked whether I would like to have coffee with him. I accepted without hesitation. Together we walked towards the museum café.

My long years with Bruno had begun.

They began on a crest of happiness. I knew nothing then of the valleys that lay ahead.

Perhaps that is why, some time later, while I was already writing my first doctoral dissertation in Munich, I stumbled into another encounter which, as it would prove, altered the course of my life.

I stumbled upon Feeny.

She first appeared before me at the opening of an exhibition entitled *Nightshadows—Women between Light and Darkness*.

She was one of the models.

Seductive.

Languid.

Entirely self-possessed.

She had only just begun studying Fashion and Design at the University of Applied Sciences, yet she was already earning her own living. Partly through designs of her own.

It was a brief encounter. Intense enough never to leave me.

Later, when I wanted to invite her to become the model for an exhibition I was curating, she welcomed me into her studio and showed me both earlier and more recent work. The studio also served as her massage practice. She offered me a complimentary treatment. I accepted gratefully. At the time I suffered constantly from pain in my back. Too many hours bent over my desk. Perhaps the stiffness came as much from my increasingly complicated relationship with Bruno as from bad posture.

Or perhaps it was simply the way she looked at me.

Something within me opened which I had long believed sealed shut. And just as I thought I was beginning to recognise myself again, I dreamt that Bruno had appeared before me while Feeny was telling me how her own relationship with René had begun.

One morning, as I left the student residence, I noticed a collection slip pinned to the white notice board beside the porter.

I almost walked straight past it.

Then stopped.

Turned back.

It really was my name.

The postal clerk had evidently misspelled the sender. There was no one called "Reger." I tore off the slip and hurried to the university, wondering who could possibly have sent me a parcel.

Certainly no one from my family.

Nor was I expecting any delivery.

The mystery grew.

During the lecture on Rebecca Horn and Cindy Sherman, on self-fashioning and the body as artistic performance, I forgot all about it. Only when I climbed the stairs back to the porter that afternoon did the memory return. I turned round at once and made my way to the post office.

The parcel came in a large banana crate. Well wrapped. Surprisingly heavy. With some effort I carried it to my room. I opened it carefully.

Books.

They spread themselves across the floor before me. Almost every title from my German Literature reading list. Many that I had never managed to borrow because everyone else needed the same novels at the same time.

Suddenly they were mine.

The beginning of my own library.

On top lay a small note.

For the long nights when you think too much again. Let these voices keep you company.

They will disagree with you, but they mean well.

—B.

Holding *The Man Without Qualities* in my left hand and the note in my right, I read the lines once.

Then again.

The tone felt familiar.

The allusions even more so.

B.

Bruno?

I folded the note carefully. Tried to put it aside. It clung to my damp fingers. As though it had already become part of me.

The books carried his scent. Pipe tobacco. The newer volumes still smelled faintly of fresh printer's ink.

Madame Bovary.

The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge.

The Civilizing Process.

An old copy of *The Second Sex*, annotated throughout in pencil. On several title pages I recognised his handwriting. Here and there, when I opened a volume, a marginal note. A question mark.

Between two pages lay another sheet.

Apparently blank.

Almost.

Turning it over, I noticed the faint impression of words that had been erased. With the naked eye I could still decipher only:

For D.

Holding the paper against the light, I made out fragments. "...*not lose*..." Nothing more. Who had he meant?

You?

Me?

Himself?

Someone before me?

Was the parcel a gift? Or bait?

I slipped the page bearing that unknown *D.* back between the leaves with the writing turned inward. Then I took my little Polaroid camera and photographed the books, carefully leaving that page outside the frame. As soon as the photograph developed, I placed it inside a mourning envelope that had remained from my father's funeral.

With a gold felt-tip pen I wrote Bruno's address on the front.

On the reverse:

Munich by night—you must discover for yourself.

Then I posted it.

For a long while I simply sat there looking at the books. They lay before me like an examination I had not yet passed.

That evening Veronica wanted to go out. Her sister Valerie had already returned to England. I was still occupied with the note on my desk and had begun arranging the books on my shelf according to the authors' years of birth. Veronica planted herself squarely in front of me.

"So—are we finally going?"

