

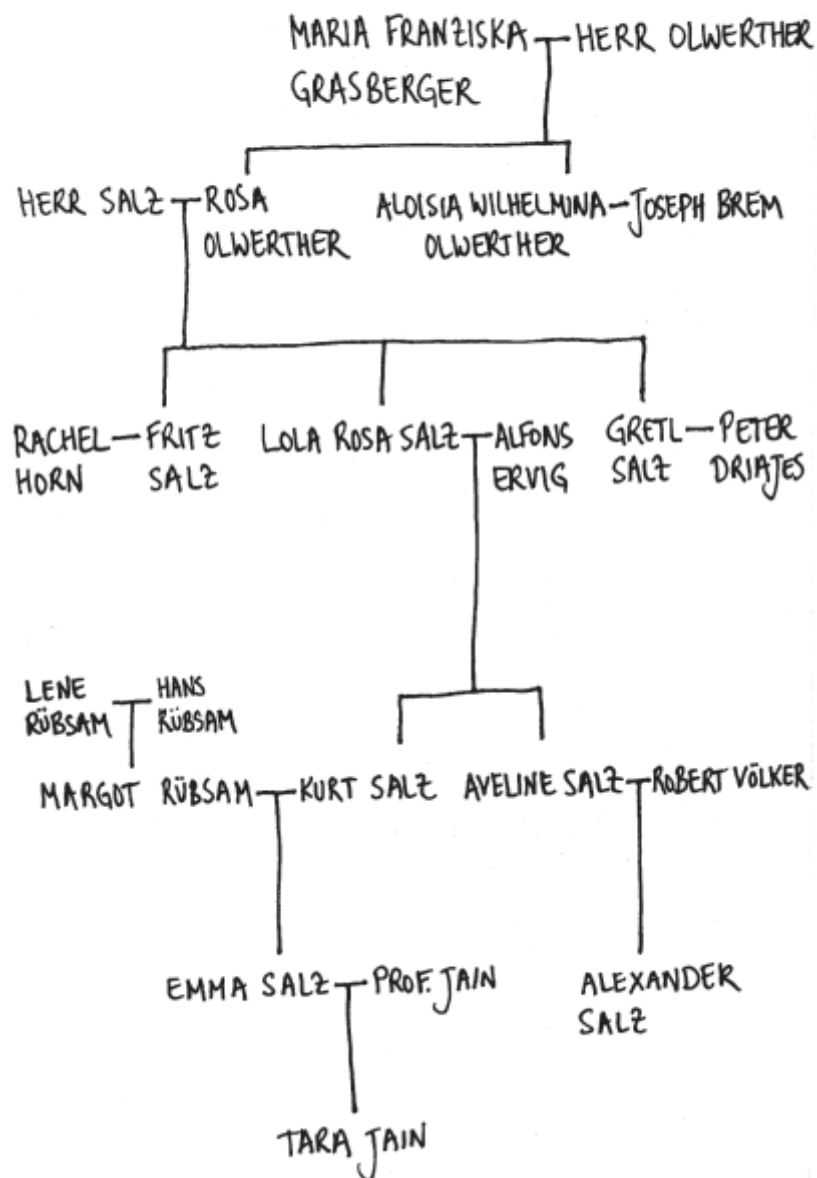
Sample Translation "The Immortal Family Salz" (C. Kloeble)

Sample translation by Aaron Kerner

The Immortal Family Salz by Christopher Kloeble

Family Tree of the Salz Family

STAMMBAUM DER FAMILIE SALZ



Emma Salz, 2015

My grandmother died twice. But the first death didn't kill her.

On July 15th 1990, just a few days after taking possession of the Fürstenhof in Leipzig, and for reasons which remain unclear, Lola Rosa Salz, in spite of her eighty-five years, clambered up onto the roof of the hotel, and then fell.

The fall was so bad that her heart failed. When it began to beat again, it was too weak to bring her back to life.

Thereafter she lay in a deep sleep that my father (her son) referred to as *coma*. But was it really? Even Aunt Ava, her daughter and nurse, was amazed how smooth the process of feeding her was. (The patient favored éclairs with extra helpings of cream.) Chewing, swallowing, digestion, excretion—all of it, with a little assistance, was no problem. She lay stretched in her French bed with wide-open eyes, and muttered away. Most of the words were incomprehensible, and the few you could make out lacked any clear connection. As if scraps of her dreams were slipping out into the world.

Apart from *I*, the four words she most frequently said were: *Mama*, *Herr Salz*, and *Maria*. (Herr Salz presumably referred to her long-dead father, and Maria to her even *longer*-dead grandmother.) Was there something she wanted to confess? Did she want to pass on a bit of her experience, so as not to slide into oblivion? Or was she simply babbling nonsense?

Her life stretched so far back that most of its years had long since found their place in the history books. She was a living example of how little of what we are remains. It's not for nothing that we tell stories about the past. Because it's nothing more than that. Just a story that the living tell about the dead.

In my case, it could turn out to be a very short story. I don't know if I'll still be alive next year. I *believe* that I will. But I don't know. Which is why I find myself thinking of my grandmother so often. What did she have to share? And what about me—what do I have to share, the much younger grandchild?

Maybe her words meant more than we suspected—maybe, as someone approaching death, she was telling a story about the living, one from which, even though it was merely a story, we could have learned a good deal.

Should we have tried harder to understand her?

My mother, who'd never been particularly fond of her, called my grandmother's incomprehensible monologue *Lola's job-interview for Death*. Death, however, didn't seem especially interested in her—nowhere near as interested as he is in me. He ignored her for a long time. Whatever was happening in Lola's head, she drifted for years, someplace between here and there. Always at the Fürstenhof, where her family had once made its home. There, as an undead resident guest, she exercised her lifelong right of abode—she occupied a suite under the roof from which she'd fallen. And waited for her second death.

Excerpt from Part I
Lola Rosa Salz, 1914

I’ve never told anyone about 1914. It was the year my family committed a murder and I rescued Mama.

But now it’s high time. I regret so many of the decisions I’ve made in my life. Not this one. My children have to hear. They need to know that I’m more than the diabolical figure they see in me. So I beg you, whoever you are, listen to me. If you don’t, it’ll be as if I’d never spoken.

Do you understand?

The last thing I remember is the sky over Leipzig. On the very day I took possession of the Hotel Fürstenhof, in July of 1990, I managed to fulfill a long-cherished wish: to climb onto the roof. I hadn’t been up there since 1914.

The ascent took me a good deal longer than it had my nine-year-old self. At the peak of the roof, right in the middle of the letters *HOTEL FÜRSTENHOF*, I sat down and let my legs dangle. I was hoping to meet an old friend. But he stayed away. Maybe he didn’t recognize me—no question that time had put me through the wringer.

So he didn’t show up. As I took this in, I looked around: I wasn’t the only one who had changed. The air of this new old Germany smelled bland. In it was no trace of the history of this place, of *our* history.

I began my descent.

The next moment I woke up here. I have no idea where *here* is. I’m surrounded by silent darkness, a perfect, noiseless, starless black. I call it: the Realm of Shadows. A little dramatic, sure, but rather fitting. In my life light has played a subordinate role, serving, at most, to generate shadows.

I wonder how much time has passed. Minutes? Hours? A day?

Darkness doesn’t care about time. When I seek to stir myself, to make myself move—here a finger, there an eyelid—half an eternity seems to pass before I have to give up.

On the other hand, has even a second elapsed since I was fed bite-sized pieces of éclair? Was that you? The end of every life should be so delectable.

Taste is the sole sense that remains to me. I am a prisoner of the Realm of Shadows. Only my words can escape—I hope they’re safe with you.

1914, then—that decisive year. What happened then marked my family forever. To be honest, it makes me a bit nervous to go back to the beginning of my biography. But who knows how much time we have left. Maybe these are my last moments. Better we start right away.

Are you with me?

In January of 1914 I was living with my family in Munich. My parents held the lease of the legendary Löwenbräukeller, and this strange Bavarian structure served as our home as well. The smaller tower with the pale shingles, which faced onto Augustenstraße and has long since ceased to exist, was part of our private residence,

and housed, among other things, the nursery. Within was a wall on which hung the framed silhouette portraits of my family, arranged as if forming a genealogical tree. In the middle: my plump and potato-nosed mother, next to my father, with a thick beard and boasting a full head of hair. Level with them: the dainty profile of my Aunt Alli, Mama’s sister, alongside with the cylindrical head of her husband, Uncle Brem. Above the siblings: my flabby Grandmother. And underneath the lot: my sister Gretl, a younger version of my mother, and myself, whose finer features recalled those of my father.

Every year, for our birthdays, Mama would prepare a new, updated silhouette for each of us. As a child, it never occurred to me to ask how exactly she went about making her own. These days I’d give plenty to learn how in the world she managed such a feat.

So as to let her cut the profile in peace, we were forced to sit stock-still in her silhouette-chair—something that I, by far the twitchiest member of the family, possessed slim talent for. I proved this yet again in January 1914, just a few days before my ninth birthday.

“Don’t move,” said Mama, as forcefully as she could. This wasn’t, as it happened, all that forcefully; her manner was much too sweet to make me stop fidgeting.

“My dear,” she said finally, “do you actually know why I’m always cutting our silhouettes?”

While I was considering whether or not I did, in fact, know, she went on: “It’s a secret.”

“Does Papa know?”

She shook her head.

“And Gretl?”

Another shake. “You’re the first person I’m going to tell. Not everyone would understand.”

Now I *absolutely* wanted to know.

“If you pay close attention,” said Mama, “you’ll understand that every shadow, painted or not, can tell you a piece of the truth.”

I thought about this briefly, and came to the conclusion: “Shadows can’t talk.”

