

THERAPY

by
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This novel lays no claim to historical veracity.
All names, places, and events are fictitious.
Any resemblance are coincidental.

BOOK ONE

RICHARD

1.

For the whole of the last year, I was 17. I'm 18 now. It's kind of weird – I haven't changed at all but the number's different. What does the number matter if there are things that stay the same, year after year? My attitude to happy people, for example. Happy people are feeble minded and two-faced. Spiteful and dejected people are more my sort. I trust them. Where there's spite, there's always despair. It's just that it's hidden away. I see the spiteful ones as my own kind. My own kind are those I can gang up with against the happy people.

2.

The tally needs to be started from 1933 when I was still living in Berlin and I was 17. Starting there means that, all in all, several hundred deaths can be attributed to me – it's no longer possible to work out the exact figure. Nor is there any point – the twentieth century killed over a hundred million people and now, in addition, here comes some Richard or other with his pathetic heap of corpses – who cares?

I understand why I want to talk about my heap of corpses. After all, I was the one who killed them, not the twentieth century. For many years now, I have traipsed through towns and villages pulling this cart, harnessed to it instead of a horse, and going in no particular direction. I simply wander the world.

The corpses on the cart dried out long ago. They are completely weightless now and

even the blood of these people has dried up – previously it used to cake my clothes, making them tight and hampering my movements, but now it’s split away and crumbled into the dust of the road. Where it belongs.

Fetching up with that cart in yet another unfamiliar town, I humbly endeavour to get the first passers-by I encounter interested in my corpses. “Look,” I say, “they used to be people, that’s got to be interesting...” But they pass by, indifferent. Then I say, “It’s me who killed them, I’m 17. At least take a peek...”

But people avoid me and my cart. They hurry away, not meeting my gaze. Why are they so frightened? Do they really not want to know how random bystanders, exactly like themselves, become dried-out corpses? Do they really not want to avoid a similar fate?

Spotting a police officer, I haul my cart over to him. A police officer is duty bound to take an interest in corpses – he is a policeman at the end of the day. But no, he’s not bothered about them either. He pays for his coffee, takes his first gulp, and then, seeing that I haven’t gone away and am still awaiting a response, he sneers, “Get out of here. You’ve done your time for that.”

And he’s right. I really have done my time for them. But I’m not looking for additional punishment, I need something quite different now: I want to know why things came to this pass. Why I became smeared from head to toe in this blood.

It goes without saying that when I was a child I too was taught that killing was wrong. Like any child, I wanted to be good. I soaked up knowledge like a sponge, did everything I could to win praise. But then adult life began and it proved to be constructed in such a way that none of the truths I had learned lasted even a minute.

3.

It’s a bad thing that as long as our world contains people like me, any human being can be very

easily killed. Imagine: for one person to be born, hundreds or thousands of generations must first be born and live out their lives. Over the course of tens of thousands of years, they must eat, sleep, perceive the world, and blithely seduce one another out of a sense of attraction and love. As a rule, without attraction and love, new people fail to appear. Unless you count people like me, of course.

If someone is born, they must be brought up, fed, any obstacles resourcefully overcome. The person who has been born must be loved. Unless it's me, of course.

And then, when the person has grown up and become an adult, previous generations must withdraw meekly and with a hint of sorrow into the mists of the past. Or, in other words, go screw themselves. And so it must continue from age to age and then, at the end of this chain of thousands of years, a sweet and completely unsuspecting creature will appear – my future victim.

For that creature to die, there is no longer any need for a succession of generations, for attraction or for love. I alone am quite sufficient. Well, plus the crude implement in my hand. And plus the slight movement of a finger. Is this really normal? No, it shouldn't be this way. It needs to be put right somehow. Otherwise, people like me will continue to bestow their grief and pain on those around them – I have plenty to go round.

In the evening, once the sun has gone down, I usually head for some desolate spot beyond the city limits. I lie in my cart beside my dried-out corpses that nobody wants, draw the cover we share over myself, shut my eyes, and try to fall asleep. It is then that, against my will, that strange, primitive march strikes up in my head...

On the whole, marches were invented to fill the listeners with their beat and enthrall them with their momentum. The momentum should so inspire the listener that he finds standing still dull, depressing, and utterly unbearable.

The rhythm of the march should create a sensation of cheerful haste and every crash of

the cymbals, every beat of the drum, should be so loud, so resonant, and so inspiring that it becomes pointless even to try and concentrate and to understand the reason for needing to go marching off somewhere.

In other words, a march is a means of giving rhythm and structure to any old rubbish, to someone's military and political hysterics, for example. No doubt, even without me, you'll have noticed that if any nonsense, foolishness, or stupidity is kitted out with a rhythmic structure, it begins to cast a spell, to hypnotize, to seem like wisdom.

Then again, popular singers will tell you about that better than I can. Or even my feeble-minded idol, Adolf Hitler. Knowing that he's feeble-minded does nothing at all to prevent him from being my idol. In order to give a rhythmic structure to his gibberish, he too knows how to play with emphases, pauses, and repetitions. In that sense, his every speech is a work of music and poetry. I hope that I will one day reach such heights in society that this poet and composer will embrace me and make me his friend.

That day, I was walking along Berlin's Wilmersdorfer Strasse towards Schillerstrasse. That shrill and mean-spirited march had plagued me since the morning and was now a constant noise in my head. Its rhythm gave a fitful energy to everything around me: it made people, vehicles, and even birds oddly jerky. And had a bewildered old lady not realized what was required of her, twisted her head bizarrely, and continued to shuffle along on her shrivelled feet, then, without a shadow of a doubt, that same old lady would have had to die – repeating the fate of all those who had previously failed to keep pace with the rhythm of my march.

The old lady who had been walking along Schillerstrasse vanished around a corner and now a young woman with a marvellous figure was heading towards me. She was in a cheerful mood. She had young legs and a broad stride and she kept splendid pace with my march.

Meeting my benevolent gaze, she smiled and I smiled back. Why not smile at a cute-looking girl who didn't even suspect the danger she was in? Let her continue to be unaware of

the strength that was concealed by my grudging, benevolent smile.

4.

I like walking fast. Marches suit my long stride. That same march was playing within me a couple of weeks earlier as I sailed vigorously and resolutely up an unknown staircase to a dark, dusty attic – the place where I was to murder my final victim.

The house had been selected at random after the trapdoor to the attic in the previous randomly selected house turned out to be locked. It nearly foiled my dirty deed altogether, that lock.

I was still unaware that day that circumstances would conspire to foil the murder and that the victim would remain alive. Nor did I know that the day's intended victim would, sadly, be far from the last in a series of victims still to come.

It was some old crackpot who put paid to the matter. It was his house and his attic. He lived on the top floor so he heard my footsteps on his ceiling. Later, it turned out that whitewash from the ceiling had crumbled into his plate – it's what did for the whole thing. He had been meaning to go up to the attic for a long time to twiddle the heating valves but had kept putting it off until the ceiling shook and the whitewash spattered down...

He had a family – a wife and daughter. I wasn't acquainted with him at the time. We weren't to know that we would come to be connected for many years – right up until his final moment when his guts would be mangled by a sizzling hot lump of iron. Well, yes, it may well be a shock but that's exactly how he died.

That lump of iron was made for him in a munitions factory by eleven-, twelve- and thirteen-year-old children from a country far away. Adults set them to do the night shift on the machine tools. They had to work, rather than playing their silly kids' games, messing around, or getting some sleep. Adults love their own very clever, serious games. One of which is war.

They put children to work on machine tools. Even if the children want to be asleep. After all, shells must be produced at night as well.

Are you happy with that, you adults? Well, then, take your lump of iron to the belly. Serves you right. May it mangle everything you've got there and may you all die.

5.

Everything I'm writing about here happened nearly a hundred years before you came along. Perhaps, I am still alive even now as you read these lines. If so, it's a tenuous sort of being alive – most likely I'm fading mentally and physically away in some zoo for prehistoric old men and today, or maybe tomorrow, they'll bury me even so.

I think, however, it's more than likely that I'd already died by the time you picked up this book. In that case, all that is left of me is bones, hair, and teeth. Don't be frightened of them. They're a long way away. They're safely buried in the ground. They won't rise up and attack you. They're not aggressive but even rather sweet and touching.

Way back when I was a six-year-old child and dug up my first corpse in the yard of our house, I discovered that hair and nails keep growing even underground. It could be that this is just a legend but that red hair really was very long. It could wrap around my skinny, six-year-old neck about ten times. And if it had begun to stir, intent on strangling me, then probably even one more time as well...

At the time, I shared my thoughts about the kingdom of the dead with my mother but she refused to talk to me about death. She said that she didn't want to think about it and that I should forget about it too.

As a good little six-year-old, I was pleased that there was someone on this earth who knew what I should and should not think about. This certainty gave me the gift of calm and a feeling of security. That's why I honestly tried to forget about it straight away and did so so

staunchly that afterwards, for what has now been a hundred years, that death and that hair have never been out of my mind.

6.

It's a pity Mama didn't want to talk to me about death... It wasn't long before I came by a real treasure trove for a child – several human skulls all at once. They became my real friends. They loved me, lonely child that I was, and, to the best of their ability, they sought to amuse and entertain me. For example, if I stood a jawbone up like a little bridge and gave it a good thwack with a stick, the teeth would shoot out and go at least two and a half metres. The teeth enjoyed entertaining me.

And if I threaded a string through an eye socket and then a vertebra and tied the string to my bike, the skull would go jingling along, leaping and bouncing like a ball. I could never have imagined that human bones had so much spring and bounce in them.

The First World War had left a lot of treasures in the ground to surprise a six-year-old boy. And I would have been happy to lay all of these treasures at my beloved Mama's feet but her fear of death proved stronger than any interest in her son's sincerely offered gifts. And so, Mama never even saw the most precious toys her son played with. It's a shame she never played my games with me.

You may be asking how come I'm writing this book if I've lost my wits or I'm already dead? I think it's my sorrow that's writing it: that hasn't died. Nor will it, even if I lose my memory.

I am convinced that sorrow can live separately from memory. Once, after the war, when I met my father, he no longer recognized me. He had no recollection at all of who I was. His memory loss advanced very quickly. It came at a very good time – just before his trial. It was precisely because of it that he was spared the fate of other Nazi criminals. He couldn't

remember anything but there was sorrow in him even so – somehow, I could tell.

Generally, sorrow makes good ink and it's perfectly feasible to conceive of writing a book in that ink alone. Back in my own day, ink was so black that in daylight it would shimmer with all the colours of the rainbow. The colours were bright – yellow, and green, and red. If a book was written in sorrow it wouldn't be black. It would contain every colour – the colour of joy, the colour of sadness, and the colour of hope.

Should you happen upon some old man heading, for example, along a country road somewhere, who can't remember his name and doesn't know what year it is, who hasn't a clue where he's going, and has long since forgotten what happened to his cartload of corpses or even whether he really had one – that might well be me. A walking sack of sorrow. It's a wordless sorrow because I can't remember it: I will never recount it again. Only this book will. It's all that's left of a person who lost his memory. Unless you count bones, hair, and teeth that are no use to anyone. It is about death at an early age. About heavenly beauty, trampled into mud and blood. And about the love that I betrayed.

7.

You are alive now, I was alive once upon a time. There are almost a hundred years between us. Nowadays, if your mind's fucked, you probably rush off to your shrink, right? When I felt like that, I set off to commit murder. Not because I'm some dark, dangerous, and evil killer but just because it made me feel better and no other way occurred to me. To begin with, I committed the murders in my head. Then I did it for real. No doubt the one followed from the other. I'm sure Dr. Zimmermann would have seen a connection of that kind as well.

Today, for example, the foreman of the fish processing plant is going to be killed. I've been working at the plant for more than a month now. I'm nineteen already. The foreman has been asking for it for a long time. I expect he has a family and he's probably a nice guy,

generally speaking. But, to his cost, he turned out to be involved in a system of coercion that has kept me in a state of anguish. And, under my laws, that incurs death.

He doesn't suspect a thing at present. He can't understand my anguished yearning. He's so simple and cheerful that he probably just can't feel such a thing – he doesn't have the capacity. Or, perhaps, of an evening, he drowns his own yearning in schnapps. Or dulls it in monotonous romps with his sweaty, weary wife. Who every evening tries unsuccessfully to persuade him that she wants to go to sleep. There's no point her trying, the mindless messages of his reptilian brain are mightier than what she wants. And, of course, it is might that prevails.

I don't know anything about his family life. I don't know his wife but why does she put up with him? What need does she have of this feeble-minded joyous anguish that has gone on for years?

The man has done everything possible to ensure that not a hint of merriment remains in this woman's life – or in mine either. He wants the entire meaning of my existence to be reduced to processing fish. Guts to the left, heads to the right. Holy shit!

He isn't bothered that the planets and stars had been spinning in the cold of outer space for billions of years before I was born. Or that they'll do the same again for billions of years after my death. Or that in the gap between those billions of years, there was a brief spark, the blink of an eye, in which I arose and have my being. And I'm supposed to devote this priceless blink of an eye to processing that damn fish? How dare he? It's for that insolence that he'll be killed today. And this time not in my head.

8.

Why shouldn't a man be killed for being narrow-minded? Specifically, for the fact that he refuses to see the universe and its eternity beyond the fish tails? His murder will be a liberation not just for me and not just for his wife, whom I've never seen, but for his children as well.

What use is a father like that to them?

Ah, they love him just because he's their dad? No, I'm not happy with that – a dad like that shouldn't be spawning others just like him. His children's feelings are no concern of mine – I never had a dad and now they won't either.

Their dad had an excellent chance to stay alive and it's not my fault he didn't take it: he could have seen me not just as a faceless worker in an apron but, for example, as a person, a friend, and a son.

As a matter of fact, he already has two sons – they're six and eight, I've seen their photos on his desk. In one of them, he's teaching the younger one to ride a bike. But he isn't going to teach Richard anything. That's not why Richard's in his life. Richard has to slit fish open and receive money in exchange. Whoever fails to see a son in Richard must, according to my laws, pay for it with his life.

9.

And this is my prison – the vast and echoing workshop, the high ceilings, the red brick walls, the tall foggy windows that the sun shines through. I stand at the conveyor belt in a line of identical workers. I am wearing an old and battered oilskin apron, just like the ones worn by the others. Putting it on for the first time was foul. But over time the foulness stops being foul – it merges with me, becomes part of me, and I become foul as well. The apron's too big for me but I've folded it lengthways and put a belt around it.

I am holding a sharp knife – it's designed for processing fish but it will do for the foreman as well. With precise, rapid movements, I cut off a fish's head and pierce its belly: head to the left, guts to the right. My whole body sways in time to the movements of my hands, to the beat of my march.

Humanity has been eating fish to the tune of that march for millions of years now. This

is proven by how worn these old, these very old aprons are – it's like they were a million years old as well.

Whoever first put that apron on – when it was still crackling and new – is no doubt already in the ground, along with his hair and nails. But whoever puts the apron on after me won't even know that I once lived.

The stars will continue their perpetual flight in the cold of outer space and on some defunct planet my dead apron will continue its perpetual service to the senseless and ceaseless eating of fish in silence and alone.

Yes, defunct humanity will continue to eat fish. How could they know that they're dead? They simply won't notice their own demise. No one will tell them about it. There won't be anyone to do the telling if everyone's dead.

For hundreds and thousands of years, every now and then, my apron will continue to change the people who put it on. After all, it can't do any work itself. It's only an apron – it has to be worn by someone who's died. Now, I am one of them.

Will it some day perhaps occur to humanity to put trained monkeys or robots on the conveyor belt in their stead? It's a bad thing that humanity has been standing at conveyor belts for a whole century – it's death, it dulls the mind, it's anguish. You feel like killing someone. It would be better to install robots rather than monkeys, of course – why force a sweet little monkey to suffer in the same way as the proud pinnacle of earthly evolution?

It would be interesting to take a peek into the future. You, who are reading this a hundred years later, are you still standing at the conveyor belt? If so then, what the hell? Ditch this sad nonsense and its anguish right now and the value of your labour will skyrocket: robots will emerge more quickly as a result and there will no longer be any need for people to turn themselves into robots and ruin not only their own lives for a pittance but future lives as well.

Future lives – that's us, your children. And ruining us means delivering us to the

torment of state educators. State educators are wicked beasts and they're wicked because they live in a state of anguish. And their anguish is because their work is the same conveyor belt as yours. Only, instead of fish, it carries us, your children.

Delivering us into the cogs of that conveyor belt is a betrayal of those whom god has entrusted to you. You betray that heavenly trust out of habit, on a daily basis. And no, on that conveyor belt, the caregivers don't rip open our guts or cut off our heads – you needn't worry on that score. All they do is turn us into soldiers.

Those soldiers then go on to form whole armies and that's why, every century, hundreds of millions of you perish. And will until you change this. But you won't change it because you prefer to turn a blind eye to your act of betrayal.

You don't want to see our tears, our fears and terror, our despair and grief. You don't feel the cold and loneliness we live in every day. You don't even notice your own deaths because you, you're the fish. The guts to the left are yours. The heads to the right are yours too. It serves you right – carry on, keep right on dying in your hundreds of millions.