Even had I managed to throw away the note, or forget it, the books remained. They already existed inside me. And my card to Bruno was already on its way.

"You expect me to go like this?" I asked.

I should have known the answer. She shook her blonde hair vigorously—hair so like my own.

"Like *that*? Absolutely not."

Her clothes represented the typical English economy of fabric for an evening spent moving from one bar to another.

I realised that I did not simply need to change.

I needed, if anything, to undress.

She inspected every garment.

Approved some.

Rejected others.

Until, in her opinion, we matched.

With our first steps outside I felt exposed. Even more so when the first men looked at us. As though my brothers might suddenly emerge from behind the next hedge or street corner.

The following morning I was the only one of us who had actually used the room during the night.

Though not alone. We lay in one another's arms. My companion stroked my hair. Paid me compliments. His Lower Bavarian accent seemed made entirely of warmth. His shoulder-length brown hair tickled my face.

We had hardly slept. Yet we were already making plans for the day.

We carried breakfast to the English Garden, spread a blanket beside the Isar, rested together so that we would have strength for another night.

That evening proved every bit as carefree.

We danced until dawn.

Repeated almost exactly the rhythm of the previous day. Once again we greeted the morning beneath the Chinese Tower while people around us were already sitting down to lunch. When we returned that evening to change before another excursion, Veronica was standing in the doorway of our shared room.

She drew me aside while my companion disappeared into the bathroom.

"We need to coordinate tonight," she said.

"I've already found somewhere else to stay."

"What do you mean?"

"I very much doubt I'll be back before tomorrow afternoon. He's invited me to his student room."

"*He*? You're sure?"

"Oh yes. But more importantly—the porter rang a little while ago. Your postcard reached Bruno this morning. He sent word that he's on the night train to Munich and will arrive at the Hauptbahnhof at dawn."

Everything inside me froze. My eyes turned involuntarily towards the bathroom door.

"And now?"

Veronica smiled.

"You'll have to improvise. Tell him I'd made plans without telling you. Tell him you have to come with me."

I was mortified.

Utterly mortified.

No amount of acting could conceal the change in my voice.

He understood the instant he stepped out of the bathroom.

He looked at me only once.

A brief glance.

Contemptuous.

Then he left. Like a beaten dog. He did not even slam the door.

I awoke drenched in sweat.

So exhausted that I could scarcely open my eyes.

Much later, during another visit to Feeny, I told her about the dream.

Or was it a memory?

Or something between the two?

We laughed until tears came.

Perhaps it had never been a dream at all.

Perhaps it was only the memory of a dream that someone else had dreamt inside me.

Travelling by Day and Night

Cambridge, 1992.

That evening I read deep into Hulda's diary. I wanted to know how, unlike—or perhaps simply compared with—myself, she had lived through those uncertain years of becoming an adult. Even as I tried to fall asleep, her handwriting continued to vibrate within me. The trails of ink left by her own wounds seemed to burn within those of my own that still lay open.

The following morning I opened her notebooks again.

I was ready to continue the journey with her. As once I had stood beside Bruno at the railway station, I now found myself standing beside Hulda at the roadside.

Her next journey would carry us towards Italy.

I turned the page.

Suddenly I was no longer in Munich.

No longer in Cambridge.

I found myself travelling with Hulda towards Italy, at the beginning of 1936. Eagerly I read: Before Rome could swallow her, life led her through another labyrinth.

She preferred to begin hitchhiking at first light. Her rucksack rested lightly upon her shoulders. One arm half-raised, one hand extended, waiting for the first motorcar that appeared on the distant road.

Judging from the photographs pasted into her diary, with her sharply cut, slightly elongated face and her slender figure she reminded me of one of the *tarantate* of Apulia, the women who danced themselves into release.

Her clothes suited the image perfectly. A close-fitting black georgette blouse, sparsely cut, leaving her back uncovered. Below it a dress that widened gently towards the hem, scattered with large red-and-white flowers. Only the long sweep of blonde hair betrayed that she belonged not to the Italian peninsula but to more northerly lands.

She found lifts without difficulty.

Nuremberg.

Munich.

Bolzano.

Venice.

Finally—

Rome.

She was in love.

With the South.

With Italy.

With Rome.