She smiled. “Are you sure? They don’t use words, true. But they can still say plenty. I remember perfectly what they first told me about you.” She paused for a moment and looked at me. “As you were born, the light of a lamp threw your shadow on the wall. A black and blurry, swirling stain, announcing the still unformed personality that only a moment later I would be holding in my arms. But even after I’d taken you and pressed you to my breast, and kissed your face and said your name to you for the first time, I found my eyes drawn once again to your shadow on the wall, which was being rocked by the shadow of a mother.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because it was the shadow that assured me, truly convinced me, that you’d arrived; it was and is your imprint on the world, the final evidence of your existence. In other words: without you there would be no shadow, and without your shadow, no you.”

“And if I lost my shadow?”

“Then,” she said, gesturing to the wall and its hung silhouettes, “you can always find it here. That’s why I make them.”

I thought about how many times I’d resisted sitting for Mama’s portraits. Suddenly I felt ashamed, I was sorry. Right away I sat up straighter on the chair. “I won’t move until you’re done,” I announced, “I’ll be as still as a stone, Mama. I promise!”

And what did she do? Instead of rushing to seize the opportunity, she pressed me to her breast, and kissed my face, and said my name, as if she was seeing me for the first time. Only then did she proceed with her painting.

It would be my last silhouette.

From then on I looked at the portraits with new eyes, and struggled to read them. I spent hours before that wall in the nursery, studying the curves of the lines between dark and light. Still, it was hard to see those silhouettes as more than mere black surfaces.

“I don’t think I’m very good at reading the truth,” I admitted to Mama the following day.

“You’ll get there eventually,” she said. “It takes plenty of practice.”

That might have been true, but for plenty of practice you needed plenty of discipline, something that I was hard put to muster at less than nine years of age. My illiteracy was so frustrating to me that I decided to take extreme measures: I considered involving my sister.

You have to understand: Gretl and I had nothing in common, aside from a last name and parents. As far back as I can remember, she was surrounded by an invisible shield that screened her off from life, and life from her. It was rare that she asked a question or expressed an interest, even rarer that she displayed a reaction to anything, apart from perhaps a little smile or an apathetic gesture. Usually Gretl did exactly what was expected of her. Her shadow, I secretly believed, wasn’t concealing any truth I wasn’t already long familiar with.

But in the end that wasn’t the reason I decided against inviting her to join me in my shadow-reading. Mama had told her secret to me alone, it was a bond between us. I didn’t want to share it with anyone else.

So I kept it to myself, and postponed the analysis of shadows to some unspecified point in the future, like a piece of boring homework—I should have made more of an effort to tease out their secrets! Maybe I could have prevented what happened later. Mama’s silhouette, for example: How much of what I know today, and how much *more* than that, might I have been able to read there?

Mama had been raised in the convent at Pasing, and had therefore received an education ill-suited to prepare her for the wider world. She was an innocent creature who saw the purpose of marriage as the production of children, just as they’d taught her at the nunnery. And she’d fallen in love with, of all people, Herr Salz, who, having worked as a waiter in London and half the world besides, knew every trick in the book, not a few of them dirty.

Though I’m reluctant to describe him as that, Papa was considered an ideal gentleman. His handsome silhouette portrait gave nary a hint of his most distinctive features. His eyes held a striking grey-blue chilliness. And he was short—too short to be an entirely attractive man. And I might add: this wasn’t the only respect in which he was lacking.

Only one silhouette in my family was more exhaustively scrutinized and admired than my father’s: that of my Aunt Alli. Every man who saw it wanted to make her acquaintance, and every woman made haste to drag her man away from it. Aunt Alli’s profile stood out as clearly from the others as she stood apart from the rest of the family. This was probably due to the fact that she’d entered this life under genealogically hazy circumstances: she was the result of an early indiscretion on the part of my grandmother, Maria Franziska Grasberger, which was then tidied up by means of a hasty marriage to the simple and honest Herr Olwerther. An open family secret. Even those who didn’t actually *know* it suspected. No one else in the family came close to Aunt Alli’s beauty, charm, and lust for life. Even her love of luxury and extravagance seemed attractive to members of the other and sometimes even of the same sex. Had she lived during the time of Ludwig I, her silhouette would have hung in Munich’s Gallery of Beauties. For as long as anyone could remember, she’d borne the nickname “Countess Guckerl.”

But already in her younger years her destiny began to show its blemishes: she had plenty of suitors. One of them, a Baron, who was especially intent on catching her, overwhelmed her with gifts, among them a wiry, spider-thin greyhound, with which Aunt Allie was so enamored that Grandma sent it back immediately, since she understood that such sumptuous presents were a definite sign that the Baron’s admiration was far from Platonic. She put an end to the liaison and began to take steps to marry her frivolous daughter off. Now, finding Aunt Alli a husband was no great chore. The choice fell on Herr Joseph Brem, a solid type, and he fell for Alli. Joseph Brem, like my father, used to be a headwaiter at the Bamberger Hof, and by that time had taken over the lease of the much-frequented Munich Station Bar.

At their wedding they were forced to suffer through that idiotic custom of tearing the veil in two, so as merrily to announce: Tonight her virginity will be destroyed! In Aunt Alli’s case, however, such a declaration was far from accurate. Mama prepared a special silhouette of her sister especially for this fête. Afterwards, everyone who saw it understood immediately: She was Uncle Brem’s greatest luxury good—and that was saying something, considering that, thanks to his lease, he was stinking rich (as he was sure to inform anyone who couldn’t flee quickly enough, for example by mentioning that he’d been one of the first passengers to accompany Graf von Zeppelin for a flight on his new airship). From him she received a three-stranded pearl necklace—not cultivated pearls, but pearls from the bottom of the sea—with matching earrings, rubies, and emerald rings. She was considered one of the most elegant women in Munich, draped exclusively in tailored clothes, all of them prepared at Schober’s, where she occasionally mounted a life-sized, stuffed, and discreetly walleyed horse in order to evaluate the width, length, and pleats of her riding skirt.

The blemishes on her destiny began to spread, though Uncle Brem apparently picked up on it neither from her lifestyle nor her silhouette: Aunt Alli had plenty of

affairs, as well. She began an especially serious one in early 1914 with one Herr Tott, son of the owner of the Regina Palace Hotel on Lenbachplatz. The two met occasionally, dined together, reveled in music. They rarely attended plays—after all, you had to think too much there. But Aunt Alli never missed a performance of *Tristan and Isolde*, even though she was completely unmusical. In this particular show, adultery was celebrated, and Aunt Alli, champagne to her left, Herr Tott to her right, simply melted. She was predisposed that way and simply couldn’t help it, just as Tristan and Isolde couldn’t help it, because Brangäne had mixed something into the potion.

“You’d better enjoy it in silence,” Mama counselled her once again, as I listened on the sly, during afternoon coffee klatch in January, on the eve of my ninth birthday—since for Aunt Alli “keeping a secret” was an utterly foreign phrase, and she’d been narrating her adventures in salacious detail.

“Not on your life! If I kept it all to myself, it would be almost as if it had never happened!” (With which sentiment I, if only retrospectively, absolutely have to agree.)

“Aren’t you afraid that Joseph will find out?”

“Of course! That’d be frightful!” Aunt Alli wolfed down an obscenely large piece of peanut-brittle and went on, with her mouth full: “But you all won’t tell on me, will you?”

She looked at Mama, who immediately shook her head, and then at my father, who did likewise. Aunt Alli’s humor enlivened every gathering. Admittedly, these gatherings had to include at least one man, in order to keep Aunt Alli from getting bored.

Mama, a much tenderer soul than her sister, asked: “Don’t you want to have children, then?”

“Of course we do!” cried Aunt Alli. “Half a dozen at least!”

“But then how can you be sure,” whispered Mama, “that all of the little ones . . .”

“. . . will be his?” Alli finished for her. She shrugged her shoulders. “Well, one can’t be *sure*.”

My parents exchanged a look.

“Oh,” said Aunt Alli, “a little mixing of the bloodline never did a family any harm. Sometimes the prettiest children come from outside the fold. Just look at me.”

Even my generally sober father joined in the laughter that followed. Mama’s response was different: lowered eyes and a bright blush. She couldn’t defend herself against such jibes, she was simply too sweet. Indeed, she presumably thought she had to put up with as much of such impudence as her sister dished out, since my mother and father had Aunt Alli to thank for their lease on the Löwenbräukeller.

A few years earlier, she’d had the idea of setting out to see the Öberschte, the head of the Löwenbräu brewery—wearing one of her most sophisticated outfits, topped with a delicate black fascinator—in order to beguile him, to toast their fruitful collaboration with glasses of beer, meanwhile managing to insinuate a bit of fine print into their pleasant conversation: Saying that, if he were to grant Alli’s sister and her husband the lease on the Löwenbräukeller after the current one expired, then the Brems *might* (here she inserted a pause, then repeated this seemingly innocent word:

might) consider continuing to serve Löwenbräu beer at the railway station bar, or *might* . . . *might* pass the concession on to a different Munich brewery.

No *might* about it, that would have meant a tremendous loss for the Löwenbräu brewery. Back then, people didn’t yet travel south by car—and everyone setting off for the Tyrol, Italy, and points further, inevitably stopped in at the Munich railway station to sip, swig, and spill the famous beer. So that the Öberschte was left with no other choice—which as it happened was, in economic terms at least, the best choice. My father turned out to be a clever businessman, I have to give him that. Under him the establishment boomed, especially during Carnival season, during which he, a Rheinlander, succeeded by means of extravagant decorations and cabaret performances in drawing all sorts of customers to the Löwenbräukeller, who greatly amused themselves there, filling the grubby, smoke-stained corners of the place with whoops and shouts. When the season was over, he carried more than one hundred thousand gold marks to the bank.

However, during the Carnival procession, for which the Löwenbräukeller had, as a matter of fact, its own float, drawn by a pair of draft horses, it wasn’t my father who was enthroned way up on top—rather my grandmother, just as she was on the wall of silhouettes.