Incidentally, even if you don't hand us over to state educators and you raise us yourselves, it's still an act of betrayal. Because you're still fish and fish are poor educators.

You are annoyed that your entire life is in service to the conveyor belt and that you are moving along it to take somewhat sorrowful leave of your head and guts for the pleasure of some mysterious and invisible someone who will eat you at a family meal.

Under these circumstances, all you are capable of doing as regards raising children is taking ceaseless revenge on your child for your own sad fate. Extracting his guts day by day and tossing them to the left. Cutting his head off and tossing it to the right. That's the most you're capable of.

You devour your own young. And you like the taste. You ought not to have children. Stop it. Don't give birth to us. All you're being asked is to carry on dying in your yearning

millions. May you all die. May the planet empty. May it continue until such time as you want to understand at least something of those very simple things that animals understand when they bring up their young without any learned tomes.

10.

Whatever surrounds us inevitably becomes part of us. Doctor Zimmermann, for example, is surrounded by portraits of certain straight-laced, learned men with beards – as a result he too appears to be a learned man with a beard even though his chin is as hairless as the heel of my foot.

His work doesn't need an apron. He isn't standing amid the anguish and the damp, clutching a knife swathed in fish guts – well-dressed people come to see him and tell him their stories in dry, cosy surroundings.

Perhaps these people, and with them their stories, become part of him – after all, he thinks about them even when they're not there. He feels for them and remembers what they said. Not out of sympathy, of course, but just because they fill his empty life with at least some sort of feelings.

But no well-dressed people come to see me. Instead, along come my dead fish in an endless stream, day after day, month after month, century after century. Just chop off the head. Just slit its belly. Not one fish has yet asked me to listen to its story in dry, cosy surroundings.

In any case, what sort of story could a fish have? The same one as all the other fish – so dreadfully exciting – about swimming along in the water, engrossed in looking for a worm and also, let's say, guided by its inalienable pursuit of happiness. But then, out of the blue, they were all enveloped in some weird kind of net and somehow they all ended up here on this dreadful black conveyor belt. And, clattering and shuddering, the belt goes off somewhere into a darkness from which no one has ever come back alive... “What did I do wrong?” the fish

probably wonders. “How was I supposed to live so as not to be caught in this net? Maybe I didn’t swim properly? Fancied the wrong worm? Pursued the wrong happiness?”

What’s odd about this is that people have been casting their nets day after day for hundreds of years now and yet for a fish landing in the net it always comes as a surprise and a novelty.

11.

Now those poor fish, wracked by posthumous doubts as to whether they picked the right worm or were right to pursue happiness, float past me on the conveyor belt, and so it goes on, day after day and night after night.

After fish have been flashing in front of me all day long, they don’t abandon me at night either – I dream about them. I can just feel them becoming me and me becoming them. I don’t think the day is far off when I will wake up, scratch my side, and be stunned to find scales instead of skin. I will scratch my back and find a fin. I’ll have a tail behind me and gills beneath my jaw.

The purpose of these fish as they travel along the conveyor belt is to have their heads cut off and their guts removed. They have no other need to be on that conveyor belt. While I’m standing at the conveyor belt, the fishes’ purpose becomes my own. Why have I not yet slit open my own belly and cut off my own head?

You know, I have no sense of revulsion as I gut these fish – I couldn’t work here if I did. Quite the contrary even, each decapitation, each slit belly gives me a barely perceptible spurt of something pleasant. If you think I’m some sort of sick maniac who derives pleasure from sticking a cold knife into the damp flesh of a creature that was alive only a moment before, you’re wrong. It’s not a very nice process, obviously, but it gives me a feeling that I’m of use to the world. I can’t cope without that – I want to be useful.

I'm given the chance to be useful by the fact that our world has a shamefaced and never-ending need of this barbaric bit of nonsense – decapitated fish with their guts removed.

Nature has made fish beautiful. And that's how they come to me. But humanity has no need of that sort of fish. For humanity to feel right, the head has to be cut off. And that's precisely why humanity has me. Now do you understand the real reason for the birth of the unique and enchanting miracle of nature that goes by the name of Richard Lendorf?

12.

Fish aren't only the reason the world needs me. They're a means of communication too. When I dispatch a decapitated fish to humankind, I commune with a vast number of people: for example, those who are going to eat it at a family meal. Or those who will fry it in some restaurant or other.

I don't know these people and I won't ever see them, but I feel their warmth – I know that these people exist, there are lots of them, and I am connected to them through this unspoken fishy interaction and in this way we are all together. And it is such a fine thing to be not alone but all together!

And that's what I'll say to the person inside me who will start crying from loneliness again at some point. I will stuff that dead, slippery, cold fish in his chops and say, "Pack in the crying, crackpot! Be glad you're not alone!"

13.

Sometimes, you do feel like crying. It's a shame, of course, that, without my sharp knife, I'm not needed by anyone. Heads to the left, guts to the right – that's what people want of me. That's what makes me interesting. Without my knife, I simply don't exist. I'm just one of these fish, destined to lose their heads. I can slit my belly open right now. Would you like that? The

knife will go through this apron easily.

I wonder what will happen when I die. Nothing very interesting. No one will even notice that I've gone. I will come crashing down dead onto the conveyor belt and make my farewell journey along it, my arms stretched out wide in the shape of a cross. And my blood will mingle with the blood of the fish.

It goes without saying that, notwithstanding all the religious beauty of this scene, it will be an irregularity. Humanity needs fish on the conveyor belt not me. Even the respectable fair-haired Christian woman, girded with seamless rectitude and purity, her mind full of lofty, spiritual thoughts who goes to church every Sunday without fail and every six months to the gynaecologist, even she wants fish more than another crucifixion: she has quite sufficient with the one that already exists.

The conveyor belt isn't supposed to stop for even a minute: eating fish is known to have gone on unabated for millions of years already, the aprons keep doing their job, and this process mustn't be interrupted just because, for reasons unknown, some crackpot at the start of the god-forsaken twentieth century got it into his head to slit open his own belly.

So I will be slung off the conveyor belt. I will lie amid the wet boots of those still standing at it, among the heads and guts, and I will become part of all that unwanted sludge. I wonder what the unwanted thing that used to be me will think about. It will probably ask itself: Richard, what sort of mistake was it then, your lousy life? Why were you even alive? Who needed you?

Your tears are required at this point. Do stop and have a little cry. Don't deceive yourself. Don't dismiss the truth that the same thing is happening to you right now. Why am I so sure? Why? Because I don't fancy lying in that sludge on my own – I want you to be lying there with me.

14.

You know, I've just reread the start of my posthumous scribbles and I want to ask – okay, it makes perfect sense as regards me – but how come you're here as well? Why on earth are you diving into this depressing delirium with its fish guts? Say to hell with the lot of it. There are enough nails, hair, and blood in life as it is – why do you need any more?

Dr. Zimmermann once told me that art's task is to witness to the beautiful. But in this instance you can see for yourselves that this guy has a problem with the beautiful. He has no problem with nails and hair, but as for the beautiful – oh dear. So, I advise you to switch your attention to something else before it's too late, to some sweet little fairy tale about good triumphing over evil, for example. Good always triumphs in fairy tales but it won't triumph here.

This plea is only for happy people. Those full of spite and despair, I ask them not to abandon me. I don't want to cry alone in the darkness and neither do you. Why should we if we can do it together?

Now when I have been a deceased old man for a hundred years, grown wise in the busy years of the life I lived, and then in the tranquil years of reflection in the cemetery, six feet under, I can confidently state that people are divided first of all into happy and not happy, and only secondarily into rich and poor, black and white, male and female, sick and well, young and old.

We, the not happy, can always find one another in a crowd but the happy ones don't see us. We don't exist for them. We can see everyone but happy people only see themselves. We will never understand them, nor they us. They really are better off sticking to their own happy company, reading one another their tales of good triumphant, and keeping us at arm's length.

Believe me, a creature who has already spent many years in the hereafter and has

therefore penetrated the murky depths of underground mysteries. Here is the great insight I have come to possess in those depths: the more evil is defeated in the fairy tales, the more there remains of it on earth.

Evil likes our fairy tales. It is delighted that everyone has the chance to experience the joy of victory without even picking up a sword. Evil likes the fact that it appears so defeatable in fairy tales. It is delighted that the heroes who challenge evil seem so bold, handsome, and robust. It is delighted that our minds are infected with belief in the inevitable triumph of the good and magical over all that is bad and real.

What need do we have of reality if we can live our entire lives amid the vapours of that magical brew? At the risk of dashing ahead, I am able to say that Dr. Zimmermann, for example, spent all the years granted to him perfectly well amid these magical vapours, thereby saving himself and his nearest and dearest from a great deal of unnecessary trouble but, at the same time, from the many years of a long life.

15.

The plant foreman was lucky today. I froze for a moment at the conveyor belt, after which I plunged my knife with all my strength into the pliant flesh of a passing fish. I pierced the conveyor belt as well. The knife sank into the belt almost up to the handle – what strength I turned out to have just then! The conveyor belt came to a halt. The plant's alarm went off. The staff started exchanging puzzled looks – as well they might: I had dared to leave them without the meaning of their lives for a few minutes.

A disgruntled male voice was heard,

“Who stopped the conveyor?”

It was the voice of the plant foreman. He was convinced that the conveyor coming to a halt was a bad thing. He simply didn't know it was a good one – after all because of it he

wouldn't be hustled cheerfully off to the morgue that evening. Instead he would be going home to his family on his own two feet.

16.

Leaving the processing plant, I took the quietest street possible – no hustle and bustle, no trams. The window sills were a riot of flowers, pleasant music was borne in from somewhere, and, at the table of a street cafe, two sweet old ladies were drinking coffee and feeding the birds. Not far away from them, an elegant man was presenting flowers to the woman who was meeting him for a date. Neither of the coffee-drinking old ladies interrupted the sweet, idyllic scene by choking on their coffee, for example, and as a result, say, dropping dead under the table. They might have kicked the bucket for some other reason, not the coffee. I'm not a dictator in these matters. I'm all for freedom.

Basically, I was going somewhere but not home. I work somewhere else as well and, although I'd been released from the processing plant early today, there was still no point taking a massive detour to be home for just forty minutes or so.

My route lay through the grounds of a hospital. The patients sat on benches, basking in the sun. One of them had vivid white bird poop running down his forehead and into his ear but the patient hadn't noticed: he'd died a few minutes earlier as he read his newspaper. Incidentally, no one had noticed as yet. What, am I the only person who can see death?

It's weird but I can see it everywhere even when it's taking a leisurely stroll among the living, peering in perfectly friendly fashion first at one person then another. It enables me to see the dead person in the living one in advance. And in myself too – sometimes I lie on my bed, examining my beautiful hands and feet and clearly and calmly imagine their inevitable future lifelessness.

When I do, the only thing that puzzles me is why if all that dies, I'll die too. Why am I

as vulnerable as my body? Why have we all of a sudden turned out to be linked unto death, my body and me?

A headline could be seen on the front page of the newspaper held by the dead patient sitting on the bench: “The Fuhrer gives an enthusiastic welcome to...” The large clear letters in peremptory black left no doubt that the Fuhrer’s enthusiasm was a boon to the whole of Germany.

I had no time to read what exactly had enthused the Fuhrer – the wind turned the page and then, after a moment’s thought, tore the newspaper from the dead man’s hands altogether, and carried it off somewhere aloft, into the sky, and then higher still. Why? So as to bring it down somewhere in town into the hands of those still languishing in ignorance about this oh-so-fucking significant piece of news?

I never could shake the habit of comparing myself to the Fuhrer. Why did his enthusiasm interest everyone? Why did the newspapers write about it? Why did even old men with poop on their foreheads get so carried away reading these newspapers, thrill to turn the pages, and pass them around with such excitement? Why wasn’t anybody bothered about my enthusiasm?

What did I have to do to make my feelings as important to everyone as the Fuhrer’s? How could I become the Fuhrer? How could I engineer things so that any half-dead crackpot, his forehead covered in shit, would, right up to his universally ignored final moment, be convulsively clutching the piece of paper he put so much store by in his dry little mitts, deeming it precious solely because some pompous baloney about my feelings had been written on it?

Up ahead loomed the old-fashioned and imposing red-brick building of the hospital – that’s where I was going. No one was waiting for me there either. Or rather, they were. If dead fish were waiting for me at the processing plant, then here it was a hundred dead people: I worked in the morgue.

I always had plenty of work. Those who rest in peace are in fact terribly restless: only at first sight do they seem quiet and peaceful. In reality, they adore freedom and chaos: they love to spread out through corridors and buildings, constantly turning up where they're not supposed to. They're like children at kindergarten – always disobedient, always on the go, refusing nap time and nothing on earth will get them to agree to lie down in neat rows.

Oh no, in the morgue, they're nothing like they are later at the cemetery. Here they have quick moving trolleys on castors, whereas at the cemetery they have nothing but a plot of land of a strictly regulated depth. There's no freedom there. All they seem to feel there is anguish. I think that somehow they have a presentiment of their gloomy future and that's why they seize the moment to have fun while they can.

For example, if a medical examiner sets about tearing open the belly of one of them, he never puts the product he used back – never puts it back where he got it. It's me that has to do it. If, in the unskilled hands of some dissecting-room student, one of the corpses should twist awkwardly onto its side or fall face down or even off the trolley, again it's me that picks it up. One morning one of the corpses was found sitting on the loo. How did he get there? Did he need the toilet? Did he manage to get there on his own in the middle of the night? What made him gather his last strength and issue an insolent challenge to death? Did he remember that he hadn't managed to finish something important in life without which the human soul can find no lasting peace? Did he decide to add to this world a little bit more of what he'd brought to it all his life in any case? Which reminds me, corpses really do come back to life sometimes. But not usually for that reason. Or maybe some jokers had had a bit of fun with him? Students, for example.

I'm not the only one who returns the corpse to where it's supposed to be. It's too much for me on my own. I have a partner – Gunther. Gunther is my private source of anguish, which deserves a paragraph of its own. It goes without saying that, if it were up to me, I would never

pick Gunther as a friend – my scummy life foisted him upon me.

Irrespective of what my eyes want to see, they always fix on Gunther. Few people arouse such a mixture of bitter hatred and contempt in me. An old, fat, half-formed thing, a great baby, utterly unfit for life, despite his venerable age. Always ludicrously dressed, constantly giving off a pungent, sick-making stench – for any reason or for no reason at all – from surprise, from outrage, from a wave of sympathy or antipathy, on the Fuhrer's birthday, or on the anniversary of the death of Klara Tsetkin – at any minute of any day of the week, there at your service was a fresh wave of this poison gas from the battlefields of World War I.

Of course, I understand that it's hard for such a fat sixty-year-old baby to have a wash – he won't fit in just any old shower and, what's more, his little tiny arms simply won't stretch to the distant reaches of his body to work up a lather, for example, somewhere over there. Incidentally, talking about working up a lather, I wonder how he jerks off. He certainly can't reach his own southern hemisphere. Or are there people who don't actually jerk off? Previously, he was washed and dressed by his mama. That's right, just imagine, this old man lived with his mama until she breathed her last. After her death, there was no one to wash the poor soul any more or to change his clothes. And, just so you know, she's already been dead for more than a year. So you can imagine how much filial grief that double-damned body has emitted over that time and what an ultra-aged brandy from the magical mix of his urine and sweat lifts my mood each morning on the days of the week that I go to work there.

I think I've now realized how to drive that Gunther out of my memory. I really don't want his stench to infiltrate the recollections adjacent to him in my head. I'll tell Dr. Zimmermann about him. I'm sure that will be enough – the doctor always knows what to do with any rubbish that's built up inside me.

Today, even before I put in an appearance in the dissecting room, I went straight to jerk off. Usually, I use the hospital toilet although it's a very narrow space: the door hits the sink when it's open. But I don't need much room. Gunther definitely wouldn't fit but that's not my problem.

I didn't really need to jerk off right then. I was just, you know, kind of nervous, overwrought, strangely agitated, and, of course, achingly despondent at the inevitability of four hours' pathetic interaction with that dimwitted amphibian by the name of Gunther: it all called for at least some sort of compensation there and then, some urgent, un-put-offable teleportation to another world, another dimension, where Gunther didn't and couldn't exist, and where a sweet, silent, magical death would take me for just a few moments to a land where all desires vanished, the restless flow of time came to a complete halt, and I would be united, if only for a moment, with the black silence of the universe.

I shut the battered door, tested the strength of the rusty hasp as I usually did, closed my eyes, and focused on communing with eternity. But at that point, somebody knocked on the door.

"Richard, is that you?" came Gunther's high-pitched squeaky voice.

I froze. There were ten minutes left to the start of the working day. How had this lousy amphibian turned up here? After all, he didn't even know I was in the hospital! Had he seen me from the window as I walked through the park? Perhaps that deceased old shit with the bird poop on his forehead had told him I was here? I looked, confused, at the door, trying to work out what to do about the impending teleportation – keep going or abandon hope.