Or perhaps, more precisely, with a voice—roughened by singing.

Or with the man who believed he possessed it. She had met him during an evening at the German-Italian Club in Berlin. That reception had been followed by an Arab-Italian night in his studio. Her appearance at the Club had been as provocative as it proved unforgettable.

Around her waist she had tied split logs of wood that knocked softly against one another as she moved. Balanced above her head she carried two broad wooden axes.

One painted silver.

The other black.

She had transformed herself into the living emblem of Italian Fascism.

The moment she entered the private salon of the Hotel Savoy she became the centre of attention.

Heads turned.

Some were fascinated.

Others visibly unsettled.

Above all she caught the eye of a man dressed in a white caftan. His dark complexion, the faint line of beard along his jaw, and his tinted spectacles gave him the appearance of someone who had stepped directly out of Egypt's Wadi Hammamat. After inviting her to the bar and buying several drinks, he asked first her name. Then her age.

She adjusted the facts a little.

He adjusted his in return.

On the dance floor, where the light had already softened into twilight, the years separating them seemed almost to disappear.

At the piano sat Friederike. She wore a long black dress with narrow slits cut above the shoulders through which her marble-white skin caught the light. A necklace of large pearls marked the transition from cloth to throat. Above it rested an attentive face that might almost have come from Lithuania, framed by hair arranged in such perfectly measured waves that they scarcely looked natural.

Beside her Hans played the accordion. A cigarette hung permanently from the corner of his mouth, although he looked scarcely older than thirteen.

Hulda had made the dress herself.

When she tried it on, her father entered the room.

From his workbench in the courtyard he must have heard the knocking as she fixed the wooden pieces into place.

"I hope you haven't taken the seasoned wood from the shed."

"No," she replied with a smile.

"Don't worry. I know perfectly well which pieces are still green and which you need for your violins."

"And what exactly is *this*?"

He tapped one of the wooden billets fastened around her waist, trying very deliberately to avoid looking beyond them at her body.

"The Italian emblem," she answered.

"What emblem?"

"Mussolini's."

He stared at her.

"Where on earth did you get such a ridiculous idea? They're our enemies."

"You're old-fashioned, Tate. At the German-Italian Club in Berlin there are hardly any Zionists. Germans and Italians meet there. People like you and me. They love Germany. Italy. Our soil. Our families."

"But you're Jewish."

For a moment she thought only of her surname.

The fatherless one.

Now she found herself standing before a man who suddenly seemed a stranger—a man who neither asked nor wished to hear.

"First of all, I'm German," she replied. "And besides, only half Jewish—or, as I've officially become since November, a *Mischling of the second degree*. My friends say Mussolini supports the Jews. Unlike Hitler. Though he'll come to recognise our worth soon enough."

"You don't believe that yourself."

He grunted.

"But perhaps your friends in Berlin know better."

Then, more quietly,

"I'm not old-fashioned. I'm cautious."

At that moment her mother appeared in the doorway.

"Tell your daughter what you think of her dressing up like some Fascist brat."

"Ernst," her mother answered calmly, "you have to understand young people."

She usually took Hulda's side.

"Be glad she's with people who like her. People who have influence in Berlin. Now that they can no longer meet under the Black Banner, let her spend time with those who think as she does. They're decent people. Even if our destination remains Eretz Israel."

"Does it?" Hulda asked, already knowing that her father would agree with her rather than with her mother.

"Decent people?" he repeated.

"Fascists. Every one of them. The Germans. The Italians."

"Not every Fascist is the same," Hulda replied quickly. The Gestapo are watching my friends' Club as well."

"So it *is* dangerous."

Without looking at his wife he added,

"At least say something about that costume."

Her mother looked her daughter up and down. She hesitated. Then deliberately let her eyes drift past her.

"Well... perhaps you could wear just a little more underneath. You're sixteen now. You're no longer a child."

Without another word Ernst turned away.

He left questions of dress to the women and returned to his violin workshop.

Hulda awoke in the studio. A faint trace of his cologne still lingered in the air, mingling with the sweetness of tobacco smoke, the heavy musk of Jussuf, and the scent of sweat and other bodily fluids that still seemed to bind the two of them beneath the blankets, although he was already arranging his easel, mixing water with ink.