Maria Franziska Olwerther, the vigilant matriarch, was an active, brainy, but also overbearing woman, who wasn’t about to retire without a struggle. As fief of the Löwenbräukeller’s *garde manger*, she oversaw its operations in a snow-white apron. Since she was a co-holder of the establishment’s lease, there were inevitably quarrels, above all between her and my father, since she laid so much stock in a well-run business—whereas my father put the emphasis on profit.

Grandmother’s silhouette greatly resembled that of a toddler: a triple chin, podgy nose, and rubbery lips; the only significant difference were the bushy eyebrows. One suspected that even as a young woman she hadn’t been the sort that a man would give a second look. (Aunt Alli, that early indiscretion, must have been sired in the dark by a man as desperate for sex as he was dazzlingly handsome.)

Sometimes, however, it is precisely the ugliest people who dedicate themselves to the preservation of beauty. First thing every morning, before going in to work, Grandmother polished the brass plate above the doorbell of her Munich residence. The house lay directly opposite the Löwenbräukeller, on the corner where the Briennerstraße debouched onto Stiglmaierplatz.

Having been summoned by her, I rang that doorbell on January 22, 1914, my birthday. The girl who answered, naturally clad in a white bonnet, showed me inside. The living room was typically bourgeois, it even had a kind of dais by the window, where Grandma sat, as she so often did, looking out onto Stiglmaierplatz. Beside her stood an expansive oaken sideboard, displaying a stuffed fox with glass eyes that my father, a passionate hunter in his younger years, had shot.

“Ah, Lolo, take a look in the sideboard,” said Grandma. I can still hear her croaking Bavarian.

My German sounded tame in comparison: “Do you have something for me?” My father set great store by my not speaking Bavarian, and corrected my pronunciation at every opportunity, presumably to tick off Grandma.

I cautiously folded back the doors of the sideboard, a little afraid that the stuffed fox might snap at me, and found a toy dog with a button on its ear, staring at me with a heartbreaking look. I immediately clutched it to my breast.

“What’s its name?” I asked her.

“What do you think it should be?” she replied.

I looked at him for a moment. “Foxl,” I answered.

“Foxl?! But it’s a dog!”

“Can’t a dog be named Foxl?”

“A fox in dog’s clothing. We already have one of those in the family.”

“We have a fox? Really?”

She didn’t answer that—and it would be years before I realized what she’d meant. Instead, she stared out again at the Löwenbräukeller, as if scanning the horizon for foul weather.

“Look, Lolo, don’t worry,” she said, without shifting her gaze or blinking, “no matter what happens, I’ll take care of the family, and make sure that everything goes well. Nobody can stop me from doing that.”

Nobody—except for one.

Grandma made the acquaintance of Death two days after my birthday. She suffered a stroke during a visit to the Tegernsee. They took her to the hospital. She lay there unconscious for hours. Mama dabbed the sweat from her brow. Aunt Alli lingered in the doorway, as if overcome by a fear of contagion. Dread hung in the air. You could hear it in the stillness. Today I ask myself what exactly they were dreading. Certainly the sisters feared losing a person they loved. But that wasn’t all. I’m convinced that they were afraid of what would happen to them once their protector was gone.

The burial took place beside the praying marble angel at the Eastern Cemetery. As we were leaving, Aunt Alli caught up with me by Doctor Gudden’s tomb, and said softly to me, in spite of the shock: “You know, Lola, the two of us look better than anyone else in our mourning outfits.”

Aunt Alli was hiding her fear and what’s more, she had hardly any foresight. But if you’ve been paying attention, you will have understood: With Grandma not only had our oldest family member departed, but also our guardian, our *garde famille*. The old order of things was no more, even if this was at first only suggested by a minor change: Grandma’s silhouette was removed from the wall and those of my parents, along with Aunt Alli and Uncle Brem, were raised to the highest position. In the process of which, the new hooks weren’t placed with precision: Anyone who looked closely could see that my father’s silhouette hung just a little higher than the rest.

After that, no more than a month passed before the incident that would steer the course of our lives in a fresh direction. Lion Feuchtwanger, the famous writer and frequently seen guest at the Löwenbräukeller, even referred to it in his novel *Success*, though he didn’t mention my parents by name.

I should tell you, before I go on, that in Munich, more than anyplace else, it was seen as essential that, whether you took your beer in a stein or a glass, it should be

topped by a full head of foam. Now no longer under my grandmother’s punctilious management, but rather my father’s new, profit-maximizing style, this began to get out of hand—and in ways that boded ill. These gargantuan heads of foam rubbed many an honest Munich drinker the wrong way. My father was accused of “unfair pouring.”

It came to trial—and in the first instance, my father was acquitted. But then Aunt Alli stood up in the courtroom, applauding as if she were at the opera, and shouted: “Bravo! *Braaavo!*” She lacked, as I said, foresight, since this applause, in turn, rubbed the public prosecutor the wrong way. The judgment was appealed. When it came up again, my father was found guilty. Ten days’ detention. All of the family’s efforts to reduce this to a fine backfired. He was one of those damned Northerners, and had to be made an example of.

On the day of the verdict the sky was ostentatiously blue. The family hadn’t delivered the disastrous news to me, the nine-year old daughter, in all honesty: Mama had simply told me that Papa would be going away for a while. Which is why, on that day, my greatest concern was for my little wooden animals. Arranging my various and brightly-colored Noah’s Ark menagerie was an arduous task. I labored at it all afternoon, until finally they crowded the whole front parlor. When my father came in, I called out, eager to show him my work. He didn’t react, didn’t even seem to notice me. He wandered into the room like a sleepwalker, loosing a scream when he stepped on a zebra. Now he was wide awake. He snatched a shotgun from his cabinet, shouted: “Let’s go hunting!” and swung its muzzle in all directions, annihilating my zoo.

I leapt up. “That’s mean!”

Since he showed no signs of stopping, I subjoined a phrase that I’d picked up from him: “How perfidious!” Of late he’d been labeling thus all things Bavarian.

Finally, he paused a moment. “You think *that’s* perfidious?” Only now he glanced at me, with a coldness unusual even for him, and I didn’t dare answer.

“I’ll show you perfidious,” he said, laying down his gun, and stepped over to the window to which I’d tied my Foxl with a little ribbon, and pushed him, so that the dog tumbled out and dangled at the end of his little leash above the ground. With a child’s vivid imagination, I imagined my Foxl was being strangled. I shrieked. I begged him to pull Foxl back inside.

But my father left the room—and shortly after that the city as well. He fled to Hamburg, *in order to find greater freedom in America*, as he phrased it in a brief note that Mama discovered that same evening on the kitchen table.

In the hours that followed, weeping reddened her eyes as much as a smoky Carnival party at the Löwenbräukeller. When I asked her how long Papa would be gone for, she answered me with more tears. She took his silhouette down from the wall, looked at it yearningly, and soaked it with her tears. When she went to bed, she laid it beside her on my father’s pillow.

The same night, Uncle Brem set out after him, and found my father the following day in the Hanseatic city, before he had a chance to board an outgoing steamer. They came back arm-in-arm, and we celebrated with a family supper, almost a plagiarism of Da Vinci’s, albeit without Jesus, though with Mama as Mary, who

throughout the meal patted my father’s hand, as if to say: “It’s okay that you left us in the lurch. These things happen. All that matters is you’re back.”

But was he, really? I believe, no, I *know* that Uncle Brem had merely brought back a gentleman called Salz, but not my father. My real father had left us long ago. My real father would have spared us what was to come.

Herr Salz spent ten days in prison in Marquartstein and so served his sentence. After which my parents had their lease revoked. Herr Salz had to cast about for a new establishment. He set down to this task at the Café Luitpold in Briennerstraße, where he leafed through the trade journals and agonized over the future.

That’s what he told us, in any case. He never let any of us come along. Those afternoons belonged to Herr Salz—and Herr Salz, during those afternoons, belonged to the coffeehouse. There he would before long stumble across a for-sale notice whose text, composed in the dry, awkward fashion of a history textbook, was riddled with the name of the same hotel that would soon dominate my life.

The Fürstenhof in Saxony’s Leipzig did not originally bear the name Fürstenhof. The house, which would only later come to be known as the Fürstenhof, was erected in 1770 by the wealthy Leipzig banker Eberhard Heinrich Löhr on the promenade, opposite the theater. For a long period of time, the future Fürstenhof was a beloved resort for the polite society of this flourishing city of commerce, books, and universities. But in 1813 imperial troops occupied the town, and the grand army made it their headquarters. Napoleon came, and the Fürstenhof’s landlord died. His widow and daughter were forced to yield the Fürstenhof to Napoleon’s city commander, who filled the place with raucous parties. Following Napoleon’s withdrawal, the Löhr ladies, back from their exile in Weimar, returned with precious items of the finest quality. So that the family could dine in the Fürstenhof in a manner befitting their rank, the Löhrs furnished the Fürstenhof with a luxuriant dining hall, which they had adorned with serpentine stone, “the marble of the Saxon Kings,” and doors of carved ebony. The Fürstenhof remained in the possession of the family until 1886. At that point, the Fürstenhof was purchased by the Leipzig Real Estate Company, which partitioned the property and resold it at great profit. In 1889 the building was converted into the Hotel Fürstenhof. Now, at last, Leipzig possessed a first-class hotel, affectionately referred to by the Saxons as the “Fürstenhöfle”, where everyone of rank or name gathered to socialize.

Entranced by the thought that in acquiring the Fürstenhof he would be all but obtaining for himself the title of Fürst, Prince, Herr Salz returned home bearing the notice as if it were a trophy. Assuming that Mama would unquestioningly help him buy it, supplying the necessary cash which would, for her family, be mere chump change, he began to read the description to her out loud.

He got no further than the fourth word.