Gunther stood on the other side of the door, breathing heavily. It's how he always breathes. Although I couldn't see him, I was sure that right then he would be wearing wide, faded trousers and striped braces over a checked shirt: without the braces, everything would

fall right off him. Oh, mama, mama, the touching little old lady that this hefty, sagging hulk came out of sixty years ago. The old lady who, throughout her final decades, willingly and devotedly sought to fill her sorry life with the only meaning available to her – tirelessly looking after her aged little tot. If you were alive, you would undoubtedly have washed him and changed his clothes this morning. And then no way would I have tried to guess what your poor, precious baby would be wearing for today’s public appearance.

“I know you’re in there,” Gunther said impatiently. “Do what you’ve got to do but get a move on. I need you. Faster!”

“No problem, faster works,” I said quietly and calmly resumed my interrupted teleportation.

Gunther’s loud, raspy breathing indicated that he was still standing outside the door.

“What are you up to in there?” he asked tactlessly.

“Guess!” I shouted spitefully.

“Come into the examination room...” Gunther said softly and left, his gait heavy and shambling.

The body of an old lady lay on a trolley in the hospital morgue’s vast examination room. Naked, the body dry and wrinkled, the hair long and grey. I never did find out what Gunther’s mother looked like – I wasn’t there the night they brought her in, and she was buried really quickly, that same morning. Perhaps she’d looked like this one. I was told that Gunther had sat on the floor that day, cowering in a corner and crying bitterly like a child. And he was sent home – just like me from the fish plant today.

I wonder whether I would have given the weeping Gunther a hug if I had been at work that day. What would have won out – sympathy for the poor soul or loathing of his body?

And there you have it, Gunther's Mama. First you smother your child with concern, take decisions on his behalf, limit his freedom, actively and vigorously prove to him with your every step that without you he's nothing, and it all helps you to achieve your goal – he can't cope without you. He's frightened to show his face outside your house, frightened of the world, frightened of life, and, to your gratification, you've lived together for decades.

He loves you and, at the same time, he hates you. He loves you because you keep looking after him – you keep taking decisions for him. And he hates you because you're his prison.

You love your little son as well: every day he saves you from loneliness. It was precisely being saved from loneliness that you were aiming for when you made growing up taboo. Yet you hate him for his lack of independence. For his fears. You refuse to accept that his fears are basically your own. His lack of independence is your lack of independence. You refuse to see yourself in him. You refuse to accept that you've raised a mirror image of yourself. You have made a living person into a shard of mirror. And now he is just as much a prison for you as you are for him: you don't even have the right to die any more. Because – how on earth will he manage without you?

And so, year after year, two prisons live together, each one acting to incarcerate the other. Each serves time in the other. Their bars have intertwined and are now so inseparable that it's impossible to know who's the prisoner and who's the jailer. They're used to it. They like their lack of freedom. It suits them both. But the time comes when one of the prisons dies.

The deceased prison is no longer subject to the fear of loneliness. It's dead, after all, and all its fears died with it. Consequently, the second prison is now free. But what does that mean – being free? It doesn't know how to do it. It's not used to it. It's scared. And it sits on the floor, cowering in a corner and crying bitterly, like a child whose mother has died.

Too bad I only gained this whole insight once Dr. Zimmermann had given me his view of life. And it only really took root much later – once I was dead. If I'd been capable of grasping it all earlier, I might have been able to help Gunther somehow and then he wouldn't have died so suddenly – few people do if they want to go on living. Gunther wanted anything but.

Now alive and lumpen, Gunther was standing beside the dry, grey-haired old woman and looking at me crossly. He already had his gloves on. I hastily crossed the room, putting my own on as I went.

“What're you staring at?” I snarled. “It won't be long before they wheel you in here as well.”

The two of us easily took the old woman by the arms and legs and moved her onto the table.

“It's not nice to make fun of the elderly,” Gunther said, put out. “I've sold myself to science.”

“Oh, sure,” I said, “No way it's for the money or to save on the cost of a funeral.”

“You're always spiteful,” said Gunther, wiping the sweat away. “Aren't you tired of living like that?”

Students in white coats had clustered around the table. In front of them stood a professor holding a scalpel. I was in the thick of the students and, since I was, I started straining to see to the front. A tall student's shoulder was in my way but I couldn't ask him to move – he'd paid to study, I hadn't.

Noticing that I wasn't leaving, Gunther hovered in the doorway.

“Let's go for a break. What's there to see?”

“Are you kidding? A naked old lady, that's the bee's knees,” I said.

Gunther went away, shaking his head in reproach. The tall student looked round and gazed at me with suppressed indignation. I dropped my eyes guiltily.

“So, what am I holding?” the professor asked loudly.

“A scalpel,” a student replied.

“No,” answered the professor although he was in fact holding a scalpel in his right hand.

“A quadriceps tendon,” I let slip quietly although in the silence everyone heard me. The student looked round again and stared at me in surprise.

“Right,” said the professor. “Who said that?”

I hunched over, edged towards the exit, and disappeared without a sound.

18.

I walked down the hospital corridor and my mood couldn't have been worse. If I'd had the money, I could have trained to be a doctor. I would have easily outstripped all those guys from good families. On the other hand, though, study might have bored me and then I'd have had to give it up. The money would have vanished in the process. See how good it is not to have any money? There's no room for mistakes. Like being in a coffin – there's no room there either and no one makes any mistakes.

I could hear the clatter of hooves behind me in the corridor. I looked round. I was being pursued by a tall, lanky mare of a woman, with horse's teeth yellowed by chain smoking and the merest hint of the squeaky leather S & M harness she wore beneath her white coat. It was Doctor Schoch.

“Richard, I've been looking for you everywhere,” the mare snorted in a human voice and my nose was assailed by a mixture of strong, mannish tobacco and sweaty harness.

“Let me guess why. You want to lock yourself in the storeroom with me,” I said.

I liked Frau Schoch. Her lack of sophistication, for example. And her deep, manly voice. But the main thing was that you could tell her risqué lads’ jokes. I only had to catch sight of her and they came tumbling out and I would feel light and cheery.

I can’t say whether she was a good doctor but the patients adored her. She was charismatic, strong, and self-confident. That was very important to the patients – they dreamed of placing themselves or a loved one into just such hands. They had nothing else to go by in any case. The patients were in awe of her – in her presence, they bowed and spoke in hushed tones. They would have been simply furious or have fainted away altogether if they’d seen the liberties I took talking to their solid-hoofed deity.

Come to think of it, I wouldn’t have taken any such liberties and would willingly have merged into the chorus of universal veneration had I not been drunk that long-ago day. That was the day she asked me, “So are you our new member of staff?” It was the first time I’d seen her. Trying to make her out through the misty blur that was veiling my eyes, I asked amicably and in genuine surprise, my tongue slightly thick, and without any connection whatsoever to her own question, “Listen, tell me straight, are you a woman, a man, or a horse?”

It was intolerable that some juvenile corpse-bearer should have the nerve to inquire as to which species the doctor standing before him belonged. The doctors were gods and a question like that could easily get you sacked. But she just burst out laughing and patted me roughly on the head. Feeling her hand in my hair, I suddenly felt a hot surge of spunky enthusiasm. I was thrilled and was about to do something about it: I’d even grabbed the horse by the hand. But, with a smile, she removed her hand from mine and things never went any further – my hand fell limply back into its alcoholic slumber.

Why did she stop me? Because I was a bit drunk? A mere nicety! Of course, she

couldn't not fancy me – I was hot, young, stunning, with great skin, muscles, and the disturbing leanness these knackered old nags always go for. So she couldn't not fancy me. It couldn't be that, it very much wasn't that – it was something that was simply and categorically ruled out straight away and subsequently – later on – it was ruled out immediately again, several times in a row.

Most probably, as a sensible woman, she simply didn't want that kind of thing at work. If we'd met in a cafe or a park somewhere or simply outside – then, of course, feel free.

Or maybe it was because of something I discovered much later on – she had a girlfriend: a nurse in the urology department. Astonishingly beautiful, delicate, divinely feminine. The union of this goddess and this horse was lovely, affectionate, touching. Their feelings were mutual. As became clear when they thought no one could see them.

Naturally, I didn't have the slightest chance of penetrating their zoophilic idyll. I couldn't offer them feeling or warmth or any kind of, even slightly, human relationship. All I had at the time was the hard wood of naked youthful enthusiasm, scintillating stupidity, schnapps on my breath, and a child's deep, untroubled sleep – a split second after a quick, earnest, and childish unpretentious orgasm.

Recalling all this today, I'm actually horrified at the thought that my first woman might have been this manly racehorse, all ligaments and tendons. I would have much preferred her delicate and mysterious urology goddess for my first experience. But I was too drunk to be so fussy that day. And the upshot of it all was that at the time I let slip about the quadriceps tendon and left the room containing the old woman's grey-haired body, there had not yet been any first woman in my life at all.

Generally speaking, when the Horse removed my hand, I felt sad and cold. Why did she turn me down? Why did she shut me out? What did it matter to her? It wouldn't have been

the usual grown-up fornication. Sure, I don't deny that I wanted to penetrate her flesh but not with the same depressing intention as the bewhiskered grown-up guys who try to sneak in there. For bewhiskered grown-up guys, it's such a tedious automatic routine that sometimes they don't even notice themselves that they're sneaking in somewhere. I wasn't like that. I was a child. And she was a grown woman. And that child was looking for his mother – he wanted to find a way back into the warmth and tenderness of his mother's womb. He was lonely and cold and incest promised warmth. Did she really not get that?

But perhaps any man when he's eager to penetrate a woman does it because he wants to return to a woman's womb? Not just those whose mothers have died recently?

My Mama never hugged me. Perhaps if she'd hugged me a bit more, there'd have been less schnapps in my life.

So tell me, Horse, why did you spurn a human sprat? Do you really not know that dogs raise kittens, cats raise puppies, and all kinds of creatures in the animal world raise the offspring of their worst enemies on occasion – solely because they are children?

I discovered that I am only the sort of person I want to be when I have a drink. Kind, easy-going, calm, all-forgiving. I let go of all the reins, all the oars, all the steering wheels so that everything goes trotting, floating, trundling along of its own accord, with a slight jingle-jangle or a soft rustle amid the misty morning silence... At moments like that I want to love everyone and to cry with happiness and an inexplicable rapture. Where do you find the talent to be like that all the time?

Life on our planet is based on water – rivers, seas, oceans, there's water everywhere and it's thought of as good fortune. But what kind of good fortune is it if water's our planet's biggest problem? It does nothing to fog the brain. It leaves it unclouded and people's unclouded brains go on to invent gunpowder, weapons, politics, and other means of killing one another.

Where's the good in that?

Based on the endless variety of the universe, some planet in a far-away cosmos is bound to have schnapps instead of water. And all its living organisms will be reliant on schnapps. How sweet, kind, and jolly must they all be? That's where I need to go. Earth's too sober for me – the people here are too sensible, too rational and driven. I find it hard being with them. They're all in such a hurry to be somewhere else. How am I meant not to turn to drink?

"It's worn a bit thin now, that joke," Frau Schoch replied to my suggestion that we lock ourselves in the storeroom. "A child's been brought in, four years old, run over by a cart."

"I'm not a doctor," I reminded her.

"We need blood. Only yours fits the bill."

"I'll do it if you pay me."

"The child's parents don't have any money."

"Kill him then and you won't need the blood."

Frau Schoch said nothing. Neither did I. She was shaking with rage and despair. I could see that she wanted to save the child so much that she was even prepared to hit me.

Of course, she knew that it was a living person in front of her, not a bottle of rare blood. She knew that it was my blood and that only I could decide what to do with it. But was what I had really of such great worth? Could I feel that I myself was of such great worth if I was currently standing there, facing the impatient gaze of this woman who had rejected me – now so angry, so emotional – knowing for certain that her only desire right then was that blood from the less worthy person in front of her should be transferred as quickly as possible into the more worthy person lying somewhere on the floor above, his life draining away drop by drop with each minute that passed?...

19.

I had never seen the child in question. Naturally, he had nothing to live for, like everyone around him. Myself included, of course. I understood that, by a twist of fate, his life was now specifically in my hands and I kind of didn't have the right to exploit that in order to dispatch a dying person forcibly to what would evidently be a much better place for him. But I didn't give a toss about rights and I stayed put.

The mean-spirited mare kept on looking at me. Her flanks were quivering. Air puffed from her nostrils. We should probably have been running down the corridor by now, but I wasn't planning on running anywhere. Something was really driving me nuts. Perhaps I just wanted to get back at that four-year-old child. Why was everyone fussing over him and no one fussing over me? Why did his life matter to everyone but mine didn't? Why the hell should my blood go to someone else? Why were people always pumping me for something? When will what's mine actually be for me? Why, when I'm travelling along the conveyor belt, dead, my arms stretched out wide, am I coldly tossed into the sludge of guts? Why does everyone love that little fuhrer and pull together to try and save him? What's his trick for so easily becoming the focus of excited crowds? What makes him better than me?... More worthy?... He can't even cut fish up properly!

None of these thoughts prevented me recognizing that I didn't want to lose the friendship of this yellow-toothed horse, and still less did I want to deprive that wretched brat of his life.

"Fine, let's go..." I said reluctantly and we tore down the hospital corridor.

A few seconds later and I was lying, eyes closed, on a bed in the blood transfusion ward. Nearby, Gudrun, an older nurse, was bustling about with a syringe. She was solid and

squat, with a thick neck and a red network of blood vessels on her pudgy cheeks. How come she had so much blood? Her patients leave pale and drained of blood, staggering, holding on to the walls, while she is always red, perky, and about to pop from hypertension. Is she secretly adding blood from the test-tubes to her schnapps?

“Great vein...” Gudrun muttered. “Not feeling dizzy?”

I didn’t answer. I know myself it’s a great vein – I slit it once, unsuccessfully, mind you – I didn’t die. And all because my vein was too good.

Brown blood started to fill up my test-tube. I wondered who it would go to – the injured child or the ravaging Gudrun. I watched the test-tube, perplexed – for some reason, I felt as if the blood wasn’t mine. But then, whose was it?

“Right, let’s have the young lady...” Gudrun said quietly.

Gudrun’s words caught my attention. What young lady? I looked round. A girl was lying on the next bed. Her pert breasts pointed up towards the ceiling. I wanted to leap onto her bed in a single jump, straight from the floor, and then look cheerily into her eyes. Naturally, the girl would find this terribly amusing. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, she would be happy – after all, I’ve already told you what a looker I am. But those tubes, through which the blood that was or wasn’t mine was currently flowing – they tethered me to the bed and ruled out any romantic possibility of being a speedy and joyful surprise.

Gudrun concentrated as she slid the needle into the girl’s vein. The girl shrieked and went pale. I burst into loud laughter. Gudrun put smelling salts under her nose. The girl took deeper breaths and looked askance at me. Her eyes glistened with tears.

“Why are you looking at me like that? Never seen anyone so gorgeous before?” she asked.

“I’ve seen better. I don’t have to look...” I turned away, stared at the ceiling, and shut

my eyes again.

“Do you work here?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said, keeping my eyes closed.

“Doing what?”

“At night, I go round killing off the seriously ill patients. The hospital needs the beds.”

“I’d come to see my grandma,” the girl replied as if nothing untoward had been said.

“She came to stay with us and ended up in hospital... I was giving blood for her and then they brought in this little boy. And my blood turned out to be a match. What’s your name?”

“Richard.”

“And I’m Aida.”

Gudrun removed the needles and quickly rubbed our arms with alcohol.

“You have a rare blood type,” she said to no one in particular. “If it suits that little boy, it means you could save each other should the occasion arise... So I recommend you stay in touch.”

I smirked. If old Gudrun was sticking her nose in where it wasn’t wanted and trying to set me up with this girl, it meant Gudrun wanted to sleep with me herself. Why is it that all the world’s ugly bitches butt into my life? Why is it that even the bloodthirsty vampire, Gudrun, who weighs around four of me and whose blood-sucked husbands have gone off, one by one, with other women, cannot accept that I’m single and is always trying to thrust someone on me, whether it’s the plain-as-a-pikestaff auxiliary from the South Corridor, or the mousy speccy-four-eyes from the hospital office? The little mouse has never even looked at me because she never takes her eyes off the floor. Wouldn’t Gudrun be better off sorting out her own single status and leaving mine well alone?

“Should the occasion arise, don’t bother about saving me,” I said, getting off the bed and leaving. In the mirror, I could see the bewildered Aida following me with her eyes. As I closed the door behind me, I hear Gudrun’s soft voice, say,

“Take no notice. He’s our very own nut case.”

20.

I left the hospital and set off along the street. My baggy clothes hung on me like a skeleton but I liked it: it allowed me to move freely – I even felt like jumping up and down. And I did. A bird with a brilliantly red head was sitting on the branch of a tree. It flew off, frightened when I jumped but, because I kept my eyes on it, I didn’t pay attention and bumped into a large policeman with a moustache. The policeman unceremoniously shoved me away. I sailed off to one side and at that point I realized what explained the rough shove – a quartet of sturdy, glum-looking workmen were straining as they carried a long iron pipe: if they dropped it, it would crush their legs. As a matter of fact, it could have hit me too but I’ll explain later on why their legs were of greater significance for humanity than I was.