"Sit over there," he said, pointing towards a wooden bench.

His voice was calm, almost commanding. Hulda rose, gathering the sheet around herself.

"I've already lit the stove. You shouldn't be cold."

She understood immediately what he meant. Half embarrassed, she folded the sheet onto the bench and sat upon it.

His eyes travelled slowly over her.

From her feet.

Across the delicate joints of her ankles.

Up the long lines of her legs.

Her hips.

The dark triangle between them.

Though her stomach was almost perfectly flat, she instinctively drew it in as his gaze lingered there before moving to her breasts, her shoulders, her arms, her hands, finally her face—her mouth, nose, eyes—and at last the crown of her head.

He stepped back from both her and the easel.

Then circled her.

Measuring.

Balancing proportions.

As though examining an instrument that would soon begin to sound.

She was not cold.

She was not afraid. Yet a shiver passed through her. Never before had anyone looked at her so completely.

Not merely seen her—

disassembled her.

Studied her as though every inch demanded its own explanation. Under this silent microscope even her skin seemed to awaken. It drank him in. Rose imperceptibly towards him. A landscape of folds and ridges, inviting crossings, tiny craters. Had he been a surgeon rather than an artist, she thought, he would already have set the scalpel to her. Deeply. Without hesitation.

He held a fine ink brush in one hand, the inkstone in the other.

Both seemed fixed there, as though they had grown into his fingers.

Only when she nodded almost imperceptibly did he finally step towards her.

"May I?" he asked.

His voice hesitated.

His body did not.

Without waiting for her answer he touched her thighs, gently moving them apart, bent one leg, lengthened the other, straightened her back by pressing her shoulder blades into place, repositioned her hands, opened her chest, then turned her head slightly towards the window.

Across the street a woman was hanging washing on a balcony. She glanced lazily towards the studio. If she wondered why a young naked girl sat motionless while a man arranged her limbs, she gave no sign of it.

Hulda scarcely dared breathe.

"I need freshness," Jussuf said quietly from behind the easel.

"The expression before it knows it is being watched. No stiffness. No posing. The coffee is ready. We'll only make a few sketches."

She remained silent. Only her lips parted slightly, exactly as he had indicated. The clothes lying beside her feet disappeared from his attention. The caftan draped over them marked where the night had ended—or perhaps where it had begun.

Every point.

Every line.

Every movement of the thin brush struck her as though it were touching flesh rather than paper.

He drew along muscles he no longer touched.

Followed the soft hairs of her arms.

The curve of her lips.

Her eyebrows.

Without moving so much as a finger she found herself directing his hand.

The rhythm of her breathing altered the shadows.

Her posture bent the lines.

The drawing became less something he imposed upon her than something they created together.

Soon sweat gathered upon his forehead.

Ran down his temples.

Darkened his shirt.

Across from him she remained perfectly still.

He struggled.

She endured.

He wrestled with the page as though every stroke had first to conquer resistance within himself.

She sat.

He fought.

She—

a *giostra*, a fantasia, the suspended instant before movement.

He—

pure nervous concentration.

No trace remained of the previous night's exhaustion.

She resembled a hunting cat, every muscle drawn taut, every tendon prepared for the leap. Her gaze held the world motionless.

The prey appeared free.

It was not.

Suddenly he tore several sheets from the easel.

They fluttered across the studio.

He stripped off his shirt.

Seized a hammer.

Dragged a block of stone between them.

Then began striking it with furious force.

Fragments flew through the room.

Dust rose.

The blows echoed like heavy machinery.

She would later write only one sentence in her diary: *He was no longer himself.*

Even perspiration began running down her own temples, though she had never left the pose.

The hammer became rhythm.

The rhythm became distance.

At some point she was no longer certain she was still sitting in that room.

Berlin ended abruptly. Jussuf Amun—known as an Arab rather than as a Jew—received an invitation to the Villa Massimo in Rome, a three-month fellowship. They agreed that she would follow as soon as he had settled in. During one of their seemingly endless telephone conversations he begged her to come.

"I've dried out here," he confessed.

"Nothing but beginners. Faces that leave me empty. Rome is unbearable without you. Day and night I dream of your eyes. Your body. Your movement. Your resistance."

