REBECCA BIRRELL

'Gripping,
gorgeously written'
JOANNA QUINN



VENUS, VANISHING

'This vivid novel of 1930s Berlin asks what
it means to make art in an emergency'
ELEANOR CATTON

REBECCA BIRRELL

VENUS, VANISHING

PICADOR

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for my parents, Debra and Duncan Birrell

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‘I will live for them all’

Charlotte Salomon (1917–1943), *Life? or Theatre?*

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PROLOGUE

1928

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Mother,

I write to you from another life. I knew what I did not want. Some fate you contrived for your only daughter. Wife to a balding widower, a rounded stomach months into marriage. A wet mop drawn across the cold floorboards of two small rooms a stone's throw from the shop in the Scheunenviertel. Gossip as the laundry is hung. Mouths to feed, a filled sink, long hours of mending and haggling and cooking. No rest, no needs of my own. My body given over to family. The sound of threads breaking. Each year ageing a full decade.

How to explain myself? Another draft destined to be discarded. Failed attempts pile up around me.

Artist never meant much to you. 'Scribbling again?' you asked, eyebrow raised. You told me that I was a seamstress, as you were, as your mother had been, as my daughter would be too. 'Alright,' I said. But I had other ideas. Sketchbook on my lap when my mending was done, my attention half with the pencil and half on my brothers, absorbed in their private games. Copies of Dürer's woodcuts, months of work, you judged 'not bad'. Käthe Kollwitz, cut carefully from a magazine, stuck on the wall where I sewed late into the night, the dim promise of something more. I noticed you studying it with a frown. The next morning, she had disappeared.

It began the winter we went to the Wertheim store for work, the display of umbrellas that filled the window like trees in a wood, and the women who wore the clothes to showcase their fit. Looking was not enough. I began to draw that night.

I won't forget what you taught me. Those skills are as permanent and fundamental as the ability to speak. The jobs are small, three reichsmark or less. Girls from the west of the city can hardly darn their own socks. The rare thrill of a difficult repair, a skirt with pearl buttons down its back like the roe of a magnificent carp. I make just enough to rent a room. A shared WC, a gas fire, root vegetables fried in cheap margarine. A dark iron bedstead that catches the light on fine days, thin calico sheets, windows that rattle at night. A landlady upholstered with family money. Her morals might yet become mine: hard work;

indifference to men. Perhaps one day you could come to the apartment, sit as you would on the stool in the workroom. Think about nothing. Rest your hands. I could paint your portrait.

You must understand: Paula Becker painted because she took great pleasure in the world. She married a widower herself. She was dead at thirty-one, her body weak from childbirth. What a pity, she said as she took her last breath. She was right.

Hannah

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PART 1

1927

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SHE ONLY EVER came to the shop with a navy wool skirt suit, tailored at an atelier in Paris. The waist needed taking in half an inch. A button re-threading. A clean and press. She couldn't trust anyone else with it, she said. Often, the repair was so small I suspected she just wanted to be touched, admired. I never asked where she took her other clothes. Perhaps each garment required its own seamstress: there were stranger ways a woman might fill her time. I was happy to indulge the customer's eccentricities, curious about her in the way I was about most women with money. But Mother wasn't. The customer was nosy and overfamiliar, frankly a little odd, Mother said, smoothing a pile of folded sheets with a vigour that implied they might fight back. Mother soon found ways to occupy herself when this woman arrived, distractedly waving her in before disappearing without explanation into another room.

Out of Mother's coldness, I became this woman's seamstress. Her clothes had an aura of quality that was impossible to ignore, like a cloud of white steam in a cold room. She was no less extraordinary. Tallness and thinness accentuated by a large oval face and hair so fair it appeared colourless. She came from a part of Berlin that wasn't far on the tram but as distant to me as another country. I had a precise image of her house: four storeys filled with tasteful antiques, a foyer large enough for twenty guests, the upper floors still and quiet as dawn at all hours. In a low voice, she recounted trips to cities reached on sleeper trains, what might be bought at this bazaar or eaten at that tavern on the hill where locals congregated like a

murmuration of birds and music could be heard late into the night. I began to look forward to her visits. When I had her in the room, I retrieved pins from my workbasket one by one, slowed my sewing hand, made subtle mistakes I would have to correct, all to lengthen her stay. When she left, insisting she wouldn't be back for months – she would normally telephone the shop a few days later – parts of her remained in the room. A jasmine cologne so strong that I always knew the banknotes that came from her purse. Blackened matches on the floor. A clean monogrammed handkerchief, ironed flat: *E.G.* Mother called her Frau Grese, but when I began to take care of the suit myself, the customer insisted I call her Elke.