About twenty minutes later, I said hello to the mean-tempered, snaggle-toothed woman on the ground floor who was our caretaker and went up to the third floor where I’d been renting a room since my mother died. It was a small room – the bed took up almost all the long wall, there was a wardrobe in the corner, a table by the window, and a narrow strip of empty floor besides. There was no room for a chair and so there was no chair.

“Hi, Ma,” I called, hanging my baggy jacket neatly on the end of the bed.

There was no reply.

I’d never liked that jacket but, for some reason, today was the first time I’d dared to think about it.

“You know, I do, of course, understand that you gave it me as a present... But it’s too big... And what’s more, you said it had hardly been worn but in actual fact it’s just rags.”

I cast a glance at a black and white photo on the table of a nervous, thin, beautiful woman – my Mama.

“I was embarrassed to tell you when you were still alive... but as soon as I have the money, I’m throwing it out. You don’t mind?”

The photo said nothing. I don’t understand our heavenly father. How can he create such beautiful women as my mother and at the same time women like the caretaker downstairs? They are incomparable. They’re simply from different planets. I think he should hold off from such extremes – either from one or from the other. Or else keep them apart on different planets. Why such inequality? Why such dangerous, mutually irritating proximity?

And here’s another question for our heavenly father: how is it possible to create such a beautiful woman and at the same time not make any financial provision for her? Without money, either the beautiful woman has to stop being beautiful or she will be forced to allow herself to be defiled. So what was the point of creating her? Was it just an exercise? It has occurred to me on umpteen occasions that all of us on earth are just someone’s student coursework. He handed it in, got the grade, threw it away, and forgot about it. And here we are floundering about.

In general, a suitcase of money ought to be available not only to the beautiful woman but to the snaggle-toothed caretaker too. The beautiful woman needs a suitcase of money to survive and stay beautiful. The caretaker needs it as compensation for what she’s been deprived of. Then she won’t be so mean-spirited and that will be easier for everyone else as well. The Jews, for example. The caretaker is in raptures all day long over the Fuhrer’s ideas and she makes sure that, on her territory, there is no physical contact between Jews and Germans. Even

though no one pays her extra for it. That's no accident, is it?

Everyone needs a suitcase of money. Each one of us. How can a person not be given money if they've been born into a world of money? I was born in Earth's atmosphere. There's air all around me. It's what I breathe, and I am built in such a way that it's specifically air that I breathe. But, if I'd been born on a planet that had mustard gas instead of air, I would have breathed mustard gas and, what's more, would have done it readily and freely and in great lungfuls, and I would have been content. I would have been obeying the realities of my planet and if someone had told me that mustard gas was poisonous and local bipeds on far-off planet Earth used it in vast quantities to poison one another, I simply wouldn't have believed it.

Living on Earth, I consider it right and fair that there is enough air for everyone, for me and for everyone else. I don't stand around thinking every time I want to breathe in, pondering how extravagant I'm being and what I will breathe tomorrow. I don't count the coins in my pocket with my thin, convulsive fingers over and over again but, of course, I could. I am extremely grateful to our heavenly father for the fact that there are no limits to the amount of air on our planet. The same goes for water. Each person drinks as much as they want. Why then if we need money as much as air and water, don't we have as much money as we want as well? When I was a little boy and talked to our one-legged neighbour about this, he told me that if everyone had money it would lose its value. I think that's rubbish – water and air haven't lost their value at all.

I attempted to see this problem through the Fuhrer's eyes and it struck me that if the caretaker had a suitcase of money, she would no longer be interested in fuhrers of any kind. She'd simply go off to some quiet manor-house, have her teeth straightened, become a respectable lady, and start to agonize over the meaning of life.

She would no longer trouble herself with the evil and energetic entrapment of Jews in

the stairwells. None of the Fuhrer's ideas would seem enchanting to her any more. Perhaps that's why everything's arranged so that no caretaker ever does find herself with a suitcase of money? After all, if every caretaker did have such a suitcase, who would listen to the Fuhrer, abide by his ideas, and build a greater Germany?

The problem still unsolved, I flopped onto the bed fully clothed. Mama had always forbidden me to flop onto the bed fully clothed. But Mama wasn't there. Her death had brought me grief and loneliness, but, at the same time, freedom. And a feeling of guilt for the pleasure I took in that freedom. Oh, and another, separate, additional feeling of guilt – for killing her.

The girl I met today when we were giving blood came into my mind. Why did I up and leave? I should have got to know her. No, I did right to leave: she'd fall for me and then I'd be stuck with her.

"I met this chick today..." I told Mama. "But she's not the one for me."

I looked at the clock. There was still a whole hour to go to our session and he only lived about ten minutes away. So I still had half an hour to read – about a young man I found interesting. Goethe's "The Sorrows of Young Werther". That book goes everywhere with me, in my head, even to the morgue and the fish processing plant. Now I took it off the bedside table and opened it at the bookmark.

21.

The sun was already getting lower in the sky as I walked along the street in my baggy jacket. The strident horn of a car sounded behind me. I jumped out of the way even though I was on the pavement. I can imagine how funny and ridiculous it looked. Those walking beside me maintained their gravity and continued their dignified progress. How do they manage not to react to shrill notes? Why the hell am I so full of nerves? Will I ever be as solemn and sensible

as everyone else? When on earth will I stop behaving like a red-headed bird?

An expensive open-topped car went past – it was the one that had honked the horn. In it sat boys and girls of my own age, laughing. One of the girls, a blonde, waved to me. What the fuck? Of course, I didn't respond. Why would I? She'd seen me stupidly jump out of the way. And she'd seen my stupid jacket. Surely everything about me was already clear to her?

I wonder what it's like, sitting in that sparkling car and casually chatting to that girl. The car turned the corner and was gone forever. And a good thing too, they can get lost. It's another life altogether there, in that car: it's not mine and I don't need it.

I went into the house and up the gloomy stairs to the top floor. I stopped outside a door. I couldn't bring myself to knock. It was scary, somehow. Turning round, I looked up and spotted a ladder to the attic and an open black trapdoor. Why is it always open? It sucks people in. It does. Best not to look at it.

The door opened unexpectedly. A woman stood in the doorway. She looked at me, unsmiling.

“Are you here to see Dr. Zimmermann? Come on in.”

I went in.

“Joachim, it's for you!” the woman called and disappeared.

A man appeared, aged around 50, with wet hands and a towel – it was Dr. Joachim Zimmermann: a person who, a couple of weeks earlier, had happened to interfere in someone else's business, thereby bursting into my life, and then, weirdly, reeling me in.

‘Why won't my legs do what I tell them?’ I thought. ‘And why are they trembling? And back there in the street, why did they so stupidly jump away from a shrill sound? Why the hell have they brought me here?’

“Richard? Excellent,” said Dr. Zimmermann. “You’ve made the right decision by coming. Come along. My office is over there.”

The armchair in his office was very uncomfortable: as soon as I realized I had shrunk into it, I lolled back – don’t let that quack feel he’s a great teacher without whom the younger generation doesn’t understand how to live.

DOCTOR ZIMMERMANN

22.

I don’t know what Richard will tell you about that session, if he tells you anything at all. I sat opposite him with my old, battered notebook on my lap. I usually write down thoughts that occur in connection with the patient’s story or some random utterance he makes. Generally speaking, patients do not make random utterances. That’s what the notebook is for: memory is not to be relied on. It isn’t impartial. Even if nothing is forgotten, it will definitely be distorted.

That day, of course, I could not yet know that soon that priceless old notebook would be lying on the granite pavement near my house, the wind would be leafing through its pages full of other people’s secrets, and then someone would pick it up, flick through it, hold up an expensive lighter, set light to it, and throw it away, and eventually it would turn to ashes on the wet stones of the empty pavement.

The objective value of an item that belongs to me is determined not by the subjective value I have bestowed upon it but by what a stranger’s lighter can do to it. Lately, there have been a lot of people around me holding lighters, and my reality is such that I am not able to protect my assets.

I sometimes think that I simply don’t know how to do it. This thought produces a feeling of despair and helplessness. My assets do not just include that notebook, but also my wife and

daughter. The problem is so unbearable that I want to run away from it. And I do run away – into this office. It has thick walls that separate me from the outside where people with lighters are walking around, and an armchair too. For the moment this young man is finding it uncomfortable – he can't stop squirming – but it's not the chair's fault – few people feel at ease during their first session.

We sit and we are silent. I don't look at him. I know that one shouldn't look too obviously at a patient during the first session. I will have time to look my fill in future. Meanwhile I'll fiddle with my notebook, flick through it, find a clean page. I will find that the nib of my pen is dry and I will dip it in ink, although of course it isn't dry at all and it has no need whatsoever of ink.

Perhaps it isn't just my patient who needs this pause – I do too. Perhaps I am as frightened of him as he is of me. And, while I fiddle with my pen, my notebook, and my ink, I simply want to persuade myself that everything here is familiar to me, which means I am safe.

I notice that the young man is furtively observing me. That's fine. He needs to get used to how I look, to notice how funny and awkward I am, to discover my weak spots, to justify the fact that looking down on me makes him feel better – let him form the impression that I am not a danger.

At some point, I infer that he no longer sees me as a danger because he has allowed himself to switch his attention from me to the surrounding space. His eyes glide over the wall and the windows and come to a stop on the portrait of a strait-laced old man with a beard. This is in fact Wilhelm Wundt but the young man doesn't know this, of course. Nor has he any need to know. The portrait should have been taken down long ago. Why is it that I can never find the time? Surely it's not that I'm still frightened?

I had hung the portrait back at the very start of my career. Even then I intuitively

understood that the patient is oppressed by all these bearded phizogs, diplomas, certificates, and attestations. The portraits' dogged academic gazes bore into him no matter where he looks. The luxuriant beards of these experts leave no doubt whatsoever as to their sagacity and learning and force the poor patient to shrink into the armchair and feel like a tiny mouse. The patient thought he was there for a confidential meeting with me, but, in fact, found himself facing the many members of a stern committee.

This suited me entirely at the start of my career: I felt confident and at ease – I gave the only solo performance and the patient was just an excuse for the flow of my own wise thoughts. Naturally, there could be no question of creative work by the patient himself in such a situation. Fortunately for my patients, after my initial successes, I very quickly felt more confident. Each new success saw a couple of portraits disappear. But Wundt, for some reason, stayed put.

23.

I continued to flick through the notebook but it soon ran out. I cast a glance at Richard. I noticed his wrists for the first time, slashed at some point in an attempt at suicide. Catching my eye, he pulled his sleeves down almost as far as his fingers.

"I've only come because you suggested it..." he said. "Well, and because I don't have to pay. In actual fact, it's all stupid. I haven't got anything to say. Everything's fine."

I had a momentary flashback to the ladder into my attic. I'd recently hauled this young man down it with considerable difficulty.

"So then," I said, "tell me in what way everything's fine."

Richard nodded. This suited him: good things are easy to talk about. They inspire other people, elicit their approval, and never put anyone out. It's so important, after all – to know how to please everyone.

“I like life,” Richard said. “I’m in good spirits; everything’s great...”

Richard looked at my notebook in alarm. He’d noticed me quickly writing something down.

“What, have we already started work?”

“If you don’t mind,” I said.

Richard said nothing. It was obvious that he wanted to say something but he was undecided.

“There was a woman,” he said eventually. “Is she your wife?”

“She is.”

“She wasn’t too welcoming,” Richard said. “Is she likely to be listening?”

“Where did you get that idea? They can’t hear anything.”

“They can,” Richard said. “I can even hear the neighbours talking.”

“She’s gone out,” I said, glancing at the clock. “There’s no one in the house.”

“If there’s no one here, why did you say they couldn’t hear?”

“Don’t you believe me? Come on.”

We went into the hall. It was dark. I crashed into something on the floor.

“Damn, who put that there?” I exclaimed

We went into the living room. I escorted Richard through the untidy space – clothes lay on the sofas and an armchair, there were newspapers on the floor.

“See? No one.”

Richard curiously considered the muddle that belonged to someone else. I took sly glances at him from time to time. He was bound to be experiencing the pleasant warmth of

moral superiority right now – over everyone who generated such chaos. That’s only guesswork on my part, however. You can’t see into someone’s heart. Untidiness can say a lot about its owner, whereas perfect order tells you nothing – it hides everything: naked surfaces reliably conceal their owner. Order is focused on the viewer: in creating order, I am primarily thinking: how does it look? Only after that do I think about how comfortable it is.

I led Richard into the bedroom.

“There’s no one here, either, see? They’re all out.”

Richard halted at the bedroom door. The bed hadn’t been made. There were clothes all over the floor.

“Wow, it’s a real mess in here...” he muttered.

“Does my untidiness embarrass you?” I asked.

“I think it should embarrass you not me.”

“It doesn’t embarrass me. I’m not perfect. You see those wardrobes? Everything is just stuffed in any old how. There’s a pile of dirty dishes in the kitchen... When I was thirteen, I wanted to kill myself because I couldn’t drum up the strength to stop masturbating.”

Richard looked taken aback. He was probably accustomed to concealment, to a world of faceless mannequins, but here he was, deluged by a sudden outpouring of unsolicited truth: firstly, my belongings had talked about me and now I had started doing so myself.

I might have been wrong but at that moment I thought that Richard being taken aback was also connected to a fear that if someone was open with him, he would be obliged to be open in return. He could probably not yet allow himself to be free of this obligation even though it was too much for him.

Now, when time has passed and my body has lain many years in the ground, I realize

that his being taken aback was in fact my unconscious goal. Why was it necessary? What did I hope to gain by manipulating this young man? Why was I hurrying things along rather than waiting calmly until he came to trust me naturally as time went by? Even now, I have no answer to these questions. It goes without saying that this situation could not possibly have been to Richard's liking.

"Why are you telling me all this?" he asked.

"We are not obliged to meet anyone's expectations," I said, continuing my attack without answering his question. "No one has any right to tell us what we should be like."

I didn't understand where I was going. I knew nothing about this young man – I didn't know, for example, whether he needed this sermon. Why had I gone careering ahead without even gathering enough information about him? What was this about? What possessed me to exploit my patients to solve my own problems? I couldn't answer my own question. At that moment, a scalding surge arose within me and its stubborn fury had me in its grip in spite of myself. It's easy to analyse myself now, of course. Death makes self-analysis much easier. After maintaining a pause, I left the bedroom, asking Richard to follow me.

A month after starting work with Richard, I received a letter from London in which the parents of a particular young man informed me that their son, with whom I had worked for two years, had jumped out of a third-floor window and died. They blamed me. Shocked by the boy's death, – I remembered him very well – I willingly accepted the blame. I sensed that I liked my feeling of guilt: it was as if I had been waiting for an excuse like this – it gave me an opportunity to attack, humiliate, and mock myself, to crush myself underfoot.

I was depressed for a few days. I suspended my practice for a while. When a recent incident brought Richard my way, I pounced upon the hapless young man in delight and, swayed by my feeling of guilt, I foisted free therapy on him. In that way, through Richard, I

could partially atone for my guilt. At the same time, Richard came into my care.

When I realized this, something else piqued my interest: why had I so willingly assumed the blame for the London incident? Why hadn't I told myself that in our two years of work the young man had seen me around ten times at most and, in the past year, since he moved to London, we hadn't done any work together at all? Why hadn't I told myself that his unfortunate parents, suffering from the loss of their only son, were fully entitled to take any opportunity to shift the blame from themselves and onto someone else?

I mention his parents' blame deliberately. I am convinced that in reality a person's suicide begins many years before he buys a rope or steps onto a window ledge. If the young man's parents had recognized this, they would thereby also have recognized that something or other must, presumably, have been down to them at the end of the day. They would have understood that they had failed to give their son life's greatest skill, required by the offspring of Earth's only rational species in order to survive – the instinct for self-preservation. Or, in other words, the habit of daily self-analysis. That said, parents cannot pass on to their child something they haven't received themselves.

Thoughts about this could have helped me free myself from my feeling of guilt over the death of this young man in London but, evidently, I didn't want to be free of it. In those days, I did not yet know that in order to avoid inadvertently transferring his own problems to a patient, a psychoanalyst should himself be in therapy with one of his colleagues. Nowadays, those psychoanalysts who are not yet buried in the ground but continue to work with patients above it are probably familiar with this and it has become a common standard, but that's something I can no longer see.

On several occasions when I was still alive, I did go to see my friend, the psychoanalyst Manfred Burbach – I could trust him and he and I discussed my problems. These meetings weren't regular though. During one of them, he practically forced me to down a huge glass of

red wine – just like the one he once forced on me outside when he and I were standing in the rain. You’ll soon find out about that – I’ll introduce you to Manfred. He never managed a day without red wine and had a secret love of violence.

Having stood for a while taken aback at my untidiness and my revelations about my youth, Richard came out of the bedroom and followed me. We went into the hall and back into my office, leaving the bedroom empty. Not quite, however: under the bed, holding her breath, lay a woman, the one who not long before had opened the door to Richard. It was my wife, Rachel. Satisfied that all was quiet, she crept out from under the bed, brushed off the dust, and looked at the space around her in bewilderment. She walked noiselessly over to the wardrobe and opened it. The shelves were immaculately tidy.