She knew she could not wait any longer.

She admitted something in return.

She missed her master.

The artist.

The man.

That same evening she found a lift south through acquaintances at the German-Italian Club.

Leipzig.

Munich.

Then onward as a hitchhiker.

Her blonde hair announced not Jewish ancestry but ideal Aryan health.

Within a day she had already reached Bavaria.

Yet Jussuf's rhythm still pulsed through her body.

As the road climbed towards the Alps and darkness gathered over the peaks, mountain and sky dissolved into one immense field of blue. Nothing remained except night—and between that night and herself, everything.

How Rome with him would unfold—that remained hidden from her.

She was not even travelling there directly. The cars that stopped for her determined her route.

Most nights she spent alone.

Sometimes in an inn, sometimes in a hayloft, sometimes in the outbuilding of a small farm. She had earned enough money modelling in Berlin—for Jussuf and for other artists—and had sold a number of her own small sculptures and drawings. She was careful with what she earned, so she travelled without desperation. At the outskirts of Munich she spent the night in a hostel recommended by friends from Berlin, run by friends of those friends. They even let her sleep free of charge in fresh straw and served her rolls with plum butter before dawn.

The following morning she stood once more at a crossroads, thumb half-raised before a dark-blue motorcar braked almost at her feet.

A young man climbed out.

"Leone Terni."

She accepted the ride.

The automobile itself impressed her before its owner did.

Comfortable.

Clean.

The leather smelled warm beneath the morning sun.

His face carried the sharp freshness of recently applied cologne, drifting across the cabin each time he shifted gears. She no longer panicked when entering strangers' cars, although the familiar tightening low in her stomach accompanied every journey with an unknown driver.

Leone possessed effortless manners.

Not theatrical elegance—

simply the confidence of someone accustomed to moving through the world as though every door had been waiting for him all along.

"I'm driving to Venice," he said.

"A concert tomorrow night on Piazza San Marco."

From the pocket in the door he produced a brightly coloured poster.

"Would you like to come?"

She laughed.

"I've never been to Venice."

"Then we've solved that problem."

"Our stop for tonight is Bolzano. Friends of mine."

"Better than standing beside the road."

As they drove he spoke of Livorno.

She remembered the city from her Italian lessons.

"Industry," she said.

"Workers. Freethinkers. Jews."

He laughed.

"Not entirely wrong. But no workers without factories. No factories without owners. No owners without banks..."

"No banks without Jews."

Both laughed.

The joke hovered between them lightly enough that neither examined it very closely. Only then did she notice the dashboard.

"What is that?"

He looked almost delighted by her ignorance.

"A radio. Magneti Marelli. My father had it installed."

"A radio... inside a car?"

"You understand immediately."

The reception crackled. March music emerged through static. He adjusted the dial until a voice replaced the music.

Only now did she truly study him. The dark-blue uniform. The insignia.

"You aren't a fireman?"

He burst into laughter.

"Guess again."

She smiled apologetically.

"Italy is still new to me."

"And yet your Italian is remarkably good. German underneath, though... perhaps even something Yiddish."

She stiffened. Had she betrayed herself already? She answered carefully.

"*Nu* - if your ears are so sharp, tell me where I come from."

He repeated her little *Nu* almost unconsciously.

Smiled.

That single syllable told her enough. Ashkenazi. She relaxed.

"My name is Hulda. I'm from Kassel."

"And the uniform?"

"Have you heard of Betar?"

She shook her head.

Then Leone stopped merely conversing. He began preaching. He spoke of Vladimir Jabotinsky.

Of the Jewish Legion.

Of military discipline.

Of honour.

Of the necessity of a Jewish state stretching along both banks of the Jordan. He quoted the Hebrew slogan as though reciting Scripture itself.

Hulda copied it carefully into her notebook later that evening: שני גדות לירדן, זו שלנו וזו ג.כ. Then translated it beneath in hesitant German:

„The Jordan has two banks. One is ours—and the other one as well?“

Three question marks followed.

She almost told him about the *Black Banner*. Almost admitted that she belonged to those German Jews who regarded Zionism as a betrayal—of Germany, of Jewish history, of the Messiah still to come.

Better not.