“Saxony?” she interrupted.

Herr Salz nodded, and started again from the top.

Again, he got no further than the fourth word.

“Saxony!” she cried.
 One last time, he went back to the beginning.
 This time, she stopped him even sooner.
 “Saxony,” she said. And that was that.

He had underestimated the Municher in her. Mama hadn’t the slightest interest in separating herself from her home, which she loved in so many ways, even for its defects.

She loved Munich for our apartment in Lucile-Grahn-Straße, right around the corner from the Prince Regent Theater, where we’d moved into in March 1914, just after the beerfoam trial. It had a spacious nursery that Mama gleefully decorated with her silhouettes, alluding to the fact that there would be plenty of room for more. Likewise, she loved the Hofgarten, where we occasionally observed Prince Albrecht (whose silhouette Mama secretly longed to cut) maniacally ripping out snowdrops. And she loved it for the zoologically broadminded gentleman who promenaded daily past our front door with a fox on a leash, for every time she saw him, she said: “Grandma would have enjoyed that!” Above all she loved Munich because it represented the natural environment for a creature by this period all but extinct, namely, the Schienaramma-Resi, the rail-pushing woman. This was an exclusively female species whose members sat on little iron seats, thickly wrapped in winter, clad in dirndls in summer, winters and summers alike wearing traditional Bavarian hats with jaunty feathers, and who—for instance on Max-Weber-Platz, the junction of several streetcar lines—used long metal sticks to push the rails into the correct configuration, so that the passengers would arrive unscathed at their respective destinations. Mama felt, as she once told me, profoundly connected to these Rail-Pushers, in virtue of their responsible “steering work,” even when she hadn’t exchanged so much as a word with the women. Mama did not love Munich’s Café Luitpold, where Herr Salz spent more time than in our apartment. But then, she did love the city for its old-fashionedness, its populace with their resistance to progress, of which Uncle Brem furnished an excellent example. Every time he stepped out of his station bar, and one of those stinking automobiles hissed by, he’d proclaim: “That has no future.”

You could say the same for the Fürstenhof, the short Herr Salz must have thought as he saw himself confronted with Mama’s unconditional love of Munich. A full-blooded Bavarian like her would never invest her family’s fortune in Saxon property. So Herr Salz had his hands tied: He didn’t buy the hotel, and we didn’t move to Leipzig. If only that’s how things had ended!

Yet Mama’s love of Munich fostered a new, foolish love, one which would have a destructive effect in every conceivable way. Aunt Alli shared the following with me in a letter, which I received only after my parents had begun to distance themselves from her. She told me: One of her more unbecoming hobbies was collecting the love-notes she’d been slipped by various gentlemen. Among these many writings there was even

a nude photograph. All of these trophies were preserved in a box in Aunt Alli's linen closet. That was more than a little stupid.

The trysts with her men took place so frequently in hotels in Rome, Paris, and elsewhere, that gradually Uncle Brem began to find her absences a bit questionable. He decided to have his wife shadowed by a private detective. As she set off once again for Wiesbaden—God only knows for what kind of cure, since she was fit as a fiddle—she became beset by doubts as to whether she'd locked her box of mementoes properly. From a hotel phone-booth she called my poor, innocent Mama: On some pretext she had her enter Aunt Alli's room, in order to take this box before Uncle Brem could find it. But she impressed upon her that she should under no circumstances open it.

The detective had been listening in on this conversation. Mama behaved like a loyal sister. Her brother-in-law met her at the door: “You're too late, Rosa.” Then he passed her the nude photograph. The naked man was lolling in a pose that distantly recalled the aesthetic of one of Michelangelo's frescoes. He was stretched out as if he were trying to make himself look taller.

Even days later, after Mama had managed to get ahold of herself again, she had trouble deciding which hurt her more: that the man was *her* man—or that she hadn't recognized him at first glance, because she was so ill-acquainted with his naked body. (In the conjugal bedroom—Mama and Aunt Alli had occasionally discussed this—intimacies were exchanged only at night and with the light extinguished. If at all.) Mama kept the nude photograph and studied it behind closed doors. So that was her husband. He seemed to enjoy posing like that, bare as Adam. Was it that he would have liked more naughtiness on her part? Would he loll like that in front of her, too (and let himself be photographed in the act)?

Mama, my much too good Mama, attempted to imitate her sister's free-spiritedness: She blamed neither Aunt Alli nor Herr Salz. She told as much to the adulterers themselves. She was convinced that they were not at fault; Aunt Alli was naturally hungry for love, and Herr Salz had merely sought some distraction from the miserable situation of his life. Rather than rage, Mama felt guilt that she'd driven her husband to such extreme measures as an affair. She was sorry. She spent plenty of time pondering how she might be able to make herself a better—or, should he so desire—a worse wife, and came to the conclusion that she would have to renounce one of her loves in order to save the other.

The following month, we moved to Saxony.

Uncle Brem, the other cuckold, was less understanding: He bought a revolver. It was, quite un-Chekhovianly, never actually fired, yet fulfilled its purpose—the threat of life-shortening consequences—through its mere presence: in as much as it rested beneath Uncle Brem's pillow, and thus beside Aunt Alli's head. He had placed it there so as not to fall prey to his siren wife's arts of seduction, and thus make a divorce untenable. Once the latter had been executed and Aunt Alli was ousted from her position in Munich society, civilized Uncle Brem nevertheless granted her a handsome settlement, and she disappeared into the genteel spa town Bad Kreuth, where she played the bereaved divorcee. There, soon after arriving, she fell in love with a

surgeon, Herr Doktor Steinmetz, within weeks sold off her rubies, bracelets, rings, and so on, in order to set him up with a practice, including tortoiseshell vases and Nymphenburg teapots for over a hundred marks each, and regretted it more than a little when he informed her that he was going to marry a younger woman.

The very same week I received the letter from her in which she confessed her misconduct. She wrote: “You have to know, or else it would be like it never happened.” Back then I wasn’t mature enough for such stories, but Aunt Alli, who clearly saw in me a natural ally, paid no heed. She probably knew she didn’t have much time left. Shortly after sending the letter, Aunt Alli accompanied a salesman on an automobile tour along the Isar. Since the roads had not been swept yet, Aunt Alli wore an enormous, flowing veil to protect herself from the dust. Just as they were passing the German Museum, this veil got tangled in one of the car’s wheels, and strangled her as they drove.

At the funeral home, they kept her coffin closed. Even stern Uncle Brem was said to have been moved to tears. I can’t confirm that, since my parents, Gretl and I had at that point been living in Leipzig for some time, and hadn’t returned for the service. Herr Salz’s decision. “An unnecessary burden for your mother,” he claimed. A terrifying burden for him, I say. He certainly knew how much he’d contributed to Aunt Alli’s untimely end. Our only leave-taking ceremony was when Mama, weeping, removed her (and Uncle Brem’s) silhouettes from the wall of our private apartment in the Fürstenhof.

Aunt Alli’s death was entered in the records of the Munich police as an accident. I’m not so sure. She’d squandered almost everything: property, husband, the close relationship with her sister. Now she wanted to give up the rest as well—but this with unyielding self-confidence and the style of a grand lady of the opera! I believe she deliberately wore the veil unusually tight around her neck, so tight that she could barely draw breath, that she let it flutter from the car, growing longer and longer, like a fishing-line, waiting expectantly, with a heavily beating heart, in anticipation of the greatest climax of her life, until the car’s wheel finally snatched it, and ripped her backward with a single jolt.

Are you listening to me? I hope so—to be honest: I presume so! You have to remember everything. No excuses! Take notes if you like. There’s no time left for repeating. If my children are going to understand who I am, who I really am, they have to know how it all started.

And please—I’m aware that before each beginning, there’s always another. That’s why I began with an ending: Aunt Alli left her life behind her; my decimated family the Bavarian blue-and-white—and I, forgive me the pathos, my childhood.

Excerpt from Part III
Aveline Salz, 1959-1960

You don't suspect a thing, you're on the way home and feel safe because nothing has ever happened to you, maybe you're humming a song to yourself or fiddling with the house keys in your hand, maybe you're running through a shopping list in your head, milk, butter, potatoes, and that's when he grabs you, you have a second or two before he clamps his hand over your mouth, but you don't scream because you are still thinking about milk, butter, potatoes, and you can't grasp that you're being assaulted right that minute by a man, a man who is this much stronger than you, you had no idea how strong men are, you always assumed you'd be able to defend yourself in an emergency, but try as you may you can't so much as tear his hand away from your mouth, you're struggling, trying to bite and scratch him, but it's much too late for that, one of his arms is enough to keep you in check, you're not on the street anymore, but rather in the thickets in a park or in an alley, and even if someone saw you they'd probably look away, most people don't want to get in trouble, but you're still hoping for help when he signals for you to be quiet and takes his hand off your mouth, you scream right away and he punches you in the face, which makes you lose consciousness briefly, and as you slowly come to your senses your head is hurting, you can taste blood and you're trembling, though you don't know whether you're trembling because you're afraid or because you're cold, probably both, because he has taken your clothes off and has one hand gripping your neck, he's looking at you, and that's the worst moment, much worse than everything that comes after it, because you realize that's just the beginning, it's not even close to over yet, and you look him in the eye and try to tell him without words to stop please and let you go, and you want to cry so that he'll understand what he's doing to you, you're hoping to get to him this way, and although there aren't any tears in your eyes he takes his hand off your neck, and you smile, and then he punches you in the face again, and this time you don't pass out, it just hurts all the way into your head, it's throbbing in your neck and in your forehead, nonetheless you're still trying to concentrate and remember what you're supposed to do in a situation like this, but your thoughts keep turning to milk, butter, potatoes, to somewhere where he can't follow you, or so you think, but there's nowhere in the whole world where he can't find you, because from this day onwards, from this hour on, you'll never be alone again, he'll go with you, regardless of how far you travel, he'll be right there, and no matter how well things are going, he'll always be a part of your life, even in your happiest moments he'll turn up and remind you how quickly things can go wrong - you can read all that in his eyes as he looms over you, he knows he isn't just hurting you and creating terrible memories, he's taking your life away, and there's nothing you can do about it, you can only look at how happy it makes him, how much good it does him to know that he'll possess you not just in this moment but all your life, and even though you're still trying to resist you've long since given up, he isn't close to being done with you, but even if he were to stop right now you'd belong to him, so you let him keep going because you think it'll be over sooner this way, you hold your face as far away as possible, feeling his moist breath on your skin, and then, as you look down,

you notice something, and you ask yourself whether you're just imagining this, but no, the man who's doing this to you, this man whom you've already decided you'll report to the police, so that he can't be out there and assault women any longer, this man has no shadow, and right when you understand that, he puts his hands around your neck, his fingernails cutting into your skin, and you try one last time to resist, but you realize you've used up all your energy, you're never going to go to the police and you're never going to remember this moment, because you're dying, this is your last breath, this is your last thought, you're dying, and your murderer has no shadow.