“So then, what’s stuffed in here any old how? You just show me!” she said indignantly but her indignation did not end there.

24.

“My underwear was scattered around for all to see...” Rachel said as we lay in bed that evening.

I was engrossed in my book at that point so that her outpouring of grievances did nothing but make me cross.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Could you not disturb me just now?”

“And the time before ... in front of a woman who was a complete stranger...”

I realized I would have to put my book down.

“You’re talking as if I stripped off in front of her.”

“No, you didn’t do that but you did say you regretted marrying me.”

“You mustn’t keep going over it. I’ve said I’m sorry. I’ve already explained that that’s

how I work. Can we give it a rest?"

"You know when you told some woman patient that you never wanted us to have a baby..."

"I didn't know our daughter heard. I've already explained to her that she was very much wanted. Theatralization is part of the therapy I do."

"But why? Why do you lie to your patients?"

"To gain their trust."

"With lies?"

"Among other things. They'll never know."

"Did Freud approve of that?"

Lord God in heaven, I love my wife very much, but where does she get these questions from? Why do I have to check with Freud every time I pick my nose?

"I didn't ask his advice. Why must I seek Freud's approval of everything?" I asked.

"I think Freud would pass out," Rachel said.

"Pass out? Then he can take smelling salts. It's nothing to do with Freud. He never thought I was a good pupil. He'd find it hard to come to terms with the fact that the pupil has outdone the master."

"Maybe you should have been an actor rather than a psychoanalyst?" Rachel suggested, and meant it. "You would have been appearing in some cabaret or music hall by now..."

I imagined myself in a bowler hat, with a cane, in striped trousers, tripping the light fantastic on a cabaret stage. I was outraged by the sight.

"I am not a comedian," I said. "You're demeaning me. My mission is to help people."

“I still hope you get involved in some other method and this nightmare will be over...”

Rachel said.

RICHARD

25.

Leaning over the gas burner, Gudrun, insatiable for other people’s blood, was boiling her syringes in a steel pan. I saw her once when she was having a hypertensive crisis. She was sitting on a chair with doctors hovering around her and black leeches fastened to her arms and neck – they were sucking her blood. Gudrun was moaning, softly and lasciviously, her face was flushed red.

I wonder about Gudrun’s logic. What’s the point of her sucking her patients’ blood only for the blood to go to the leeches?

The syringes continued their foot-tapping number in the boiling water. The blood transfusion unit was full of steam – the air was damp and I was struggling to breathe.

“I’ve already told you – I’m not telling you anything,” the bloodsucker snarled, without taking her eyes off the boiling water.

“But why?” I exclaimed angrily. “I’m head over heels! I just need the address! Bear in mind, you’re breaking up a future family!”

“And thank god for that!” said Gudrun. “You mustn’t marry anyone. You’d make any woman unhappy. You’re spiteful. That’s why you’re not getting her address.”

“I’ll find out anyway,” I said with a smirk and off I went.

That girl was inexplicably stuck in my head, disturbing, irritating, and tormenting me and I didn’t understand what the hell was going on.

Later, mulling this over with that so-called doctor, I realized something. Or, to be

precise, it wasn't me that realized it at all – it was the doctor's version; he managed to impose it on me because nothing better had entered my head at that point.

As I realized later on, that version was to his advantage in his personal situation, which I knew nothing about at the time. Dr. Zimmermann wasn't interested in my accepting the simple, natural, and most tempting version – that this girl was simply fabulous and her pert breasts had simply pierced my heart.

Instead, he suggested his own complicated and laboured version, linked to the fact that at that moment the girl had been saving a child. Since I was also saving the child at the same time, I already had some image of the little boy in my head.

To the doctor's mind, somewhere in the dark and mysterious depths of my soul, that image of the little boy-victim who needed help had fused with my image of myself – also a victim who needed help.

In other words, it turned out that I was the child in need of saving. So that meant the girl was now saving me, roughly in the way that a mother usually saves her child.

And all this at the very moment when I myself had so recently been left without my Mama and was now feeling lonely and as if I'd been run over by a cart.

An added convenience of this fusion of mine and the little boy's images was that my blood was at that very moment flowing into him and if we had fused into a single whole then basically my blood wasn't flowing out of me and I had no need to be sorry about it.

For Dr. Zimmermann this was a very convenient version because, in this picture, the girl's pert breasts and her sweet face were kind of extras and not at all important.

And that in turn, to the doctor's delight, meant that any other woman could replace Aida in this set up. Gudrun and her fangs, for instance. It turned out that all that was required of Gudrun for me to go crazy about her was to save some random little boy in my presence, with

whom I identified.

Did the doctor really seriously believe that if Gudrun was to save some little kid, I'd fall in love with her the way I had with Aida? Could he really be hoping that his stupid mental constructs would be able to put me off Aida?

Or perhaps that wasn't what he was trying to do at all? Perhaps he simply liked it when his hungry, reckless, and not over-responsible mind received at least some sort of sustenance?

Probably, hunger meant he was ready to gnaw even on stones. If he was told that some sort of rock from space had fallen to Earth yesterday, he would come up that very second with a whole theory to the effect that in no way was it gravity that drew the rock earthward but the fact that the poor thing had been flying around all alone in the cold of outer space, utterly unwanted, with no one to give it any affection, and then bang! – there before him is a warm and loving planet, with exciting pert mountain peaks that he wants to leap onto in a single jump.

Rapidly realizing that this planet could be a substitute for his Mama, the cosmic pebble will hurtle towards it and physicists, astronomers, and other fools familiar with the word "gravity" might as well relax with a coffee.

True, when the pebble crashes to the ground, it will completely flatten that psychoanalyst, leaving a wet patch behind, and then there will be no one left to tell people stories about the craving for a mother's warmth and love.

Meanwhile, the astronomers and physicists will finish their coffee, pick up their brooms, wash away the wet patch left by the psychoanalyst and nothing will prevent them any longer from once again explaining world events in terms of science and the universally accepted theory of gravity rather than stupid flights of fancy about the longing for warmth, love, and affection.

26.

So, Gudrun did not intend to give me the girl's oh-so-important address while I, naturally, did not intend to leave my fate in the hands of that bloodthirsty idiot. I decided to write a letter to the Fuhrer about her.

If she was a fan of unnatural lust involving black leeches, then it was clearly forbidden miscegenation between Aryan flesh and parasites on the German nation.

The Fuhrer would definitely not approve – the Gestapo would arrest her, cart her off to a cellar, and send the leeches to a concentration camp and I would then go through her bloody card index unimpeded to find the address of my incomparable Aida – a pure and innocent German girl, whose Aryan blood the wily national traitor Gudrun had been sucking in order to sate her black, non-Aryan, friends.

At the same time, I understood that it might take some time for the Fuhrer to plan a military operation, bring troops to our hospital, and organize a night of the long scalpels in it, to arrest Gudrun, capture the leeches as they slithered away, and seize all the others in the hospital who were leeching the blood of the German nation. After all, there were enemies everywhere and our hospital might have to wait a long time for its turn.

I needed Aida's address straight away, however. My emotional and mental state demanded that I should be clasping a piece of paper with the address on in the very next second and that in the second after that I should be charging off to that address.

And so I decided to act independently. I went to the first floor – to the wards that I could see contained old ladies – and not just any old ladies but only those brought together by that dangerous set of diagnoses which calls for urgent care from their pert-breasted granddaughters.

A minute after my rapid flight up the stairs, I was standing beside Erika – a young and pretty nurse with a slim waist, full breasts, and long, straight fair hair. She was fussing over a

naked old man on a bed.

Any man seeing Erika for the first time would instantly remember my line of argument about the suitcase of money. He would be unable to understand how such a girl could be working as an ordinary nurse. After all, it was utterly clear that her true place was, constantly and in return for vast sums of money, to depict the true Aryan woman in patriotic magazines and news reels.

Perhaps she simply doesn't know her true worth? Can it really be the case that so far not a single fine Aryan lad has turned up who would explain it to her? Can it really be the case that the heavens have entrusted this lofty mission solely to me? Can it really be the case that only I am able to return Erika to her one legitimate owner – a Greater Germany?

“Erika,” I could say to her, “how can you have any kind of work? You should be reclining, ensconced, and rise in majesty: you should be on a pedestal, definitely naked, grey marble fabric cascading down from your hip, and surrounded by a gloomy crowd of great painters and their easels, all jostling you at the same time.”

Where are they, these painters? What are they painting right now? A jug? An apple? A dead chicken?

“Is this a joke?” Erika asked me with a smile. “There are lots of old ladies here. And they're all visited by their granddaughters. And, incidentally, these granddaughters' visits have nothing to do with their grandmothers' diagnoses.”

Erika's last sentence led me to assume that she was none too bright. After all, I was joking when I mentioned the diagnoses. But being none too bright didn't go with such beauty and so I decided that Erika was joking as well. Or that it had been a hard day and she was simply too tired to think.

“You might as well help me since you're here,” she said.

Together we helped the naked old man to get off the bed and settle himself on the commode. Erika handled the old man's body far more skilfully than I did and I even noticed, from the expression on her face, that my clumsiness annoyed her.

But it wasn't my fault. I'd like to see Erika helping me in the morgue: that's where we'd find out which of us was the more skilful. Erika would realize straight away that corpses are extremely cold, rigid, and stuck-up patients. Corpses have more character and stubbornness – they are unyielding, they never help, they're a canny lot, and there's no negotiating with them.

This old man wasn't a corpse yet. His skin was warm and dry but his body was yielding. I watched him and, from nowhere, a stupid thought occurred to me: and what if he was my grandad? Maybe I should ask him? I didn't know any of my grandfathers or grandmothers. My mother had lived entirely alone and never mentioned her parents – as if she'd never had any.

But my grandfathers and grandmothers were somewhere, after all, and what's more, at this very moment. Unless they were dead. Grandpa, for example, might be sitting at a table somewhere just now, eating fish – the very one his grandson had gutted. Why hadn't I had the gumption to use a knife to scratch on the side of a big fish: "Hi, there, Grandpa. It's your grandson. How are you?" How surprised he would have been!

The old man continued to sit on the commode and at that moment further evidence that he wasn't a corpse burst upon the world from the pot – the loud noise of bowels emptying. I didn't like it. I turned away. Of course, he wasn't my grandfather: mine didn't make noises like that.

"Sorry..." the old man muttered, covering his eyes.

"Don't you apologize, my lovely," Erika said. "You and I have been waiting for that for a whole three days. Those sounds are as good as a Mozart concerto to me!"

We helped the old man up off the pot. Erika washed his backside. We put him back into

bed. The old man gave me a suspicious sidelong look. No, this wasn't my grandpa. Would mine really have looked at his grandson with such disapproval?

"I haven't seen this lad before..." The old man rasped with distaste.

Erika said nothing. She was busy changing a pillowcase.

"I work here in the morgue," I said, introducing myself.

"But what are you doing on my ward?"

"I've come to get to know you in advance."

"Don't be frightened, Martin," said Erika, looking at me reproachfully. "You got that shit out so it's not time for the morgue yet."

The old man gratefully squeezed the nurse's hand.

"She was giving blood for her grandmother," I told Erika. "She has a rare blood group. Like me."

"Nothing like that happened on my shift," Erika said. "Come back on the next shift."

I suggested we took a look at the blood donor card index.

"If you don't leave right now, I'll chase you out with the mop," Erika warned.

"If you marry a wealthy man, you won't have to work," I said. "And then you won't be so mean."

With that, I took my leave. The old man malevolently watched me go. Generally speaking, he looked unhappy. He didn't want Erika to marry a wealthy man – it would be a disaster for him if he lost her.

Naturally, the old man himself was aware that this was no place for Erika. It was somewhere for people like Gudrun to work. Or Doctor Horse. Or my caretaker. But if Erika

went, there would be no charm left. The place would be empty. And then the old man wouldn't find the strength to expel from his body everything that had built up in it over three days and which, God damn it, the world had long deserved.

The old man would die as a result and no one would even notice. I began to feel sorry for the old man. To the point of tears. But what can you do? He had it coming. Kick the bucket, old man. Women like Erika aren't for you.

DOCTOR ZIMMERMANN

27.

He was sitting, facing me, in the patient's armchair and no longer seemed to find it uncomfortable. A moment before, I had explained his pity for the old man he had met on the ward. I suggested that Richard had seen himself in him. Still alive and warm but already wizened and weighing little – in other words, suspended somewhere between life and death. Vulnerable and helpless like a child. In need of warmth and protection. Lost, spiteful, lonely. These are the adjectives Richard gave when I asked him to describe the old man for me.

It's very significant that the old man was a patient, i.e. dependent on someone's care. Maternal care, I'd say. Once I'd described that care as maternal, I stopped talking. The silence went on and on. Tears appeared in Richard's eyes but only for a moment – he pulled himself together and asked me to continue. I should have had him sit with that emotion at that point but I couldn't. For some reason, I myself felt like escaping the moment as quickly as possible.

A little while ago, I talked to Richard about his need for maternal warmth – I think in connection with his story about a girl he'd met at the hospital – she was saving a child and, in my version, Richard had seen himself in the child as well.

It's a shame that Richard made fun of my version that day, responding by relating some

stupid tale about a cosmic pebble he'd invented. Then again, it isn't a shame at all – it doesn't matter what caustic remarks Richard makes to me, because all that matters is what he feels.

And he has no way of getting away from the cosmic pebble's feelings – he's the cosmic pebble and we both know it. He can attempt to protect himself from these feelings as much as he likes, by making fun of me, for example. But he needs that pain and I already know that I will lead him to it, regardless of all his attempts to avoid it or to pretend that it doesn't exist.

For some reason, Richard has chosen to work in a hospital – an institution where someone is constantly taking care of someone else. The kind of place which exists for the purpose of taking care of people is a place where maternal warmth roams the corridors. It's no accident that many people who are in themselves prepared to provide that warmth have gone to work there rather than anywhere else. But that warmth isn't for everyone. It's for the patients. And Richard isn't a patient. Why did he go to work there? Is he capable of providing that warmth? Does he want to? Or is his aim to receive it? Is he hoping a little of the maternal warmth intended for the patients will spill over onto him too?

On the day that Richard gave blood, someone had been taking care of a child who had been run over by a cart. And today someone had been taking care of the old man. This time the source of maternal warmth was a nurse called Erika. Erika had infused the atmosphere of our planet with her portion of warmth. But are Erika's efforts sufficient to heat our planet with maternal warmth? Scorching heat and the droughts it causes make vast areas of the earth's surface uninhabitable. But if climatologists could measure how these areas are faring in terms of maternal warmth, we'd find ourselves in a cruel ice age. Why is there so little of this warmth? Why must Richard struggle so desperately for his share?

If I have understood the situation correctly, Nurse Erika, whom Richard mentioned, made no reference to being discontented with her life. She didn't say she wanted to change

everything, give up her job, and marry well. On the contrary, she seemed cheerful during the time he saw her in the hospital. Without a shadow of a doubt, she loved her patients – she enthusiastically wiped their bottoms, all the while singing them cheery little ditties. Everything implied that she was entirely happy with her work and her life.

But if that's the case, then why does Richard want so much to see Erika as unhappy? Why does he so like worrying about the fact that she might disappear at any moment?

I have never seen this Erika, of course, but in the real world millions of divinely beautiful women spend years, decades, cleaning hospital toilets, labouring from morning to evening in noisy factories and busy offices, and, at the same time, consider their lives to be a complete success.

I decided that Richard's fantasies about Erika's unpredictable disappearance might be linked to his mother's recent and sudden disappearance. Instead of experiencing his own grief, Richard found it easier to experience someone else's – for example, the old man's potential feelings if, all of a sudden, he were no longer to have Erika.

Richard is convinced that, in the event of Erika's disappearance, the old man would be distressed. But there is absolutely nothing to confirm it! Richard, for some reason, will not admit the thought that the old man might not give a damn about Erika and if, for example, Gudrun were to turn up in the ward one morning instead of Erika, the old man would love Gudrun just the same.

If the old man depends on Erika, he loves Erika. If the old man depends on Gudrun, he loves Gudrun. I am entirely prepared to make this assumption. Even on the occasion during a night shift that Gudrun sinks her teeth into the old man's neck and starts imbibing his blood, the old man will look into her eyes and ask if it tastes nice.

Ultimately, a great many of my fellow citizens loved Bismarck to death and considered

him a genius, but once Hitler appeared they became just as passionately enamoured of him and he too suddenly became a genius to them. Whoever is a danger today is a genius. Whoever's sunk their teeth into my neck and is drinking my blood must think it tastes nice.

I fully accept that Erika and Gudrun are easily and rapidly interchangeable in the old man's affections. For some reason, however, it is important to Richard to remain convinced that Erika is a unique source of light for the old man and even his reason for living. Where does this conviction come from given the complete lack of information? I'll jot down for myself in my notebook that Richard paints the old man's relationship to his nurse in the colours of his own relationship to his late mother.