He would probably stop the car and leave her standing by the roadside.

Instead she smiled.

Looked out across the South Tyrolean mountains. Let the conversation drift elsewhere.

The radio crackled again.

A triumphant fanfare. Then an announcer.

Italian victories in Abyssinia.

Badoglio.

The Regia Aeronautica.

Bombs.

Smoke.

Heroism.

She understood only fragments.

Leone understood every word. His face brightened.

"Addis Ababa belongs once more to the Kingdom of Italy!"

He lifted both arms in celebration. Neither hand remained on the steering wheel. The Lancia drifted towards the embankment.

Hulda caught her breath.

"Were you there?"

"Not yet. Perhaps one day. Betar will need settlements. Who knows?"

She remembered countless arguments inside the *Black Banner*. Arguments about Zionism. About Palestine. About loyalty. None of it had ever persuaded her. Everything she

loved—music, painting, philosophy, medicine, the astonishing freedom she enjoyed as a woman—had grown from Europe. From Germany.

Why exchange that for desert and war? Why abandon home before home had entirely abandoned them?

Absurd, she thought.

Yet she said nothing.

A pleasant journey,

a warm meal,

two peaceful nights—

those were worth more than another political argument.

Bolzano appeared almost suddenly.

Leone proudly drove through the broad avenues of the new Italian quarter.

"The Duce built all this."

"I wondered why every street suddenly sounded Roman," Hulda replied.

"I thought we were still in Tyrol."

"We are. And we aren't."

His friends welcomed her as though she had always belonged among them.

Lambrusco appeared.

Soon afterwards they wandered together towards the Victory Monument. The towering fasces supporting its entablature made Hulda smile immediately.

She recognised the symbolism at once.

For one mischievous moment she imagined appearing before them in the costume she had once worn in Berlin—wooden fascio bound around her waist, axes balanced above her head.

Instead she produced the photographs.

The young men roared with laughter.

Exactly as she had hoped.

Arm in arm they marched down Via Vittoria towards the Cinema Vittoria.

The newsreel preceded the feature film. Bombs fell over Abyssinia. Columns of smoke climbed into the sky. The audience erupted in cheers. Someone whispered that the new bombs carried mustard gas.

Hulda leaned quietly towards Luigi.

"What is mustard gas?"

He answered without turning his head.

"State secret."

Then even more softly:

"They tested it first on livestock. Then villages. After a few days... nothing remained alive."

Her heart seemed to fall through her body. She kept her face still.

On the screen *Il cammino degli eroi* celebrated conquest.

Around her the young men applauded every explosion.

She heard the cheering.

She saw the smoke.
 She imagined something else entirely.

Much later—perhaps already towards dawn—they found themselves back in the apartment.
 Wine still circulated. One after another the others drifted into sleep.

Only Leone remained awake. He looked across at her.

"What do you actually do? Do you study? Why Rome?"

"My work."

"What kind?"

"I'm a sculptor. A painter. And I earn money posing."

That surprised him.

"I thought you were still at school."

She smiled.

"So did many people."

"And Rome?"

"I work with an Arab artist. He has a fellowship there. We're developing several projects together."

"What sort of projects?"

She avoided the question.

"Do you know much about art?"

"Not really. Only that movements need artists. Look at the Victory Monument."

This time she interrupted him.

"Politics always provides art with its frame. Sometimes it nourishes it. Sometimes it starves it. But art survives politics because it reaches beyond the present moment. It is rather like religion. Sometimes it gives life. Perhaps especially when politics is busy taking life away."

Leone was silent.

Then he answered quietly.

"Politics still needs art. People need to see greatness. They need direction."

Hulda answered evenly: "That's what you say."

She pointed to the postcard she had bought at the museum kiosk, reading aloud the Latin inscription engraved beneath the monument:

HIC PATRIAE FINES SISTE SIGNA: HINC CETEROS EXCOLVIMVS LINGVA
 LEGIBVS ARTIBVS.

She studied it for a moment before continuing.

"Great art hardly needs a title. This monument already marks the *patria* and its frontier—and at the same time suggests that every frontier may be crossed. Home isn't merely a place. It is time as well: yesterday, today, tomorrow. Why carve into stone that you've educated others through language, law, and art? Anyone standing here can already feel it in the architecture."