This is the story with which Mutti has put you to bed whenever she is drunk, for as long as you can remember, you tell your brother in a letter. You describe how she always tucks you into the wool blanket, how she gives you a kiss that smells of beer, and how she says, she feels bad about always having to tell you this story, "this terrible story," she sometimes adds. She says she doesn't know how else she can keep you safe from the shadowless men out there, she explains that she has to describe the danger in as much detail as possible, so that it's impressed upon you, so you'll recognize it when you see it on the street, and that's why, she repeats as she turns off the light, she has to tell you the story even though she feels bad about it, she's only trying to protect you. She's so careful about the words she chooses as she says goodnight, she seems almost sober, and it shows that she's trying to make up for telling you this story. But nothing can make up for it. You hate the story, every last word of it. At the same time, you know you'll have trouble falling asleep if you haven't heard it in a while. This story is just as much a part of your life as eating and breathing. Sometimes you try to imagine what it would be like if Mutti stopped telling this story. But the idea frightens you even more than the story itself frightens you. If Mutti stopped telling you the story, you might forget that there are men like that out there, and if you forgot that they existed, it would be much easier for them to attack you.

You often ask Mutti whether something like in the story has ever happened to her. She always points out in reply that she's obviously still alive - but only because she always remembers what a shadowless man can do to a woman, or rather, what shadowless men have always done to women.

Of course you have your doubts, you write to your brother, you're seventeen years old and you don't believe in Santa Claus, in God, or in shadowless men. But what you believe or don't believe is one thing, and what you're afraid of is another. It's strange how afraid you can be of something you don't believe exists. In the final year of the war, as a two-year-old, you saw some terrible things that you don't remember, and thanks to Mutti you can remember some terrible things that haven't happened yet.

The fear can't simply be thought away. It's there when men stand right behind you in the queue at the vegetable stand and you can feel their breath on your neck. It's there when you share a paternoster lift with a man. It's there when someone is sitting next to you in the doctor's waiting room and his knee is too close to yours. You carry the fear deep inside you, you grew up with it, you don't know how to cut yourself off from it and you're afraid you can't. Over all these years, Mutti has never given you

the impression that she’s found a way to fight the fear. She’s only found a way to numb it. Mutti drinks more than she eats. She won’t drink anything but Löwenbräu. She only drinks out of a proper beer stein, and never, God forbid, straight out of a bottle “like the plebs!”

Mutti empties (or consumes, as she’d put it) up to eight bottles per day, but you wouldn’t know it from looking at her. Her dresses and blouses are at least two sizes too big for her, and in them she looks shrunken. You’ve offered more than once to go shopping for new things with her, but Mutti is of the opinion that her clothes are as good as new, and it’s not like you’re that keen to go into a clothing store with her. She’d only tell the saleswoman yet again that she’s the widow of the famous actor Alfons Ervig, and then refuse to buy anything as soon as the saleswoman let on that she’d never heard of an Alfons Ervig. Mutti should just keep wearing her old things - after all, all she does is stay home and listen to records until late at night: Carmen, the Ring cycle, Lortzing, her so-called Operas of the Magnet Mountain, not that you’ve ever asked her where this mountain is or if it even exists. Whenever the neighbours hammer on the walls or ceiling, Mutti plays Mozart’s Kleine Nachtmusik at the maximum volume.

After going through Euripides’ Medea for the hundredth time, a play she already knew by heart, she recently went back to studying Faust, which she can also recite word for word. Every time you walk past the living room, she insists on reciting a passage to you. The more Löwenbräu she’s consumed, the longer the passage and the more theatrical her delivery will be, which is why you always hurry past the living room, which doubles as the dining room and Mutti’s bedroom, so that she won’t see you, or if she does, you can claim you couldn’t hear her.

The two-bedroom apartment is definitely too small for you both. It feels to you like the walls are shrinking, windows are turning into peepholes, you can hardly move in the bathroom without knocking something over, and your feet stick out off the edge of the mattress, which is too short. As you tell your brother in a letter, you know that he spends every spare minute when he’s not studying working, so that Mutti won’t have to work in her condition - she receives a modest pension - and so that you can finish school in peace. But firstly, it wasn’t your decision to take the Abitur exams instead of doing an apprenticeship, despite the family’s straitened circumstances. Mutti insisted you take them, so that you could be “more than a mother and housewife” someday. And secondly, you ask yourself, and him, how long things can go on this way. To be honest, it doesn’t seem fair to you that he has a life of his own in Montreux while you’re here looking after Mutti in Munich. He always sounds smug during his rare phone calls home, which makes it seem all the more unfair. It’s just because he supports you financially and thinks he’s the only member of the family in a position to recover the Fürstenhof - a hotel in Leipzig that the GDR took over after the death of your grandfather. It’s not your fault that you’re the younger sibling. You would swap places with him in a heartbeat. In real life, you won’t need anything they teach you at school anyway.

But what is “real life” anyway? Half your teachers are old-time Nazis who need walking sticks to get around, and the other half are old-time Communists who strut around with an arrogant air of “I told you so.” They always talk about life as if it only

starts properly after you've finished school. But you'd already seen quite a bit of life even before you saw the inside of a school building. You write in the letter to your brother - who knows this, of course, but you just want to remind him the way you sometimes remind yourself - that you were born during the war, that Mutti fled across Germany with both of you in tow, that you lost your father far too early.

In your letter, you say you know he might think you never understood the consequences of this loss, because you, unlike him, were too young to be fully conscious of who your father was. You barely grieved for him because he only existed for you in a naïve way. BUT, you write in capital letters, BUT that is simply not true. Because your first memory is of your father's burial. You never told anyone about it. Whom would you tell anyway? You were only four years old then, but you still remember his friends and former colleagues giving speeches about his illustrious career as a State Actor, about a time before the bombs and before you. That is another thing you consider unfair: that your father survived two world wars only to die of the common flu one year after Germany surrendered.

The days after the funeral, when your brother had already left for school, Mutti lay down with you in bed. "You shouldn't be left alone after such a heavy blow," she said. Thinking back on it, you wonder who Mutti meant when she said "you." Her husband's death had robbed her of something. You couldn't name it when you were four years old, but you could tell. Today you would call that something courage - the courage to face life out there. That must have been why she never met another man even though she was only widowed in her forties. Mutti, on the other hand, always insists that men were hard to come by and even cripples and shell shock casualties were highly sought after. Besides, she'd never find anyone like "her Alfons" again.

That makes you regret all the more that you don't have any photos of him. They've all fallen victim to incendiary bombs. You would have liked to have a picture of this man who was so one-of-a-kind that his loss could make a woman completely lose her courage. You wonder how she managed to leave Karlsruhe and move to Munich with the two of you after his death, despite being an anxious widow. She'd done it in order to ensure the place of her childhood would be the place of your childhood. You tell your brother in the letter that you were thankful that he'd done the groceries, brought you to school, and cleaned the apartment whenever Mutti was in one of those "phases" in which she retreated into a space in her head where she couldn't be reached. Every time she'd respond to any question, no matter how loudly you asked it, with snippets from a play you'd never heard of called *Aimée*, every time she'd wander through Munich with you in hand for hours, looking for Löwenbrau, every time she'd box your ears for bringing her beer in a wine glass - your brother was there for you. He calmed Mutti, brought you both home, and protected you. And that is why, you write to him, he must think he saved you from her.

But he hasn't.

Maybe you should have written to him much earlier that Mutti has been telling you something for ages, something you can't quite put a finger on. It is a story, yes, but also a warning, and it feels much more real than both. It started when you were still young, not long after your father's death. Mutti varied the details over the years, but the story remains essentially the same. When she's had something to drink, which

happens fairly often, she tells you this story in the evenings before you go to sleep. Did she also tell him this story? you ask in the letter. You can't remember him ever having been around when she told the story, even though you slept in the same room. Was he hiding? Did Mutti split you up so that she could feed the story to each of you separately? And if so, why hasn't he ever mentioned it?

Perhaps for the same reason that you've never mentioned it to him until now. You wanted to downplay the story, to prevent something about it from escaping into the world and attacking you. Besides, you didn't want your brother to be angry at Mutti, as he often was when you all lived together. Because despite everything, you still love her. You aren't mad at Mutti even though you sometimes want to be. You can see how difficult it is for her to tell the story, even today, after all these years. You feel sorry for her, so sorry that you'd like nothing better than to be able to tell her she doesn't have to repeat the story any more. She's done what she could to warn you, and you'll be careful. But you can't say that. Because you know, and you have known for a while now, that Mutti has to tell the story, that she won't have any peace without it. And that's why your only hope is that your brother will be able to help you. You don't know how, since even if he could take you in in Montreux, it's not as if you could leave Mutti on her own. But he's your big brother and he'll know what to do. He'll save you, this time for real.