It follows, from the fact that it is easier for Richard to experience the old man's grief and loneliness than his own, that when Richard mentally says to the old man: "Women like Erika aren't for you", he is telling himself: "Richard, your Mama isn't for you."

This is how Richard attempts to legitimize his grief. He hopes that if he explains its pattern to himself, it will be easier to live through. Sadly, grief couldn't give a damn about patterns.

I don't think the recent drama of his mother's loss would have wounded this nineteen-year-old so deeply had his previous history not entailed earlier episodes – not yet known to me – of his mother going away and abandoning him. I mustn't forget to ask him.

When Richard says, "He had it coming. Kick the bucket, old man," he is saying those words to himself. And that's sad: Richard's too young to die.

I'll jot down another observation: Richard likes the image of an Erika who is striving with all her might to take flight from her wistful daily routine at the hospital. That the image bears no resemblance to reality whatsoever doesn't bother Richard in the slightest. This fantasy speaks to the fact that Richard himself wants to take flight. But what from, where to, and why?

I wonder how things stand with me. Why is this desire of Richard's so familiar to me? Do I see myself in Richard? Do I also want to take flight? What from, where to, and why? Perhaps I ought to stop this therapy with Richard? Is it really permissible for thoughts about a patient to be forever turning into thoughts about myself?

In his lifetime to date, Richard has not yet seen any specific ways of taking flight. All his thoughts have turned upon just one method – following his mother into death. He and I have not yet broached that subject but it seems to be the only recipe for changing life for the better that Richard's loving mama bequeathed her son.

Neither of my own parents killed themselves. Although my father's way of life was, you might say, suicidal. How am I to separate Richard's therapy from my own? In analysing him, I constantly find that I'm analysing myself. This young man hasn't the faintest idea how much I need him. It's terrible to be using him blind like this, but I can't help it. How am I to maintain the distance between us? How am I to stop being human?

Richard's loving mother sent him up to my attic to solve his problems. She hanged herself in her own room while Richard chose someone else's space. What does that say? It says that he doesn't consider a single room on this planet to be his own. Incidentally, as I understand from what he says, he doesn't consider even the planet to be his own. Where on the planet are you going to find a room of your own if the planet as a whole is alien to you?

The day that he went up to my attic, I wouldn't let him do it. No doubt, to the displeasure of the loving mother watching us at that moment from the heavens and delighted that her son had assimilated his mother's values so well. I won't let him do it in future, either, just so you know, Loving Mama.

When I think about this, my own mother comes to mind. How is she connected to Richard's mother? Why is it all so muddled up? I need to give this therapy up. But how can I,

if not a single idiot would agree to work with him for free and I'm the only one who can help this young man see the alternatives – the ones where there will be no sign of that black, dusty attic? The very alternatives that his mother was unable to show him.

There's a good reason she couldn't show them to him – you can't show what you can't see yourself. It's a pity she didn't come to me. There are so many desperate people wandering the world. I'd love to have a magic wand so that I could arrive in advance at the locations of impending suicides. I'd love to have the chance to start up a conversation. A little chat then leave. They can do what they want after that.

His mother can't be helped any more. She is no longer with us. She's seeing a different psychoanalyst now. I wonder how he works with her over there? Does he teach her how she should have lived? Does he send her back to our world in the form of a new born baby with little understanding? Both options are pointless. If I were her new psychoanalyst, I wouldn't waste my breath – I'd just hug her.

If my life was imagined as a book, it would probably be one about how I saved Richard's life. If I could see into the future, I would be surprised at how strangely everything became entangled there: I saved him and he tried to save my daughter as well as many, many other people. He tried to save me too. It just didn't work out.

28.

Today, he brought along a picture of his mother – I held it in my hands. I had no choice, basically. Richard was looking at me and, beneath his gaze, I had to examine this run-of-the-mill portrait with due attention and interest.

I even asked for a couple of clarifications, said how beautiful the woman was, and then looked at the picture again in silence. After a while I decided that that was sufficient and I set

the picture aside. At the end of the day, I'm planning to work not with the portrait but with the image of a mother that lives in Richard's mind. These are two completely different images: his Mama is perfectly sweet in her photograph but it's not the photo that's running Richard's life, all unbeknownst to him.

Richard is terrified of touching the mother image that inhabits his mind. This is most probably why he brought the portrait with him – in the hope that I would be distracted by it and back away from what it would be better not to touch. Alas, that gambit's not going to work.

"You stopped at the point where you said you don't feel anything for her," I reminded him.

"Absolutely nothing," Richard said. "As if she was never there. I think... It's as if she's still alive. And, at any moment, she could cause a scene."

"Did you often quarrel?" I asked.

"She always found some nonsense. She was always driving me mad."

"How?"

"I don't know. With her dishonesty. Her cluelessness. Her inability to sort out her life... I always wanted to run away from her. I just never had the money. Her dying solved all the problems. I rented a nice little room and now I'm my own boss."

His need for his mother, along with his grief at her loss, did not at all fit with the ease with which he criticised her. I assumed he was simply belittling his loss – so that it was easier to survive. Later, it turned out that he had another reason to belittle his mother. He was attempting to free himself from a feeling of guilt for her death.

"You said she killed herself after some kind of conversation with you," I said.

"Yes, there was a conversation," Richard recalled reluctantly. "But it's not connected."

I had nothing to do with it. And I'm not sorry. I told her something it was high time she heard."

I silently wrote down his remarks in my notebook. And when I had written all I wanted, I simply sat and held the silence. Richard didn't understand my silence. Attempts to interpret it forced him to dredge up his most recent remarks and this patently disturbed him.

"A guilty feeling?" he asked. "If that's what you mean then no, I haven't, not at all."

I remained silent.

"Why don't you say something?" Richard asked nervously. "I've told you – I don't feel guilty at all!"

I sensed that an important moment was approaching – the patient was agitated. He was defending himself from accusations known only to himself. Clearly, certain feelings would now arise, which he had long kept hidden from himself, and I would find out about the unseen but lethal battle being fought between particular parts of his personality. But my daughter ruined everything.

29.

First there was some kind of noise. Then the door was flung open with a bang and Aida flew into the office in a great state. At that point, I was not yet aware that my daughter was the same girl that Richard had mentioned in passing in a convoluted account of some tale of giving blood at the hospital.

"Pa, what should we do if the fireplace is giving off smoke?" Aida asked, all of a flutter.

"I'm working and you're interrupting me," I said.

Aida started coughing. Behind her were clouds of white smoke. Richard was looking at Aida in shock.

“Is this your daughter?” he asked softly.

Aida cast a glance at Richard.

“Hello,” she said, the smoke immediately forgotten,

Rachel told me later that when she and Aida were still in the kitchen, Aida had mentioned that she thought she knew the young man who was sitting in Papa’s office. Aida had wanted to take a look at him and so had decided cautiously to open the office door just a touch so that she could peer through the crack. Rachel had asked her not to, and reminded her that looking into the office during a session with a patient wasn’t allowed. Aida was forced to agree but she was upset about it. Rachel suggested that Aida wait until the end of the session and looked at the young man as he left. Aida said that wasn’t possible because she wouldn’t be there when the session finished – she had a music lesson at three o’clock and she still had to leave time to get to the teacher’s house.

Rachel didn’t understand her daughter’s impatience – today was most likely not going to be the last time the patient was there – Aida would definitely see him again. Or she could, for example, ask her father about the patient later on when she came back from her music lesson.

For some reason, however, none of Rachel’s arguments satisfied Aida. She was practically crying, she was so frustrated. Fortunately, a few minutes’ later and a horrid, acrid smoke suddenly filled the whole house and there was nothing for it but for Aida to burst, screaming into her father’s office where she finally saw the patient who interested her.

Subsequently, when it emerged that the problem was that the damper in the chimney breast had fallen shut, I asked myself why it had never done so before.

“Hello...” Richard answered quietly when he saw Aida.

They looked at one another in silence.”

“Douse the fireplace,” I said, breaking the silence.

I was keen to continue the session: it had broken off at a vital moment – it was still possible to restore the patient’s now extinguished emotion and I wanted Aida out of there as quickly as possible.

“But if we do that, the fire will go out!” Aida exclaimed, puzzled.

Damn it all! Was I really going to have to deal with that wretched fireplace right now instead of my patient? Why had they lit the fire today at all? If it’s cold outside and there’s a problem with the fire, then you sit in the cold!

“Something’s wrong with the chimney,” Richard said softly and confidently. “The damper’s probably fallen. I’ve had that happen to me. I’ll help.”

Richard swiftly stood up from the armchair and, before I had time to realize what was happening, he and Aida had left the office.

I was on my own. For a little while, I sat in the armchair and kept looking at the clock. Richard didn’t come back. I picked up his mother’s photo and began to examine it closely. I saw the scratch to one side. I examined the frame. Then the back. I put it down again. What a ridiculous situation... How had it come about that a patient had broken off the session and left my office without my permission? What was he doing now? Was I supposed to go out or stay here and wait for him? If I did go, would it seem as if I was chasing him?

I imagined going into the living room and Richard, seeing me, dashing away into the corridor, the kitchen, locking himself in the bathroom, but no way was that going to work! I was chasing him, holding back my righteous indignation, banging on the bathroom door, and saying sternly – quietly but persuasively: “Richard, this is the only door. All roads are closed. There’s no way out. You will have to continue the therapy.”

Why the hell had I foisted therapy on him and free of charge at that? What other attitude

could I expect of a patient if the therapy was free and forced upon him? No, I couldn't sit and wait any longer. I had to leave the office, grimly and determinedly. I had to do it right away. No, in no way was I chasing him – I was simply worried about the possibility of a fire in my house.

30.

There was no longer any smoke in the living room. The window was open. Richard and Aida were sitting on the carpet in front of the fireplace. Aida, laughing, was showing Richard the slender vein in her wrist. He said nothing. She looked at him inquiringly.

“The superficial branch of the radial nerve,” Richard fired off without hesitation.

“How do you know all this?” Aida asked in amazement. “Are you studying to be a doctor?”

Richard laughed. It was the first time I had seen him laugh, the first time I had seen him smile. They were having a lovely time here without me. He had absolutely no need of me and my stupid therapy.

My head was in a complete whirl. Why was I wasting my efforts? Perhaps I should simply sit all my other patients on the carpet in front of the fireplace and arrange for them to socialize with Aida? If she had such a salutary impact, I could reach agreement with her to come rushing in every time, shouting about a fire?

Half the money for the therapy would go to her and half to the family. I would turn the office into a greenhouse and in the winter I would burn the bearded Wundts and all the diplomas, along with their frames, in the fireplace – the house would be warmer for a little while at least.

Lord, is all this irritation of mine, which I am so spectacularly failing to conceal from myself, really the result of me being jealous of Aida? Or is it anger at losing my authority over the patient?

“No, I can’t afford to study medicine,” Richard replied.

“So how do you know all this?” Aida asked.

Richard gave a sad smile.

“When Berlin’s best professors say the same thing to you over and over again every day and Berlin’s best corpses silently stretch out their sinews towards you ... in the hope that you will finally remember what they’re called ... so that they can be released into the realm of eternal rest...”

As he said this, Richard reached out his own sinews to Aida in entreaty, as if he were a corpse that wanted to be released into the realm of eternal rest. Aida laughed, stopped Richard’s arms, and placed her hand on his chest. Richard tenderly placed his own hand over Aida’s.

“The sternocostal section of the pectoralis major...” he said sadly, pressing Aida’s hand to his chest.

To my paternal gaze, this was already overstepping all the bounds.

“And, by the way, I’ve been sitting there, waiting,” I said.

I thought I was keeping an excellent grip on my irritation but at the first sounds of my quavering voice they both leapt up for some reason and Aida snatched her hand away from Richard’s chest.

“I’m sorry...” Richard said.

“Shall we continue?” I said.

Richard cast a glance at the clock.

“Time’s up,” he said. “I need to go.”

Richard got up from the floor and went to the door. I watched him, completely at a loss: is it really up to the patient to decide when a session is over?

A minute later and I was standing in the kitchen holding a glass of water and looking out of the window. There was Richard, walking away, with his bouncing step. I switched my gaze to the bay window of my house. In Aida’s room, a curtain twitched.

Noiselessly, I went into Aida’s room. She was standing by the window and looking down, hiding from Richard behind the curtain. There wasn’t a hint of any hurry to be at her music lesson. I went over and drew the curtain right under her nose.

“I have asked you to keep out of sight of patients when they come to the house,” I said stiffly.

“Papa, but our house was on fire! It was a conflagration!” Aida exclaimed. Her eyes were full of horror.

I understood that the more horrific the potential blaze, the more justified Aida’s incursion into my office when I was working with a patient who intrigued her.

“A conflagration?” I said sarcastically. “In which nothing was burnt? How do you come to know him?”

“We gave blood together when Grandma came to visit,” Aida said.

Rachel’s mother, Leah, really had been to stay for a while. She ended up in hospital because her lymph glands became swollen and painful. Unfortunately, it turned out to be a blood cancer and she was already beyond help. Rachel suggested giving blood for her. Aida had told none of us that once Rachel left the hospital, she had also given blood – against the rules – she was too young to be a donor.

The blood from Aida and Rachel lifted Leah's spirits for a while. She became more cheerful and even found the strength to go home to die in Mulheim.

Six months later she was dead. Rachel and Aida were with her to the last. They buried her and a couple of years later thanked god that Leah had died a natural death instead of being forced into the next world as part of some pseudoscientific programme to improve the population of Germany.

Aida stared at me in silence, automatically rubbing the arm from which blood had recently been taken. I stared at my daughter in silence.

"If you see smoke but no fire," I said authoritatively, "you need only open the window. The smoke will go out. You could have handled that yourself. If you were unsure of your own ability, you could have asked your mother – after all she was at home at that point, wasn't she?"

What I was saying was indisputable. Aida said nothing. She could not object.

She lowered her eyes and pulled a long face. I said nothing. She cast a brief, silent glance at me and I saw anguish in her eyes. At that moment, I became aware of an unpleasant feeling. Yes, I was right, undoubtedly right, but why the hell did me being undoubtedly right make my daughter pull a long face? What nonsense was mixed into my being right if anguish appeared in my daughter's bright and merry eyes? What a dull, sad thing it is – grown ups being right!

I sensed my child-self pull a long face together with Aida. I went over and gave her a hug. What kind of stupid gesture had it been – closing the curtain right under her nose? How much lack of respect it contained, how much contemptible, empty certainty of being contemptibly, emptily right, how I revelled in my own power... Where did it come from? Who taught it to me? Whose ignoble voice within me was attempting even now to persuade me that closing the curtain right under her nose was the right thing to do?

AIDA

31.

Well, if, for some reason, we're going to pay attention to such petty things ... I suppose it really wasn't very nice when Papa closed the curtain right under my nose. But, to be honest, I didn't notice any unpleasant feeling at the time. And then I quickly forgot about it. They're parents. What do you expect?

Perhaps Papa was just out of sorts. It could be because of that stupid smoke that prevented him doing his work. Surely Papa didn't want to hurt my feelings? Whatever possessed me to mess about with the damper?! Why did I even touch it? I mean I'd never done it before and I don't know anything about the fireplace. When I was little, Mama moved the damper a little bit once without knowing what she was doing and the whole room was full of smoke – everyone started running around. It was so funny!

In the afternoon, I went to my music lesson. Although I was late, the teacher let me in – I explained that there had almost been a fire at home and she was very impressed. Then Mama and I spent the evening cutting fabric on the kitchen table.

“Pass me the scissors,” Mama said.

“Mama, am I allowed to go out with a man before getting married?” I asked, handing them over.

The question would have had to be asked sooner or later and now was exactly the right time: that young man had left behind such a joyful feeling for some reason! He had such a nice smile... And he was so manly and fearless when he put that horrid damper, all black with soot, back in its proper place... And we had so much fun laughing and using old newspapers to drive the smoke out of the open window of our living room... And he told me so many interesting things about human sinews... What a dull life I've been leading! However can people eke out

their years, knowing nothing about their sinews?

In short, after all these dizzying experiences with the fire and the sinews, the question of premarital relations couldn't be put off for another minute.

I looked at Mama, awaiting an answer, but she kept on sewing as if there hadn't been a question at all. Finally, she glanced at me and said softly,

“And those threads.”

I gave her the threads and went on waiting for an answer. The pause dragged on.

“What do you mean start?” Mama eventually asked

“Nothing,” I said.

“Absolutely nothing?”

‘Lord, she’s such a pain!’

“Well, going for walks... kissing...” I said.

“Is that all?” Mama asked in surprise.

“Of course, it is!” I said indignantly. “How could you think anything else?”

“There’s no need for such a show of surprise,” Mama said. “You’re hardly a baby any more.”

Mama carried on sewing and I carried on waiting for her to answer. The silence dragged on and on – that was probably Mama’s strategy – to wait until the question somehow vanished of its own accord. For example, not having received an answer, I might say, ‘Fine, Mumsy, I’m off to bed.’ And Mama, nose in her sewing, would say: ‘Righty-o. Night, night, darling.’ I would give her a kiss and go off to my room and wake up in the morning without any foolish questions in my head – because, for example, during the night I dreamed about a little hare and

he was so sweet and fluffy that I completely forgot about what I'd been asking the evening before.