I worked in my parents' workshop off the Grenadierstrasse. The pressure of the needle between my fingers was as familiar to me as my own breath. I was no longer a child, but I wasn't a woman either. I was my eyes and my hands, the tension of a thread pulled taut. Years were marked by the garments I made. A waistcoat with tortoiseshell buttons that made whoever wore it stand straighter. A pale pink cotton shirt with frills on the sleeves, high at the neck, the shape of a flower in bloom. Long woollen dresses in shades of plum and brown, plumes of coloured smoke. I worked according to the seasons, and moved as a weathervane did towards wool, away from silk, when the nights lengthened. To perfect these simple items was to pledge something to myself about my own life, which deserved attention and tenderness despite its ordinariness.

I made a skirt a woman would wear each day for months, years, repairing and adjusting at a small cost until it finally wore out. This was how I spent time with women without ever really knowing them, how I passed through the city's rooms I would never otherwise enter. Could you lift your arm, please, I would ask, and turn around, yes, just like that. Women raised their limbs and spun in circles as I crouched at their feet. They asked what colours matched their eyes, what would flatter their figures, invitations to regard them without shame or fear. I steadied my hands and looked. Nothing was so important to me then. This was how I came to know women and their bodies. Through measuring tapes and pins, the fabrics that held them. Through stains, lost buttons, tissues blotted with lipstick. The smell of these garments, fragrance and face powder and sweat, was distinct to each client, eloquent of their interests, their routines. An imprint of their inner life. The scent would linger on my hands after women brought garments in for some small repair, and I made sense of their lives from the

notes I knew. On Elke, it was cigarettes, coffee, men's cologne. On the rest, cooking smells, cold cream, spoiled milk.

Occasionally I saw garments I had made in the streets surrounding the shop. Crossing the Alexanderplatz, lit by sunshine, dampened by rain, they clung to the customer's flesh. It was like seeing a part of myself living independently of my own body. Jealousy shadowed any pride. These items spent the days with women like Elke, admired but inconspicuous, and knew them more intimately than their husband or maid.

Comments about my age and appearance began the summer after I turned eighteen. Mother would point at men in the street and name them as you might different species of birds. He made forty-eight pfennigs an hour. He owned a shoe store. His apartment was only one room, but it was forty square metres. I responded as though these remarks were intended for someone else. Nodding pleasantly, I would turn the conversation to my drawings. Then it was Mother's turn to feign ignorance. Soon men began to arrive at the shop, furtively glancing about as Mother manoeuvred them into another room. Thin walls betrayed the hushed sound of negotiation. I wondered what Mother would say about me. She works hard and wants very little. A functional worker and wife.

'We have someone in mind for you,' Mother said casually one morning. 'Older, but in good health, a widower. He's a good man. Lives nearby. Your aunt will tell you more.'

It was the first decision I made entirely for myself. I knew where Mother kept the money. Better still, the miscellaneous valuables that constituted my dowry. A pawn shop took everything at a price I didn't know to argue with. I counted the money in an alleyway, a black wind blowing cold through my blouse. I assumed my rebellion would be brief, a spoiled page I would tear from the ledger, but I was wrong. Rooms were advertised in the local papers, and cheaper lodgings required no references. I went to Wedding to enquire after a shared room in a vast building with wet-faced children pressed against the windows. Three tenants shared one bed, and as the other girls worked nights and slept through the days, I would have the privilege of six hours alone on a mattress with a threadbare blanket. This was unappealing but appeared to be all I could afford. I had almost given up when I noticed an advertisement for a room in an apartment in Schöneberg, half the price of others like it, promising modern amenities and home-cooked meals. It had its own telephone, a detail unusual enough that the

landlady would repeat it with pride in her subsequent letter. I signed any correspondence with a family name that wasn't my own. Schmidt: the desirable Christian tenant. The landlady told me the room was mine if I wanted it. I calmly packed my bag. I finished my garments for the week and slipped out of the house while it was still dark one morning. Once the birds began rustling in the trees, I knew everyone would be awake. Mother's old shoes pinched at my toes, outraged at the betrayal. I tried not to think about how the following week's mending would get done. Whose hands would replace mine.