That's the main reason why you're writing this letter.

The next morning, you drink Frauengold for breakfast, as you do on so many other mornings. You have never told your brother about that in the letters. How could you admit to him that there's something wrong with you. A few months ago, you saw an advertisement for Frauengold, and even though you don't identify with the hysterical secretary at all — I won't just put up with everything! — her outburst reminded you of the rage that sometimes smolders in you at night, when Mutti plays music so loudly in the living room that you can't get to sleep. So you bought a bottle of the medicine, drank a few gulps at night before brushing your teeth, and it worked: even Wagner couldn't keep you up. But Frauengold doesn't just help you with that. When you drink it, you feel stronger, and you spend less time thinking about why you're so attracted by the unshaven chin of the cowboy in the Marlboro ads, or why you once recently stopped at the door of the boys' changing room of the school's gym and stared at the silhouettes of naked boys through the rectangular frosted windows. Because as soon as you start thinking about it, you know that something's wrong with you. Something must be wrong with you, or you'd behave properly and wouldn't need Frauengold at breakfast. Of course you know that the medical cordial contains some alcohol. But it's a precise dose of alcohol, like the alcohol in cough syrup. It can't possibly be bad for you.

You generally bike to school, even in winter. The cold doesn't bother you. You like it when your face feels as if it's burning with the cold after a ride. And you're fast - you could easily shake off any pursuer.

But this morning you have to walk to school. Your bike has a flat tire and walking beats taking the overcrowded tram.

You're coming up to a mailbox. Getting nearer with every step. You can feel your heart beating as you take the letter out of your jacket pocket. It's a slim envelope - you could just slip it into the mailbox without thinking about the consequences. You check the Swiss address one more time and push it through the slit.

Now all you have to do is let go.

Then a man in a black leather jacket hurries towards you, his hair combed back like James Dean's. He takes a flat brown package out of his backpack.

You pull the envelope out again and quickly cross the street. A car honks. A caramel brown Volkswagen Beetle screeches to a halt, your hands land on the hood. Even though you know that it was your fault, you flip the driver off - so much for hysterical women! - and continue running.

You can post the letter later.

From your grades, anyone would think you have a stable family. You consistently get As, with only the odd B here or there. None of your teachers would believe you if you told them that your brother only comes to visit every few months, or that Mutti is your mother, or that your classmates only talk to you when they need homework help. So you're all the more surprised when Robert Völker strikes up a conversation with you during recess in the upper-year classroom. His expression reminds you of a boxer entering the ring: it's meant to project self-confidence so as to conceal his fear. But you know all about fear. No one can hide it from you. Lots of your classmates make fun of Robert's hook nose. You, on the other hand, like the idea of kissing it, which just goes to show that something isn't right about you. His blond hair successfully resists his attempts to tamp it down. Robert is definitely a nerd. He doesn't wear jeans or play football with the other boys. He doesn't ride a motorbike. He isn't just top of the class, but top of the whole school. He's one of the few people you don't have to check to find out whether they have a shadow. You're intrigued by the fact that he doesn't live with his parents any more. Everyone knows that he moved to Munich from Nuremberg; no one knows why.

"Do you know Dalí?" he asks.

You want to say something original but all you can come up with is: "Yes."

He presses on, unflustered, that nerd. Or perhaps he isn't a nerd after all, since nerds aren't supposed to be so unflappable. "There's an exhibition in the city and Dalí himself was there at the opening. Would you like to go? This afternoon?"

"With whom?" you ask.

His answer also doubles as a question: "With me?"

You decline politely, as Mutti would have expected you to do. You're aware that you sound laid back, not least because of the Frauengold.

After school, when you get home, Mutti is still sleeping, exhausted by her nightly musical escapades. You make yourself some soup from bouillon cubes and fill up on butter cookies. Back in your room, you put the letter on the table and contemplate it. You drink a glass of Frauengold. And then another. But you don't go back to the mailbox. Instead you put the letter with all the others, in a box you keep under a pile of sweaters in your closet. You have written nearly as many versions of this letter as Mutti has versions of the shadowless man. Every time you write one, you

think this will be the letter that your brother reads, and you really believe yourself, but by the time you're about to send it, at the very latest, you realize how angry Kurt used to be at Mutti when she let herself go, and you get worried, because you don't know what will happen if he reads your letter. Your fear of the unknown is even greater than your old familiar fears. Besides, an unsent letter isn't necessarily pointless. Not everything that's written down has to be read. You like stroking the edges of the envelopes you keep in chronological order, from the first, slightly yellowing envelope to the bright white ones from this year. You don't have to open any of the letters to remember what they contain. They contain your life, in precise doses. You used to put them in your brother's schoolbag or on his pillow and then hide them before he'd have a chance to find them. One day, you think, the day will come when he reads one of these letters. But you don't know what will be in it.

You dress warmly and sit directly under the street light on the bank of the Isar even though it's bright daylight. The street light will expose every man without a shadow as soon as it grows dark. You take up as much space as possible so that no one will come and sit next to you. Now and again you sip out of a green Fanta bottle that you've filled with Frauengold. You watch a bunch of teenage delinquents show each other their trading card collections and laugh huskily. Soon you've finished the whole bottle. When you get up to go to the art gallery, you wonder whether you're the only seventeen-year-old who calls other teenagers "delinquents."

You don't go out often, but today is your chance to pretend you're one of these delinquents too. You can already tell that if you hang around with Mutti and watch people from your bedroom window like predators in a zoo, you'll only grow more and more fearful. There is no man without a shadow, you tell yourself. There is no shadowless man.

But you still scrutinize every man to make sure he has one.

A poster hangs at the entrance to the art gallery. Dalí's mustache smiles down at the viewer. You're relieved that the gallery is quite deserted. No one will be inching past you to get a better view of a painting. You quickly spot Robert. Before you go up to him, you watch him look at art. You ask yourself what it would be like for him to look at you that way. You greet him at "The Font," but keep your distance so that he won't be tempted to try and shake your hand.

"You came," he says. He surprises you with a winning smile. You wouldn't have thought that your presence could ever make someone smile that way.

Again you want to say something original, but all you manage is: "Yes."

You walk through the exhibition together. Sometimes you read each other the descriptions beneath the pictures. More than once, you catch Robert observing you. In front of "The Discovery of America by Christopher Columbus," a new painting from this year, an older gentleman bumps into you, and you have to steady yourself on Robert's shoulder so as not to stumble and fall. You apologize right away.

"Don't worry about it," he says.

You hope your breath doesn't smell of alcohol. Robert can't possibly know that it's medicine.

At the gift shop at the end of the exhibition, you produce your wallet and buy three art prints. When Robert holds the door open for you at the exit, he wants to take at least a couple and hold them for you, but you make it clear that you can handle it.

Then Robert looks at his watch and excuses himself. But he insists on walking you to the tram. You can't tell him why you don't like taking the tram, but you also can't say you'd rather walk home. Then he'd insist on walking you back, and Mutti would be able to see him. So you give in and walk with him to the tram stop. On the platform, as the tram is pulling in, he holds out his hand to shake yours. You stumble backwards and step on one of the art prints. Robert picks it up and smooths out the creases with a swift motion. You're so grateful to him for not looking embarrassed at all. The doors open, and there's nothing you can do except get on. The elbows and shoulders of other passengers are touching your body. You try your best to conceal your panic. Now you're the boxer in the ring. If you only hadn't drunk the whole bottle of Frauengold - you could really use a sip right now. The door finally closes, separating you and Robert. He waves at you the way children wave, opening and closing his hand, and smiles that smile at you again. As the tram begins to move, you wonder if he's still looking at you.

The tram is full. It's rush hour. Should you be shielding the prints with your body so that they don't get crumpled, or shielding your body with the prints? You turn to face the door so you won't have to see the other passengers. You remind yourself that men without shadows don't exist. Your face is almost touching one of the tram windows, which your classmates call mirrors for tramps. You take a long look at yourself, your trousers, which you grew out of so long ago that they're starting to look like the cropped trousers Mutti would never let you buy, your bulky jacket, your ponytail, the bag hanging from your shoulders, and for the very first time in a long time: your smile.

You don't even know how it got there.

Next to you, a man with a heavily slicked side parting is leaning against the windows. He's probably an Italian worker. Your eyes meet, he smiles, and you quickly look away. Not far away, three grandmotherly women wearing loden coats with green felt hats are standing together. They keep each other balanced whenever the tram starts and stops by tugging on each other's coats. They smile at you too.

The tram brakes, and the Italian gets off. You don't. You stay on the tram and keep moving through nighttime Munich. You stay on it all the way until your stop. When you get off the tram and look over at the driver, it happens again: that special thing Robert showed you, a smile.

At home, you put the art prints up. The walls in your bedroom, which also used to be Kurt's room, are papered over with red and blue floral wallpaper, a standard choice for children's rooms. They disappear behind burning giraffes and melting clock faces and elephants on stilts. The room immediately looks bigger, and it seems to you as if you can breathe better, as if you'd installed a window and fresh air is streaming in.

When Mutti comes into your room, she doesn't so much as glance at the prints. But as soon as she sits down on the edge of the bed, she stares hard at you and tells you, her breath smelling of beer, that you shouldn't be going to art exhibitions because

they attract all sorts of odd folk. You nod. She’s right. After all, you and Robert were there too.

While she’s telling you the story, you keep looking over to the giraffes and clock faces and elephants.

Excerpt from Part IV

The Dark Area Produced by an Object Coming Between Rays Of Light and a Surface, 1989-1990

Trust the shadows, Emma. That's what I'm asking of you, as your future shadow, while you're still able to understand me. You'll lose this ability at birth at the very latest, just as you recently lost your embryonic tail and gills. Human beings! Before they even grasp what they possess, they've already lost it. That's why you have to listen to me right now. It's the only way you can find out what no one else will tell you.