I kept on looking at Mama. She looked at me in surprise – that I was still there and, for some reason, still waiting for her to answer. Mama looked around perplexedly but nowhere was there even the tiniest hare that was sufficiently fluffy to distract me from my question.

“If Grandma doesn't find out, then yes...” Mama said, nose back in her sewing.

Her brief “yes” simply took my breath away and my heart started pounding. And I felt scared.

“And it's better if Papa doesn't find out either,” she added.

“Why?” I asked.

“Well, not least because he's his patient.”

“How does she know everything?”

“Mama, I never said who I was talking about.”

“Do you like him?”

I could sense her warmth and her well-meaning interest. I went over and gave her a hug. Mama smiled.

“No one has such a lovely Mama as I do,” I said.

“It's just that your lovely Mama remembers perfectly well that when she was your age she ran away from her parents with one particular boy,” Mama said and, after a brief silence, hastened to add, “I don't advise you to copy my example.”

“And that was our Papa, of course?” I asked.

“It was not,” Mama said, carrying on with her sewing. “That was three boys before our

Papa.”

I liked Mama’s answer. It went to show once again that, strange though it may seem, parents are also human. And it went to show too that adults sometimes tell the truth.

32.

The moon was shining in through the window. I cautiously crept out of my room in my nightdress. This time the door didn’t even creak – that was very kind of it. It was dark in the hall. As I passed the half-open door to my parents’ room, I tried to be as quiet as I could and I pulled it off. During the daytime parents work and provide for their children but at night they are entitled to their well-earned rest. Children must remember this and respect their precious sleep, avoid making any noise, and do everything they can to maintain the silence. Especially if things are going on at the time which the parents need not necessarily know about.

Most of the cards in the card index were old and yellow while there were very few new ones – white and stiff, with sharp as yet undamaged corners. Right from the start, I only looked at the new ones and so it wasn’t difficult at all to find Richard’s. I quickly wrote down the address but I simply didn’t have time to read anything. All of sudden the card leaped out of my hand and flew high up into the air. I didn’t even have a chance to realize why my hands had twitched so – as if from an electric current. And the reason turned out to be simply my mother’s tender, soft, loving voice – what magical power it has when you’re not expecting it in the slightest.

“You’re not going to go there, are you?” Mama asked.

She was standing at the door of Papa’s office in her nightdress.

“Where?” I asked.

The card had described a smooth arc in the air then bumped into the cupboard and treacherously descended right into the hands of the person I considered the most important one there. Mama glanced at the address, showed me the card, and there was her answer to my question as to “where”. I shook my head – no, of course, I’m not going there. How could she suggest such a thing?

“Then why?” Mama asked.

I didn’t answer. I simply couldn’t think what to say. Mama went over to the card index and put the card back where it belonged.

“Go to bed...” she said. She switched off the light in the office and left the room.

I remained, standing in the dark. Mama hadn’t forced me out of the office but had left me there by myself to act entirely at my own discretion. But I couldn’t betray her trust. I followed her out of the office.

Mama was no longer in the hall – she was probably already asleep again. I went back to my own room, clambered into bed, pulled the blanket over me and stared at the ceiling. I tried to work out what was happening to me: after all, I had never got up in the middle of the night before, never made my way into the dullest bit of the house – Papa’s office – and never gone through his dullest of dull papers.

This attempt to understand myself didn’t produce any real results. Unless you count the fact that I suddenly found Richard underneath the blanket – he was lying beside me and looking at me. His body was burning hot. I ran a hand over his hair and then stroked his shoulder. Next, I firmly set aside my old teddy bear that I usually cuddled when I was asleep and wrapped Richard in a hug. Only after that was I able to go to sleep. The teddy continued to lie to one side – now he was the one, not me, who suffered from insomnia and lay, pondering his fate.

DOCTOR ZIMMERMANN

33.

Had a passing stranger happened to glance into my office on that grim day, he would have concluded that the self-assured gentleman in the room was its real owner. While, opposite the owner, a pathetic notebook on his lap, cowered some misfit, some creature worn down by life: this had to be the patient who at long last had arrived to learn how to live and to take down scrupulous notes of all the instructions he was given. The new owner of the office was called Ulrich. He was no more than 50 years old. Glancing at the notebook, Ulrich frowned in dissatisfaction.

“Put that away, I’m not a patient.”

I immediately did as I was told and put the notebook away. Of course, he wasn’t a patient. Particularly bearing in mind that our entire planet is made up of patients and there isn’t one of them who couldn’t do with psychological help.

“I have come to see you because there is something wrong with my son...” Ulrich said then fell silent.

The pause went on and I had no way of guessing what was wrong with his son, although the unhappy expression on his face suggested that I should have guessed long since. To inspire him to go on with his story, I cautiously inquired,

“What exactly is wrong with him?”

Ulrich gave a contemptuous sneer. His whole appearance showed that my question was a tactless one, that I had asked about something unacceptable. Perhaps it only seemed so to me and in reality he had quite simply had a most distasteful recollection of that morning when he had, in irritation, snatched some dreadful, indecent postcard from the hands of his nonplussed twenty-year-old son.

I don’t know,” said Ulrich. “I don’t know what’s wrong with him. And I don’t want to

know. Better you look into it yourself.

I nodded.

“What means do you use to change people?” Ulrich suddenly asked suspiciously. His gaze drilled into me, his voice was dry and clipped, and I felt as if a light was shining in my eyes and I was being interrogated by the Gestapo.

“Me? Change them? I wouldn’t have said that I do change anyone...” I muttered. “People change themselves when...”

“No need to avoid a straight answer,” Ulrich interrupted. “I know you change people. How? In what way? Using what? Do you hypnotise them?”

I thought for a moment then said, “I talk to them...”

“What do you mean, talk?”

“I ask questions.”

“I don’t think much of that,” he said.

The wave of fury customary in such circumstances immediately constricted my throat and made it difficult to breathe. Just as immediately the equally familiar technique for ridding myself of intense emotion kicked in. It kitted my fury out with two tiny wings and allowed it to flutter freely and airily out of the window – despite the fact that the window was closed. A real bird that was sitting on a branch outside the window just then immediately flew off in fright.

“Yes, questions aren’t up to much,” I agreed. “Especially if you don’t take into account that these are the questions people never put to themselves.”

Ulrich said nothing. I had no further interest in talking to him – I was awaiting his son. He appeared after about ten minutes. During my conversation with Ulrich, he had waited in the

car and then, at a signal from his father, given from my office window, he came into the house. Now Theo was sitting in the patients' armchair while Ulrich waited outside by the car.

34.

"Have you ever had sexual relations with other men?" I asked.

"No," Theo replied.

"Then why has your father decided that you're interested in men?"

"Because it's true. It's what all my fantasies centre on..." said Theo, looking out of the window.

"Is your father familiar with your fantasies?"

"Of course not. But he's probably noticed something if he's brought me here. He said he won't stand for it."

Theo suddenly turned towards me: his troubled glance was full of hope.

"Will you help me?" he asked.

I didn't know if I could. I knew nothing about the nature of his attraction. And I didn't yet know precisely what help he had in mind. A patient doesn't always want to be rid of what he feels he wants to be rid of with all his heart.

"Do you want to be rid of it?" I asked.

"Of course!" Theo exclaimed heatedly.

"Why?" I asked.

"What sort of question is that? If it gets out, it will harm my father's career. Damage his reputation. The whole family. You must realize that, surely?"

I nodded. What he was saying was understandable but, in fact, I understood nothing. All I could grasp was that such laudable filial concern for a father's career and the needs of the family ought to evoke only unrestrained admiration. And yet, I could find no trace at all of such admiration in myself.

"Will you help me?" Theo asked.

"Do you want to be rid of it?" I asked.

"But you've already asked me that!" Theo said.

"I have," I said.

"And didn't you get an answer?"

"I did," I said.

Theo said nothing. Neither did I.

"Why don't you say something?" Theo asked.

"I want to know if you want to be rid of this?" I said softly.

Theo blushed. His hands began shaking with emotion. When he felt tears in his eyes, he hastily stood up and stalked out of the office.

I remained seated. The first thing that entered my head was that Theo's interest in men was a subconscious attempt to attract his father's attention. This version was indirectly confirmed by Theo's odd lack of caution, which had allowed his father to find the indecent postcard. If Theo hadn't wanted his father to see it, his father would never have come across it: no happenstance would have prevented Theo hiding something he really wanted to hide.

I stood up from the chair and looked out of the window. There, by the car, a grim Ulrich waited for his son. Theo came out of the house and approached his father uncertainly. Ulrich asked him something. Theo, hiding his eyes, said something in return. Without a word, Ulrich

sat him in the car, slammed the door behind him in irritation, got into the driver's seat, and off they went.

RICHARD

35.

It isn't true that the cock of a male corpse sticks out. Nothing sticks out when we're dead. You can believe me because I am telling you this not only as a future corpse and not only as a being who is already deceased, but also as an entirely living nineteen-year-old worker at a morgue.

The philosophy behind the legend probably lies in the dramatic male dream whereby even a dying male body in the final seconds of its useless life retains the moving possibility of once more senselessly continuing its line – for example, given the opportunity, by convulsively injecting into a gaping female the final dose of his precious genetic junk.

It's hard, of course, to imagine such an exceptional case. There you are, alive, unimaginably handsome, painfully ready for any stroke of good luck but, at the same time, somehow absolutely unwanted by anyone.

And then once you're dead, nature's purported females come swooping down from all sides, pushing one another out of the way, inexplicably seized by a wild passion for a half-dead thing: they will tear you to pieces and then – to the victor the spoils – nine months of an exhausting pregnancy, an excruciating birth, plus a title of honour – proud bearer of the human race on Earth.

The bearer will be declared "honourable" because the legend is apparently focused on a situation where this semi-corpse is the last man on the planet and there is no one else on our Earth to inject life into the female.

Fine, let's assume that, for some reason, there are only females left on Earth and therefore a lover turning into a stiff before your very eyes has shot up in value. But then the

question arises again – where were these females previously? What were they thinking about when he was alive and vigorous and still not yet entirely a stiff? Why did they not get a move on? On what nonsense did they spend their precious minutes, hours, and years? Why not value a person when he’s alive? Why does recognition come only after death?

I wonder who this delightful legend occurred to first. A woman? I don’t think so. Most likely a man. Only men want to persuade themselves that not even death is a barrier to their spasmodic joie de vivre. Particularly those who weren’t fit for much in their lifetimes. The I-was-a-real-goer type in my youth but then, naturally, I went a bit off the boil but after death – wild horses wouldn’t hold me back! – right now, on my deathbed, you’ll see the true scale of my talents! God, how very much people want to believe this tasteless platitude: that death is in no way something final, melancholy, and depressing. No, there is bound to be a continuation after death with dessert, drinks, music, fireworks, confetti, multicoloured balloons, as well as a delightful, festive, and just as multicoloured ejaculation.

My latest deathly blue poppet lay naked on a scuffed trolley in the morgue’s empty examination room. No multicoloured balloons or desserts were to be seen anywhere near him. The reality was such that, instead of all those drinks, musicians, and passion-crazed females, alongside the deceased in the echoing emptiness and the cold, there was me and only me – a solitary, despondent skeleton, resigned to transporting the dead into the next world on scuffed and squeaky trolleys.

Now I was standing beside him with a large wooden ruler and measuring his genital organ. No matter how I tried to boost his paltry readings, in keeping with my naturally endowed gift of kindness and generosity, it amounted to shamefully few centimetres.

“Not much to write home about...” I muttered. “How did you manage with this problem?”

“What are you doing?” A stern male voice sounded suddenly in the echoing room. I cast a rapid glance at the corpse. His lips didn’t move. I looked round.

Gunther. His appearance was so unexpected that I almost dropped the ruler and jumped back – like Aida in the night when her mother caught her trying to find my address. And there I’d been, thinking that I was completely on my own. Where had he come from?

“Can’t you see what I’m doing?” I growled. “I’m measuring his cock.”

“Why?” Gunther asked sternly.

“I’m researching racial statistics. I’m sure the Fuhrer will be pleased.”

I used the ruler, defiled by its contact with the dead blue cock, to point at the portrait of the Fuhrer, which hung on the wall in an inappropriately lavish frame right above the trolleys and their corpses.

The solemnity of death, which filled the cold faces of the row of the deceased, was a good match for the cold Nordic solemnity of the Fuhrer, his psychopathic gaze focused on Greater Germany’s far, fair future.

“First, I forbid you to make fun of our Fuhrer,” Gunther said. “For the record, this is not the first time you have taken such a liberty.”

“I’m sorry, Gunther,” I said, feigning sincere repentance. “I forgot about your sacred feelings.”

“I am warning you – I will report you to the hospital managers.”

“I swear I won’t do it anymore. I mean I do understand that the Fuhrer is great... Although not so great that he doesn’t need you to protect him.”

“Remember, scum, when I die, don’t you dare come near me with that nasty ruler, got it?”

For a moment, I imagined that Gunther was already dead, lying naked on a trolley, and suddenly jumping up off it in a temper, snapping the wooden ruler maliciously over his knee, and tossing the pieces at me.

“Don’t worry, Gunther,” I said. “No one will find out your centimetres. Your secret’s safe with me. I am always on the side of those who have something to worry about.”

Red-faced and shaking with rage, Gunther threw a glove at me but I managed to dodge it.

“Gunther, I feel sorry for you but death will render you utterly defenceless,” I said with immense pain and sympathy. “Accept it. You have no guarantees I won’t be drawing swastikas all over your dead body one night.”

The dead Gunther, now covered in swastikas, leaped off his trolley and chased after me. A long, swastika-covered Roman tunic, partially concealing Gunther’s nakedness, fluttered as he ran, reflecting its wearer’s distress.

I took to my heels but Gunther’s nakedness, alarming in its bulk, continued to hurtle after me at astonishing speed: with every second, the distance between me and that rabid nakedness narrowed inexorably and I had absolutely no idea what horror awaited me.

In reality, the living Gunther lunged at me in a frenzy and attempted to grab me by the scruff of the neck but I managed to tear myself away and escape: at the last moment as I ran out of the morgue, I slammed the door right in his face.

46.

Manly German mariners, hands shading their eyes, stared out to sea. They were on a poster for the film “Cruiser Emden”. Aida and I had just left the cinema after seeing it. The sailors on the

poster were so unusually handsome and manly that it was quite simple to imagine them sternly sharing their handsomeness and manliness with one another in their cramped cabins during long sea crossings.

It was a warm summer's evening. I embraced Aida and kissed her... We walked past the street cafés; people sat at the small tables lit by candles... I felt calm and full of joy – when I was with Aida life seemed wonderful somehow. It occurred to me that I could take her home with me now, lay her carefully on the bed, slowly undo the buttons on her top, and then tenderly touch her with my lips...

“Have you ever slept with anyone?” I asked.

“No. Have you?”

“Never.”

That's when I should have kept my mouth shut... But I realized too late.

“I want to ask something...” I said. “Women, I mean, they probably talk about these things...”

Everything was tangled up in my head. Why had I said it? Why did my fears control me in spite of myself? How could I put a stop to this now?

“What do you mean?”

“Forget it...” I said.

“But you wanted to ask something,” Aida said.

“Yes but ... I don't any more.”

“Don't be afraid. Ask. I am certain that if you want to know something, you should definitely ask.”

I hesitated. And boldness rather than good sense won out...

“A man’s cock...” I said. “How long should it be?”

Aida said nothing. She seemed shocked. Why for heaven’s sake? How I could have used such a crude word? How could I have mentioned that inconvenient part of the body, which currently had absolutely no place in our relationship? We’ve been to the cinema, we’re walking along arm in arm, the starry sky above us, relations between us splendid and pure! After all, I only wanted to give her tender kisses, cautiously touch with my finger tips, recite poetry! God, I’ve ruined everything! How can I prove to her now that my intentions were pure and honourable? How can I prove that I had nothing in mind for which people need the gross thing they call a “cock”? How could it have entered my mind? How could it have grabbed the microphone? Why was it always sticking its nose in where it wasn’t wanted? How can I now prove that it asked the question not me?

She turned her bottomless gaze upon me and it was instantly clear that our relationship was over. I saw that, although she carried on walking along the street with me, she was no longer there, we had broken up, she had left me and gone back to her own world, and her lovely, clever family where no one ever let slip a rash word.

I felt really miserable. My eyes pricked with hot tears of frustration. Once again, I was in my old world of anguished isolation – alone with the pathetic, unsettled, self-satisfied idiot of a cock that unthinkingly speaks in my place and destroys everything I put so much effort and deceit into creating.

Now I would be back to spending my days only with my cock – like some lonely old woman who has no one but her cat. The old woman sometimes strokes and caresses it. The cat is playful and unpredictable like a child. Sometimes it sleeps, but more often, whether it’s appropriate or not, it is full of mindless, idiotic enthusiasm. It stops me thinking and living my

life. And serve me right.