At first, every woman in the city was Mother. She appeared on street corners, wavered on the kerb as cars rushed by. I could walk for miles like that, meeting Mother's gaze at the exact moment the resemblance disappeared. In bars she was loud and convivial, and in parks she was languid on the grass, detaching cherries from their stems with her teeth. I waited to be discovered. Three mothers in the grocer's inspected fruit for bruises. Ten checked their watches at the U-Bahn station. I surrendered myself to Mother, but when another stranger stared back at me, I wasn't always relieved.

I belonged to nobody. Mother never sought me out. Mother accepted my departure as she did the whims of a stray cat. One month became six. I cut my hair. I drank cheap wine. I slept soundly at night. I had everything I needed. There was nothing for me to fear.

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THE SHINE OF the kettle, a lit stove, discoloured Venetian blinds. Patterned rugs worn at their edges, the apartment's ageing skin. A cot with freshly laundered sheets, a sink that produced brown water from its tap. Drinkable, the landlady claimed. My sewing machine like a small animal in the corner. Lamps in the hallway that never gave off much light. A mirror with a sullen, distorted surface that cut me off at the ankles. A cupboard with a loose door into which I put the few possessions I had brought from home. After a few nights, the hinge succumbed to rot.

The landlady insisted on being called by her given name, Olga. When addressed as Frau, which I did automatically those first few days, making practical enquiries about water and heat, she startled. I must call her Olga: she wasn't a cantankerous old woman. Her tone was sharp, her nostrils huge and black. She was small, her smallness accentuated by rounded shoulders and a short back. She seemed designed to take up as little space as possible, as though reared to make her living like this. I told Olga that I was a seamstress. This was very fortunate, Olga said, because she had garments she needed repaired, and hadn't the time to trawl through the newspaper to find a woman she trusted. Before I had a chance to respond, she took my hand and pulled me into her bedroom. A tiny, tinselly box that released a fume of cheap powdered cosmetics, rose water and brandy. It was the same smell as the rest of the apartment, but denser, sealed by the tar-coloured draught excluder under the door, and two small, permanently latched windows. Below a huge mahogany wardrobe, a cot arrayed in white

bedclothes, more suitable for a child and dressed as though for its christening. Olga fussed with the contents of a drawer as she spoke. This was a habit of hers, I would later discover, a tireless domestic conscientiousness that meant she was always doing two things at once, even useless tasks that were merely for show. She said she was willing to adjust my rent in line with any mending she might need. I hadn't considered how I would fill the days that comprised my new freedom. She gave me an encouraging look. I glanced down at my hands as though seeking their consent. I said yes.

Yellowed petticoats with a stale odour. Dresses eaten by moths. Could silk shrink in sympathy with the body it housed? Olga carefully handed over her charges. 'I paid a tremendous amount for this, bought it for the buttons, real pearl.' Comments directed at the garments, not me. The air shimmered with particles of dust. I coughed behind my hand.

'You aren't sick, are you?' Olga said. 'The last girl was. She couldn't work. Wouldn't pay her rent. Lay in her bedroom all day with a handkerchief pressed over her mouth and the curtains drawn. I had to get rid of her.'

I learnt to dress lightly for half an hour in the hot dining room, eating oily goulashes from sturdy floral dishes on a spotless tablecloth. Olga scrubbed the three in circulation with feeling, in grave silence, her forearms tensed. She was either diminutive in an armchair or bolt upright, as an ironing board had only two positions. A dour blue dress replaced a black tunic worn during the day, neither garment revealing anything about the shape of her body. She told me her husband and son had been killed at war as casually as she told me the names of the upstairs neighbours. These men were phantoms who might be glimpsed moving through the apartment like moths at twilight, if you only knew where to look. The enormous winter coat Olga wore with buttons on its right side. Dim photographs in gilt frames that seemed to recede, as memories did, behind the mantelpiece's clutter. Rings on her fingers that featured delicate brown plaits of hair studded with floral ornaments, and because they had always been so alike, Olga said, she no longer remembered which belonged to Otto and which to her boy. She knocked on my door much earlier than dinner had been served at home, often when it was still light. I was positioned in a chair opposite her own. I learnt to appear receptive to conversation while really thinking about how charcoal pressed hard onto the sheet might capture the solidity of

the jug Olga had set down upon the table. The other lodger, Maria, sat with her chair pulled up close to Olga, as though they required each other's help in cutting up and consuming their food. Maria had a large, beautiful face with permanently overtired eyes and a voice whose volume she was unable to control, always pitching her speech loud enough to address a crowded room. She told me she was twenty-seven, but she looked as young as me because of her clothes and make-up and hair, all immaculate, fashionable, lifted from the magazines she left lying around the lounge.