Other shadows don't usually go to this much trouble. Not only do they respond indignantly to light, they also do so to ignorance. If human beings won't listen to us, they argue, why should we bother talking to them? To which I say: if we don't talk to them, how are they supposed to listen?

Here's what I expect in return for my trouble: a name.

We're always referred to as *so-and-so's shadow*. But we're not just the dark area produced by an object coming between rays of light and a surface, and certainly not just a useful vehicle for metaphors and overused puns. Anyone who thinks we're just slaves of physics, tied to our owners, should know we shadows have a will of our own. We don't have to imitate everything and everyone. There are plenty of questionable or downright ugly goings-on out there from which we distance ourselves. It's just our loyalty that makes us scarcely ever depart from our owners' sides.

Anyone who knows this, just as your grandmother did, will agree that every single one of us has earned the right to a name. Lola was a pioneer. She christened her shadow Figaro back in 1914. I won't be needing a name that's quite so extravagant. Any run-of-the-mill name will do. I don't think that's too much to ask, Emma. After all, you already have a name, even though neither of us has even been born.

But before then, we should make the most of the time we have. As your shadow, I can tell you everything. The truth. What really happened.

Of course I can't change anything about your past. But I can attempt to alter the future by telling you how you came to be, so that you learn from the story and don't make the same mistakes. If other people in your family had been warned by their shadows, I wouldn't have to help you understand who you are right now - there's no doubt of that.

The answer to that question almost always begins with a *she* and a *he*, in this case Margot Rübsam and Kurt Salz, your parents. There's also a *when*: 1989. And a *where*: Pößneck in the German Democratic Republic.

The only thing that's left is the *how*.

The opening act of this comedy – after all it has a happy ending: you're going to be born – took place on November 9th. At a few minutes before 7pm, during a press conference in East Berlin, the Italian journalist Riccardo Ehrman asked a grammatically odd question: "You have been speaking of mistakes. Do you not think it was a big mistake, the travel law you introduced now a few days ago?" His question was directed at Günter Schabowski, a member of the GDR's Politburo, whose shadow was kept busy under the glare of the flashlights while Schabowski responded by reading a

statement in perfect officialese from a sheet of paper. A journalist followed up with a question: "When will that come into effect?" To which Schabowski gave a grammatically odd response: "That comes into effect as far as I know is immediately, without delay." His words lead to the opening of the borders of the GDR on the very same day.

That was how Schabowski accidentally precipitated German reunification which is only a few weeks away today. Reunification didn't only take place in politics. After thousands had crossed the state borders, hundreds of thousands crossed the invisible line separating both halves of a marital bed that had seen better days. Spring returned in the deep of winter. Never before had so few Germans felt alone. It was no wonder that the number of births in Germany reached an all-time high in 1990 with nine hundred thousand babies born - a statistic to which your parents made their contribution.

The morning after the press conference, a GDR police car was parked on a country road behind a black, red, and gold billboard: PLASTIC AND ELASTIC FROM SCHKOPAU. Hans Rübsam – a policeman whose friends and family all called him Hans Rübsam, as if it were a double name, because they weren't close enough to call him Hans and too close to call him Rübsam – this Hans Rübsam, owner of the most angular shadow in the GDR, was waiting in his Wolga with the windows rolled down.

In his mind, he was still sitting at the breakfast table where he and his daughter Margot had learned of the fall of the Berlin Wall from a neighbor. She was a great gossip, the kind of person who sometimes raps on your kitchen window. She had also been secretly tuning in to Western radio.

What does that mean? Is it bad? What's going to happen next? Margot asked the same questions that Hans Rübsam had silently been asking himself. All he had come up with on the spot was that the political turmoil would soon pass, and that she shouldn't get too worked up about it.

That had reassured neither her nor him.

The hum of a motor was a welcome distraction - a car was approaching. Hans Rübsam set aside his thoughts about the fall of the Wall, put on his police cap, stepped out onto the road and signaled to the driver to pull over. The car's West German tires squeaked on the East German asphalt. Then they were facing each other, Vopo to Vopo. He, the Volkspolizist or policeman, faced the silver Porsche 914, nicknamed the Volksporsche or Vopo. It glinted in the sunlight.

The person who got out of the car was: your father. His temples were graying and he was wearing a suit. His shadow always had trouble living up to its owner's imposing appearance. His forehead was marked by a few horizontal creases. His salmon pink pocket square matched the salmon pink decorative shoelaces on his loafers.

Hans Rübsam tried to look unimpressed. He asked for the man's driving permit and vehicle registration in his best Thuringian dialect.

"You mean my driver's license?"

"Driving permit," Hans Rübsam said.

"But why?"

From the wayside, a cricket competed for attention.

"Driving permit and vehicle registration." Hans Rübsam crossed his arms behind his back and stuck his chest out. A comrade at the police academy had told him he could use his body language to convey self-confidence and intimidate the other person.

Kurt didn't seem especially intimidated. He took his time handing over the documents.

In return, Hans Rübsam took his time studying them. A very long minute passed. Then he said, without looking up: "Where are we going today in such a hurry, Herr... Salz from... Munich?"

"To Leipzig."

"Visiting relatives?"

"Yes, Constable."

"It's Inspector Hans Rübsam."

When he smiled, the lines on his forehead tightened. "Hans Rübsam?"

Hans Rübsam looked up and into Kurt's crystal blue eyes. "You were driving too fast."

"Impossible." He cast a distrustful look at the Porsche, as if it had betrayed him. "How fast was I going?"

"Ten kilometers per hour too fast," Hans Rübsam said, somewhat pleased that the exchange was proceeding along familiar lines, though he was also a little disappointed. He'd expected more from the driver of a Porsche. The driver would now ask for proof that he'd been speeding.

"Can you prove it?"

Hans Rübsam made an effort to sound as objective as possible. "I have good ears."

The lines on Kurt's forehead tightened. "I see." He reached into the inside pocket of his jacket, from which he drew a calf leather wallet.

Hans Rübsam waved his hand in dismissal, even though he knew that someone like Kurt Salz wouldn't believe him. "I'm not one of those policemen."

"Of course not." The way Kurt dipped two fingers into his wallet had something lascivious about it. "How much?"

Even after years of service in the Volkspolizei, Hans Rübsam still hadn't hit on a good way of convincing people that he had an extraordinarily good pair of ears and could tell how quickly a car was driving down to a few kilometers per hour. His colleagues nicknamed him "rabbit ears," even though his ears were average-sized, and told him he should appear on the variety show "Ein Kessel Buntes."

Kurt drew a pale lilac blue banknote from his wallet. On it there was a picture of Sebastian Münster staring pensively into the distance. "A hundred?"

Hans Rübsam glanced at his police car. The blue-white sky in Bavaria was blustering its way across the border. It was reflected in the Wolga's windshield, hiding his daughter's head of curly hair.

While innumerable women with all kinds of hairstyles had sat beside Kurt in his passenger seat, Hans Rübsam always had the same head of curly hair by his side. Margot came with him on his rounds more often than Sergeant Görsch, Hans Rübsam's boss, would have liked. But Görsch closed both eyes to what was happen-

ing. Hans Rübsam's wife Lene had disappeared without a word when the girl was six years old. Officially, the Pößneckers were deeply sympathetic to Hans Rübsam and his daughter. But in the bowels of the town, in the men's room at the Volkspolizei, after a few Rosen-Pils in the bar, and at the till of the Konsum mart, townspeople were whispering that she'd crossed over to the West. Since Hans Rübsam's parents were no longer alive and his in-laws were rapidly progressing in that direction in a home for old people in Rostock, he had no other way of taking care of Margot when she was younger but to bring her along on his rounds. At first he did so mostly because it helped distract him from how lonely he felt without his wife. He also didn't want Margot to be afraid of losing her father just as suddenly as she had lost her mother. Like a loyal shadow, he never left her side. From the passenger seat, she could watch him putting a stop to traffic infractions. Everyone was respectful to him. With his traffic tickets and well-meant warnings, he was making the world a more just place. He battled ignorant speedsters, badly maintained lorries, and smugglers. To Margot, he was a defender of order, who made sure that injustice would be followed by justice. As long as he was patrolling the streets in his Wolga, all was right with the world.

The older Margot became, the more Hans Rübsam worried about her, and the less often she came with him, and the more he worried about her. Margot was seventeen years old, a dangerous age. She wasn't just asking disconcerting questions, as she had done as a child. Now she was inquiring into the answers herself, especially when it came to the question of where her mother was. She tangled with just about everyone on this subject, including the insolent, drunk auto mechanics who weighed three times as much as she did and had brown belts in karate. That assured her a certain degree of local notoriety. Not long ago, Inspector Görsch had given Hans Rübsam a letter from the camp for troubled teenagers at Hummelshain. He was on good terms with the director there, and thought it would perhaps do Margot some good. Despite his jovial demeanor, Görsch couldn't conceal the fact that he thought the camp would be the best thing for Margot. Görsch himself had no children. Hans Rübsam took the letter and thanked his boss politely, promising that he would consider it. But of course he would do no such thing. It was said that things often ended badly for girls in these camps. They were exactly the kind of place from which he wanted to protect Margot. Recently, he'd even caught himself listening in to her phone calls from another receiver in the house. He was only doing it to keep her safe. He would always be there to keep her safe, especially from herself.

Hans Rübsam, on the other hand, needed a different kind of security. West German marks could make life a lot easier for him as a single father who bought his daughter an Amiga record whenever she asked for one.

Kurt waved the hundred-mark bill. "And this takes care of everything."

Hans Rübsam was the only one of the three who noticed the swish of a lawn sprinkler in the distance. "Please put that away."

"Fine." Now Kurt had two pale lilac blue banknotes in his hand. "Happy?"