Leone smiled.

"Education requires guidance."

"External education, yes," she nodded, "but that peels away. Whatever is meant to reach beneath the skin speaks another language—one without letters or grammar. Often silence. Everyone understands silence. Every age. Every tongue."

She stepped close enough that the conversation itself disappeared. Before he could answer, she placed her lips softly upon his.

Certain.

Unhurried.

The kiss silenced the monument more effectively than its inscription. Moments later they had sunk onto the warm stone together like the others scattered around the square, and sleep overtook them beneath the southern sky.

The following evening they left the automobile outside Venice and continued on foot towards Piazza San Marco. The nearer they came, the denser the crowd became. Leone never released her hand. He guided her across narrow bridges spanning black canals, through tightening alleys until bodies pressed against them from every side.

"Do you actually know where we're going?"

"You'll see."

"You won't regret trusting me."

She believed him.

The blue uniform seemed to part the crowd before him.

People stepped aside almost instinctively.

Soon they reached the brilliantly illuminated square.

Instead of joining the masses, Leone turned into a narrow alleyway and led her through a dark passage into the rear entrance of a palazzo whose upper terrace overlooked the entire piazza.

He knew the route. Flags lined the balustrade. Floodlights transformed night into theatre. Ahead stood a speaker's platform crowned by an enormous microphone. Below, thousands of voices merged into one.

Giovinezza! Giovinezza!

Primavera di bellezza...

Leone released her hand only long enough to place it into that of another uniformed young man.

"Wait here."

"I'll be back."

She remained among banners, cables, technicians and men wearing headphones who adjusted microphones with almost liturgical precision.

From below another song rose.

Faccetta nera...

Then another chorus joined it. Louder. Triumphant. Mocking.

At last she saw him again. No longer merely Leone. The floodlights sculpted him into someone larger than life. His gestures seemed rehearsed by history itself.

He stood behind the podium speaking with astonishing confidence.

His voice rolled over the square.

He celebrated Abyssinia.

Italian military genius.

Victory.

Then something larger still—the newly forged alliance between Italy and Germany. His speech concluded with words Hulda immediately recognised: "No one is a bad human being—but unlike the superior white race, there is the subhuman, devoid of vigour, devoid of pride." A quotation from Fontane. One she herself had once admired. Only now it had been bent into something else.

The crowd erupted before she fully understood what had happened.

The applause swallowed the sentence and transformed it into certainty.

Hulda felt the blood leave her face.

Suddenly she herself stood beneath the lights.

Photographers.

Reporters.

Microphones.

Questions flying towards her from every direction. Someone addressed Leone by a Hebrew word she understood immediately.

Mefaked.

Commander.

Leader.

She heard herself answering in broken Italian threaded through with German.

Half sentences.

Fragments.

Enough to satisfy no one. The reporters quickly abandoned her for more eloquent witnesses. She slipped away into shadow before anyone noticed she had gone. She waited near the entrance. The speeches ended. Officials crowded around Leone.

Heavy men embraced him.

Women congratulated him.

His future appeared to belong entirely to those gathered there.

Then a young woman approached him.

Slim.

Dark-haired.

Betar uniform.

Without hesitation she threw her arms around Leone's neck.

She kissed him.

Long.

Hidden behind the brim of her cap.

Hulda did not wait for the kiss to finish. She turned on her heel with military precision and left the square as though escaping an execution.

Some time later she found herself climbing into the back of a freight lorry.

She could not have explained why.

Only that she needed distance.

The truck crawled south through the night.

Its driver scarcely spoke. Broad-backed. Thick-necked. Smelling of diesel, sweat and long hours behind the wheel. Each gear protested. Every loose bolt rattled. The vehicle seemed held together less by mechanics than by stubborn habit.

Leone returned to her thoughts. She admitted something to herself she had tried not to know. Had events taken another course that evening—she would probably have surrendered herself to him.

Her body still remembered him. Her skin did. Yet every recollection now collided with the image of that kiss in uniform.

Oil and rubber filled the cabin. The smell reassured her. She had chosen correctly.

Whatever desire remained behind her in Venice could stay there.

Rome lay ahead.