But – amazingly – Aida, it seemed, was not at all embarrassed by my question. All of a sudden, she delivered her response. And as lightly and serenely as if she'd been asked the time.

“I don't know. I really don't. You'd probably be better off asking your father about it.”

I couldn't believe my ears. I hadn't been rejected! What a load off my mind right away. Disaster had been averted. Naturally, you should ask your father about such things not a girl you're escorting home from the cinema on a romantic, moonlit night. Or, perhaps, you could ask your friends. God, why don't I have a father? Why don't I have any friends?

We arrived at her house. Aida kissed me and disappeared into the entryway. And I set off for home. I walked and imagined what it would be like when she got home. She would be met at the door by her beaming Papa and Mama. A crisp bed with fresh sheets would await her in her room. She would snuggle cosily under the blanket, holding in check her delight at the surrounding freshness, cleanness, and enchanting scents. Does a stray really belong on these sheets? No, he belongs in a lonely stinking kennel on a rough cloth that no one has changed for a long time. And never will because the person who used to change it has been long in the ground. Nor will he change it himself – dogs don't sleep on sheets.

At that point, feeling like a stray dog myself, I suddenly began to doubt that I hadn't been rejected. I suddenly realized that Aida had reacted to my indecorous question exactly as a polite, well-bred young lady should: she had pretended that nothing had happened.

She herself, of course, had instantly made the decision to break up with me, the matter was resolved once and for all, but I would learn of it only the following day because a break up should be done nicely. Tomorrow, she would start to avoid me, come up with pretty excuses, and I would never discover the truth.

And quite right too – why should a stray dog hear the truth if, in all honesty, he knows it himself? Aida was absolutely right – that was exactly how a relationship with a stray dog should be broken off.

I decided to help Aida out. She would not have to come up with pretty excuses. I would never go to see her again. I would break off the relationship myself. Why had I even started it in fact? A girl from a good family. She has a Papa and Mama. A girl like that deserves a good boy not a bad one. Who is also from a good family. Who also has a Papa and Mama. And also sleeps on fresh sheets. And isn't troubled by idiotic questions about cocks. She needs a good boy. Who doesn't want to kill anyone.

I walked along the empty night-time street. Everyone was already asleep and I felt as if I was the only person who lived in the city. To begin with, all the thoughts of the evening left me sick at heart, but then came a weird freedom – even a sense of relief at the decision to break up with Aida. It became utterly clear that Aida wasn't right for me: the girl was from another world. I had no business there – I was an outsider there, an alien. This unnatural union – nothing good would come of it.

Yes, I'm a stray dog and so what? If I am burdened by my solitude, I just need to find myself some other bitch. One like myself – mangy, mean, alone. Why am I getting involved in the human realm? I am so fed up with people. And I'm tired of a role that doesn't fit – the role of being human.

With these thoughts, I returned to my room and fell asleep surprisingly peacefully and quickly. This was indirect proof that the decision made was the right one.

DOCTOR ZIMMERMANN

“I will never be a member of an exemplary German family. I do not want to continue heading towards a gravestone with an inscription that everyone finds so endearing.”

Theo stopped talking. I said nothing either as I wrote his words down in my notebook.

“What’s the alternative?” I asked.

Theo ran a hand distractedly over his forehead. He looked at me, bewildered.

“I want to go to Hamburg,” he said.

“Why Hamburg?”

“To the port. They have sailors’ hotels there. I want to give it a try. I want to live...”

Tears appeared in Theo’s eyes.

Neither of us spoke.

“What are you feeling right now?” I asked.

“Anger. Enthusiasm. I don’t understand how I could let myself feel like this.”

Theo was watching me, waiting for an answer. He was surprised, disconcerted, his eyes shone with tears. I continued to say nothing – a patient’s emotion takes time to develop and nothing should be said at that time.

“Remember this feeling,” I said after a while. “It’s yours. No one has the right to take it away from you.”

Theo said nothing, trying to come to terms with what was to him a new and surprising fact – he had a right to live.

When Theo had gone, I picked up the watering can and looked out of the living room window. Down below, I saw Ulrich. He was waiting for his son as usual, wandering about by his car. Impatience, irritation, anger could all be divined from his abrupt movements, changes

of stance, turns of the head.

I understood how he felt – wasting precious time on his ugly duckling outside some dubious establishment which never failed to take his money while giving no guarantees that his son's head would be fixed in the appropriate manner. Was that what this father dreamed of when he contemplated his son's future?

Hearing the door creak, Ulrich looked back towards the building, spotted Theo and sneered balefully – at the sight of his son, the father's face always took on an expression of displeasure and aversion. Ulrich, just like the last time, opened the car door for his son, mockingly obliging, so that once Theo was in the car he could slam the door with an exaggerated bang, sit in high dudgeon at the wheel, and drive away.

This time, however, everything went differently. Theo walked towards his father not with his usual cat-like steps but with a determined stride and for some reason looked not at the ground but directly at his father. Once at the car, Theo didn't get in, he hesitated... Ulrich continued staring at this son in derisive bemusement, then looked at his watch, took Theo by the elbow, and shoved him towards the vehicle. The next moment, Theo abruptly pushed his father's hand away and walked off.

Ulrich watched in confusion as his son walked away along the street and then looked daggers directly at my window. I wasn't expecting it at all. Caught unawares, I hastily took a step back and tried to hide behind the curtain. I trod on it in my haste, however, and curtain and curtain rail came crashing down on top of me. I tried to wriggle out but became entangled in the folds of material and fell over. Snatched from my hands, the watering can performed a somersault in mid-air and doused me in water.

Ulrich's stare alone had proved sufficient to wrap the curtain round my legs, hit me over the head with the curtain rail, knock me to the floor, and soak me in water. Paralysed and

at a loss, I lay there in a puddle, feeling like a freshly-watered geranium. His mission easily accomplished, Ulrich got into the car and drove resolutely away – the roar of his engine and the squeal of his tyres reached me from the street.

Hearing the clatter of the curtain rail and my expletives, Aida ran into the living room. “Papa, what happened?” She was quicker off the mark than Rachel who, absorbed in her needles and wool, went on sitting in the far corner of the room, knitting. Aida helped me untangle myself from the curtain and get to my feet. Water was trickling off me and onto the floor.

“How on earth did I fall like that?” I said, genuinely puzzled. “For goodness sake... I’ve never fallen down like that.”

“Papa, may I ask you a risqué question?” Aida asked.

I nodded. Of course, there’s an element of risk in all risqué questions so they are best avoided but if, at an awkward moment, a father has become entangled in a curtain and is unable to disentangle himself without his child’s assistance, how can he then fail to express his gratitude?

Generally speaking, it is very important that a father is not afraid of risqué questions from his offspring: he must not hide the truth from them but act as a wise mentor. After all, the father’s priceless wisdom will then, over the course of many years, help the child to make the right decisions and find solutions to difficulties in her future, independent life. Thanks to these generous crumbs of wisdom, the grateful child will long retain a sense of gratitude to her father, will respect him, and pass on his cherished memory to her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. And that’s why I was perfectly prepared for any risqué question from my child and I readied myself to listen.

“Papa, how long should a man’s cock be?” Aida asked.

Silence descended on the living room. Rachel cast a sharp look at her daughter and buried herself back in her knitting.

“His cock?” I asked in turn, perplexed. I did not see how this crumb of priceless paternal wisdom would help my child make the right decisions in future.

“Yes,” said Aida. “Does it matter?”

Rachel sent me a rapid glance and once again buried herself in her knitting.

“Modern science is inclined to state that size does not matter at all,” I said and shot a quick look at Rachel. Rachel was silently knitting... Do you know what modern science is good for? Turning up any answer and even a whole heap of mutually exclusive answers for every occasion.

For a while Aida said nothing. She was evidently thinking something over but was afraid to ask.

“And why on earth is that of any interest to you all of a sudden?” I queried.

“Well... It wasn't me that was interested.”

“Really? So who was it?”

Before answering, Aida shot a quick look at Rachel. Rachel was silently knitting.

“Richard,” Aida said.

“Was he now?” I said. “My patient? And however did you come to know the range of issues, which worry Richard?”

“We are... going out together,” Aida said.

I was stunned. I looked at Rachel. She went on knitting.

“A peculiar situation...” I muttered. “My patient... my daughter... And I know nothing

about it. Rachel, did you know?"

Buried in her knitting, Rachel gave a non-committal shrug.

AIDA

38.

"Is that what he said?" Richard asked when we took a stroll that evening.

"Yes," I replied. "He said that size does not matter at all."

I found it strange that Richard had been so difficult to persuade to go for a stroll today. Normally, he was overjoyed when we spent time together. Today, for the first time, however, I felt that I was imposing and that he didn't have very much need of me. Well, then, I will put my impression to the test one more time; and then, perhaps, one more again. And if my impression is confirmed, I shall split up with Richard. I do not intend to waste my feelings on a relationship in which I need someone more than he needs me...

If we do split up, it will probably be a bit sad. Perhaps even miserable. I might cry. But better to cry now than weep buckets later on.

"That's what everyone says when they're not particularly well-endowed themselves," Richard mumbled, staring off into space.

We never talked about it again. After our stroll, he took me home. But the next morning was simply dreadful. Father and I were having breakfast. Father was looking gloomily through the newspaper. In the silence, the tension was palpable. I tried to keep my eyes on my plate to avoid encountering his gaze. I was in the worst possible mood. I couldn't swallow a single bite. Mama had her back to us. She was fussing at the stove. But I was certain that even her back could sense the tension.

“I’m sorry, Papa...” I forced myself to say in the end. “I... I didn’t mean...”

I stopped talking. Why is it always so hard to apologize? Especially if you don’t know what for.

“No, I don’t understand a thing!” Papa burst out, throwing down his fork in outrage and finally peeling himself away from the paper. “Hitler wants to annex Austria. The SS burst into the office of the Austrian Chancellor, Dollfuss, demanding that he resign. He refuses and then they kill him! And yet the biggest piece of news in our family is the size of my penis! Why is everyone so bothered about my penis? Rachel, is there nothing you want to say?”

“It wasn’t the SS,” Mama said peaceably, continuing to busy herself with the dishes in the sink. “It says they were Austrian guards.”

“Are you in your right mind?!” Papa exclaimed, turning purple.

He was scary to look at. His eyes were burning, his hair sticking out in all directions. Throwing down his napkin, he jumped up from the table in a fury.

“Hitler is financing Rintelen. That’s quite clear!” he yelled, gesticulating away. “They were SS-men disguised as Austrian guards! It simply couldn’t have been anyone else!”

Wiping down the sink, Mama was meekly silent. Which was very sensible – her silence brought Papa back to earth. He calmed down a little, caught his breath.

“No, I do understand,” he said more softly, “we are unable to influence the imminent Anschluss of Austria in any way. As thinking people, this drives us mad. But let’s look the truth in the eyes! Let us tell ourselves honestly that we can have no influence on Austria or on the size of my penis! So why discuss it? Why go endlessly on and on about it?”

It was astonishingly quiet in the dining room. No one made a sound. It seemed as if neither Mama nor I were breathing.

“Yes, I have a small penis,” Papa suddenly declared in the utter stillness. “So what? Why is this issue of such morbid interest to my daughter?”

“It’s just that the woman in your daughter is awakening,” Mama said calmly. “Everything to do with sex is starting to concern her. What’s morbid about that?”

Papa turned towards me. He began looking at me in silence. He didn’t say a word. He looked and looked, fixedly like a snake looks at a rabbit. After a while, his eyes went red, he began blinking in confusion, but even so he didn’t take his eyes off me. I have to admit it was an ordeal. I began to feel uncomfortable. What was he trying to see in me? The woman awakening?

“Yes, Papa,” I said, unable to hold back. “It’s a perfectly innocent interest! I just passed on to Richard what you said about size not mattering... And then, well, Richard suggested your own penis might be ... not the biggest ever.”

An ominous silence descended. We all froze. Even Mama’s hands stopped running the cloth over the bottom of the sink. Papa’s face went red. He struggled to breathe. His hands began to tremble.

“That Richard again!” he erupted, making the windows of the house rattle. “He gets everywhere, that Richard! Why the hell are the two of you talking about my penis?”

Papa’s energy transferred itself to me. I felt as if my head was on fire and electric currents were running through my body. I realized that unless I forced that energy back out into the world, it would consume me and leave nothing but ashes.

“Papa, I haven’t discussed your penis with him!” I shouted indignantly.

It came out so loudly that Mama cringed and covered her ears with the dish-cloth.

“You’ve just said yourself that it’s only small! And Richard just guessed! What’s it got

to do with me? I never said a word about your penis to Richard! You... Richard... Why can't you both leave me alone? Sort your penises out yourselves!"

I was so worked up, I was shaking but I was pleased with my outburst – despite the fact that it had shot out of nowhere of its own accord, taking me rather unawares – I mean, I hadn't planned it at all.

This is always the way. Why do I never know in advance what words are going to come flying out? Where do they come from? This unpredictability is terribly awkward: as a result, I'm responsible for something I have no control over at all.

Meanwhile, all I have noticed is that anything I say is preceded by certain vague sensations, feelings, emotions and that these are as formless as a cloud or a mist: they are so vague that it's possible not even to notice that these sensations exist.

They only become clear when they've turned into words – from then on, they take on distinct limits and it is no longer possible not to notice them. It's too bad that I don't understand how this transformation from mist into words takes place.

And if the mist didn't turn into words, it would probably just fade away without anyone noticing, wouldn't it? For some reason, I think that's exactly what happens to most feelings on our planet. And people don't have an inkling that they've experienced something... And if a person doesn't have an inkling that they've experienced something, what does he know about himself? Does he exist? What actions might he take? Is he dangerous?

After my tirade, Papa looked frightened and subdued. He had probably not been expecting to be answered back in this manner, but I really didn't give a damn – the blood was pounding in my head and I was now in such a state that I could have brought down a bull with my bare hands. My foot kicked away the stool that was in its way, I stalked out of the kitchen, and slammed the door behind me.

DOCTOR ZIMMERMANN

When the door slammed shut behind Aida, I sat down wearily. I glanced at Rachel. She was standing with her back to me, wiping down an already dry sink with exaggerated zeal. I felt utterly empty – drained of all my strength... It was a hellish mess, all of it – Austria, the yelling from the radio, the broken shop windows... These secret meetings between Richard and Aida... Life, winging its way to who knew where... And the backdrop to all this was my quiet, regular, and unhurried work with a certain patient who inexplicably had an opinion about my cock.

39.

Richard was sitting in the armchair, I sat facing him. I had hidden my ignominious penis beneath the old notebook lying in my lap. I was shattered, my head was completely empty, my thoughts were all over the place. We were both maintaining a silence and that silence had already gone on for a good long time.

Richard looked at me questioningly for the umpteenth time. Had he perhaps said something that required an answer? I realized that come what may I had to find the strength to pull myself together and focus: I had to say at least something to him right now. But what?

“Forgive me...” I said. “My head’s in a bit of a spin... So, you said you wanted her dead...”

“Yes, I did...” Richard said tiredly. “But when she was dead... I really miss her now...”

Richard fell silent. I waited patiently for him to say something else.

“All during her final days – from that conversation we had until her actual death, she was so affectionate towards me... Hugging me... Asking forgiveness for something or other... I had never had so much affection from her in all my life.”

Richard started to cry... I said nothing. He wiped away the tears and continued.

“We didn’t exchange a bad word during those final days. She bought me this jacket as a present... I thought that it would be nice like that between us forever... But it turned out that these were just her final days... She’d already made up her mind... But no, that conversation... Did I kill her?”

“What was that conversation about?” I asked.

“I’m tired... I can’t take any more... Next time...”

Richard stood up and left...

I stood up after him but I didn’t try to leave the office. I went over to the desk and wrote in the notebook that Richard was moving towards feeling guilty for the death of his mother. Previously, he had been frightened to approach the topic. He had considered it dangerous, and simply denied any feeling of guilt. I was heartened by the change because we couldn’t move forward until he cast off his feeling of guilt.

The office door remained open after Richard's departure. Through it, I could see a mirror. It reflected the kitchen and I could see Aida helping her mother to knead dough. Aida cast a curious glance at the corridor and saw Richard passing the kitchen. He was upset and didn’t even turn his head towards her. After the door closed behind him, a quiet conversation between Aida and Rachel reached me.

“Mama, do I have to marry a Jew?” Aida asked.

“Well, you know that if your husband’s German, Grandma will be dead set against it,”

Rachel replied.

“What about you?”

“I don’t mind.”

“And could you talk to Grandma?”

“Why?”

“So that she doesn’t mind either.”

“And ruin my relationship with my mother-in-law? No, that’s not something I intend to do,” Rachel replied. She was silent for a moment then added, “So, is it in the offing already?”

“No,” Aida replied. “I was just asking.”

40.

“I asked you here to brief me about what’s going on with my son,” Ulrich said.

We were sitting at a small table on a restaurant terrace, having lunch. I had foreseen that the conversation would not be a pleasant one but I couldn’t refuse to meet a man who was paying for his son’s therapy.

“The work continues,” I answered. “I don’t have the right to give you the details.”