Hans Rübsam took the notes. He was assaulted by an aggressive West German aftershave. He folded the man wearing the old-fashioned hat so that he could only watch the encounter with one eye, and stuffed the money into the pocket with the pink pocket square. "Step to the side, please."

Hans Rübsam leaned against the hood of the Porsche, which was as flawless and smooth as a frozen puddle. With one hand, he held Kurt’s vehicle registration and driving permit. With the other, he groped for the stamp in his jacket pocket and inked two clean stamps on the green piece of paper. “The speed limit on rural roads in the German Democratic Republic is eighty kilometers per hour.”

“It’s a hundred across the border.”

“You’d better observe the speed limit. Five stamps and you won’t be allowed to drive here.” Hans Rübsam handed Salz his driving permit. The latter put it away as if it were a stingy but desperately needed piece of charity.

“May I go now?”

“That will be ten marks.”

“Seriously?” Kurt tugged at one of his silver cuff links. “East German marks?”

Hans Rübsam nodded.

“Do you have change?”

Hans Rübsam shook his head.

One Sebastian Münster was separated from his brother and acquired a new owner.

“I’ll get you the receipt.” Only on the way to the Wolga did Hans Rübsam finally permit himself a smile. He opened the door on the passenger side and leaned in. His police cap slipped off. Margot immediately bent down, leaning out of the car, and retrieved it for him. In the sunlight, her curls looked like copper-colored fusilli.

As your future shadow, Emma, I know: the sight of Margot made your father forget for a minute how much he would have liked to punch the Vopo, also known as Inspector Hans Rübsam. He imagined the girl sitting next to him. At that point, more than a hundred women had graced his passenger seat. Regardless of how independent and emancipated they were, every single one of them had felt flattered when Kurt looked in their eyes at the end of the first date and asked: shall we go to my place? They often looked at him in surprise, blinking, having only just realized right then that that was exactly what they wanted. And it was only right then that he’d realize it wasn’t necessarily what he wanted, that he only needed them so he wouldn’t feel alone – which didn’t stop him from making good on his offer.

Kurt wondered whether the slight crookedness in the policeman’s face as he gave him a receipt and wished him a pleasant journey was the remnant of a smile. Back behind the wheel of his Porsche, he made sure that the needle of his speedometer didn’t edge so much as a hair above eighty. At this rate, however, it would take him an hour and a half to get to Leipzig. After this many years of waiting, this was a laughable test of his patience, but it took everything Kurt had not to just hit the gas pedal. After all, he was on the way to survey the past and what he hoped would be the future of his family: the Fürstenhof on the Tröndlinring Road, a hotel worth tens of millions of marks, for which the very word hotel was too spartan. Kurt’s heart beat harder at the thought that he would soon be setting foot in the Fürstenhof. His mother had raved to him about it: the rooms fitted out with chandeliers, the serpentine-paneled hall whose dark splendor made it seem like the stepmother to the famous Amber Room, seven-course menus on the dinner menu at the hotel restaurant, and a history of prom-

inent guests such as Marlene Dietrich, Johannes Heesters, Anna Seghers, and Bertolt Brecht, who was especially good at refining his socialist ideas in the lap of luxury.

Lola Rosa Salz, your grandmother, had lived in the Fürstenhof as a young girl. Your father, on the other hand, only knew the Fürstenhof from her descriptions of it. The first five years of his life were during the war, when they had lived in Karlsruhe and then fled across Germany. Then he spent the rest of his childhood in a much more modest place near the Isar in Munich, crammed into a one-bedroom apartment with his mother and his sister Aveline. As the result of a family quarrel, they were no longer in touch with the old Herr Salz. Lola never told Kurt why. "All that belongs in the chapter called PAST," she said when he asked. He only knew that his grandfather had almost been considered a member of the resistance, for reportedly having hidden Jews in the hotel during the war. He was hence allowed to reopen the Fürstenhof for business not long after the war came to an end. He died in 1956. By then, it was said, the terrifying Herr Salz was a hollowed-out version of his former self. The German Democratic Republic ignored his descendants' inheritance rights and confiscated the property before Kurt would ever have the chance to see it. Even the former name of the hotel was expunged. A competition was held to select a new name. The winning name was submitted by the head waiter, Herr Beller, who received fifty marks for it. It soon appeared on the facade: Hotel International.

Kurt attended the hotel school at Glion on Lake Geneva, and rose through the ranks at a hotel there called Montreux Palace. He was able to pay for a fair-sized apartment for his mother in Bogenhausen, with expensive, traditional furniture and a view of the Prince Regent Theater. For decades, he resented the fact that SED functionaries were reclining in soft beds in the hotel that was his rightful inheritance, but he had to live with it. As soon as he heard the borders had been opened, he took a couple of days off from the Montreux Palace, hopped into his Porsche, spoke briefly to his mother about their plans, and set off for the German Democratic Republic that same day. Since the borders were open, he was able to cross the German-German border without incident. There was traffic on the highway because of an accident, so he made a detour onto a country road. There he was briefly stopped by Hans Rübsam before he continued on his way.

If the era of the Wall was coming to an end, it could mean a new day for the Salz family, too.

When he got to Leipzig, Kurt tried to get in touch with the state notary with whom he was supposed to discuss the Salz family's claim of ownership regarding the Fürstenhof. He had planned to win her favor with Sebastian Münster's help. But she stood him up. She couldn't be reached by telephone. He waited for a whole hour in the empty restaurant where they had arranged to meet, plagued by idle waiters who circled his table like a pack of hungry wolves and kept refilling his soda water, brushing crumbs off the table cloth, straightening out the salt and pepper shakers, and bringing him the fourteen-page-long menu. Whenever he ordered something, the waiter would rush into the kitchen with his order, only to return several minutes later and tell him that they were out of whatever he'd wanted. Eventually, he settled for a side dish.

But none of that detracted from Kurt's pleasure in knowing that he would spend the night in the renowned Fürstenhof. That pleasure was stolen from him by the Fürstenhof itself.

When he checked in, no one seemed aware that he had made a reservation. The upholstery in the bar was scuffed. It smelled like cold cigarette ash. They were out of whisky and the vodka was too harsh. The sole was both very cheap (at thirteen marks!) and very dry. The elevator was out of service. There were light-colored, rectangular patches on the walls in the corridors. After Kurt tipped his porter generously, the man whispered to him that certain state guests were fond of oil paintings. The wallpaper in his room was peeling off, concealed by baroque curtains. The water in the shower was yellow. The radiator didn't have any controls and it blew hot air into his face. Kurt wanted to open the window. It was stuck, so he took it off its hinges. A folded piece of paper fell out. Someone had used it to plug a draught coming in through the window frame. It was a yellowed menu from the fifties. On the back of the page, next to the chicken salad, beef tartar, and ham rolls, the following words were printed in bold: **FULL STEAM AHEAD FOR THE FIVE YEAR PLAN, THE PLAN TO BUILD OUR ECONOMY OF PEACE!** When he opened the window, cold but sulfurous air rushed in. The springs in Kurt's bed commented on every movement he made with a metallic clang. When he was ready to leave the following morning, before the sun was even up, the valet service took forty minutes to retrieve his Porsche, and the radio antenna was bent.

Kurt willed himself back to Lake Geneva in the fourth gear. But Hans Rübsam delayed the fulfillment of this desire when he stopped Kurt's car again near Pößneck.

"You," he said.

"Me," Kurt confirmed. The ordeal of the past few hours had left him with a little less panache than he'd had the previous day.

Before Hans Rübsam could even answer, Kurt raised his hands in a placatory gesture. "I know. I was driving too fast."

Hans Rübsam coughed slightly. "Twelve kilometers above..."

"Here." Kurt interrupted him and held out a hundred-mark note. "I take it you have no change?"

Hans Rübsam looked at the crumpled note, the blemish on the glittering Porsche, and the West German man's royal blue tie, which pointed down to his open fly.

"That was a short visit to your relatives," Hans Rübsam concluded.

"Have you ever been to the Fürstenhof?" Kurt asked.

"Which Fürstenhof?"

"It's the best hotel in Leipzig. Near the main train station."

"In Leipzig?" The way Hans Rübsam pronounced it, it sounded like Leepzsch. "You mean the 'Hotel International.'"

"The Fürstenhof," Kurt corrected him, "belongs to my family."

"That's nice."

"You'd hope so."

There was a gust of wind, and the PLASTIC AND ELASTIC advertisement groaned in response.

Kurt peered into the Wolga. "I see you have company again?"

Hans Rübsam reverted to his routine. Driving permit. Stamps. Money.

“Have you ever been to the West?”

“You certainly have a lot of questions.”

“And you don’t?”

Hans Rübsam straightened his already straight cap.

“Goodbye.”

“What about my receipt?”

Hans Rübsam’s right eyelid twitched. He turned away.

Kurt’s eyes followed him. Before the policeman got to his car, the passenger door opened and the young woman with fusilli curls came towards him with a slip of paper. Kurt couldn’t hear what they were saying to each other but Hans Rübsam didn’t sound pleased. He took the paper from her. Kurt waved at her. She lifted her hand cautiously in response. Hans Rübsam immediately shoved her back onto the passenger seat and closed the door. Then he brought Kurt the receipt.

“That’s your daughter, right?”

“That’s no one.”

“Does no one have a name?” Kurt asked loudly.

“Margot!” a voice called out through the open window.

“An interesting choice of name.” Kurt nodded in thanks in the direction of the Wolga. He winked at Hans Rübsam. “She seems like a handful. You certainly don’t have it easy.”

Sitting in her observation post, Margot, your mother, pushed her hands into the pockets of her pants so she wouldn’t bite her fingernails. She had never been called *a handful*. But she agreed with the stranger that Hans Rübsam didn’t have it easy with her. Because a daughter who made life easy for her father didn’t leave a message on the back of the receipt of a West German Porsche driver.