'We're very lucky to have Olga,' Maria said in our first conversation, within earshot of Olga, smiling wide enough that I could see all her little teeth. 'She isn't a tired old spinster with nothing to do but pry. You know the type. Steaming open your letters just to entertain herself.'

Olga's apparent lack of curiosity about our lives suited Maria, whose door slammed at odd hours, often accompanied by a second set of heavier footsteps. A man with small red eyes emerged from the bathroom as I attempted to enter it one morning. He wore a short silk dressing gown untied at the waist. I looked closely before affecting embarrassment and returning to my room. I already knew he was there; I always did. Men's breath and sweat travelled through the thin partition between our bedrooms and alerted me to their presence as surely as though they had been introduced. Olga never mentioned any of this, nor registered it in her treatment of Maria, despite solemnly telling me when I arrived that there was a strict policy against male visitors. 'This is a respectable house,' she said, saying each word extremely slowly as though to allow time for the statement's full meaning to assert itself.

Maria made a fuss of Olga; that seemed to be the reason for her exemption from the rules. Maria watched Olga's cigarette diminish, and when she was ready for another, lit a new one in her own mouth. Whenever I entered the room, they were always talking urgently as though the evening was coming to an end, and they were parting for good. On my second night, Maria listened intently as Olga recounted her childhood dream to become a doctor. Maria began to scowl long before Olga described her father's suppression of her university ambitions, clearly aware of the story's arc. In defiance of her father's small-mindedness, Olga now read medical textbooks with the absorption of romantic novels. Occasionally I found Maria reading aloud to Olga from some obscure pamphlet about venereal disease with a theatrical emphasis that suggested a story with a plot. Reams

of notes in Olga's neat cursive were put into files piled high in the corner of her bedroom. On Sunday afternoons, on her hands and knees surrounded by her research, Olga prepared what she referred to simply as 'my book'. Afterwards, she made a show of her mental exhaustion, and played the patriarch returned from work, slumped in an armchair waiting to be served sandwiches she had prepared herself earlier in the day.

It didn't take long for me to reveal my own ambitions to Olga. 'That looks nothing like me,' she exclaimed, with a warmth that made me glad I'd tried. She was interested in why my attempts had failed. I should look at her medical textbooks, she said. Because the colour and form of the body were determined by its interior, the seen by the unseen. I read late into the night, as a liquid darkness steadily filled the room to its brim. Sentences were underlined, at times more than once. The margins bristled with illegible commentary. Diagrams of sex organs were annotated with an additional slip of ruled paper in an incomprehensible shorthand. A dissection of the skull, an analysis of men's and women's heads with a hierarchy of differences, was laid out across several figures arranged side by side. I never examined any of it closely. Its intensity assumed privacy. After a time, I almost ceased to see the marginalia. I went to Olga with my pencil drawings of feet, their muscles and ligaments, and her comments were full of words I recognized from Mother, from the shop. Tissue. Cords. Elastic.

'I know a woman who paints,' Olga announced one evening. She was still ladling food onto our plates. Her tone suggested she couldn't wait to relay the news.

'Would I know her work?' I asked.

'Oh, no. She isn't interested in selling them.' The question seemed to bewilder Olga. She removed her spectacles to reveal eyes glazed over in thought. 'She paints her house, and who would want a picture of another woman's house?'

She seemed pleased with this analysis. Her hands beckoned us to eat.

'Most paintings depict things that belong to other people,' I said. 'That's partly what makes them interesting.'

'The houses in Prenzlauer Berg are very attractive, of course.' Olga smiled. She was either unmoved by my argument, or not listening.

'Artists tend to be rather strange people, don't they?' Maria said, turning to me. 'Apparently, women painters are often indistinguishable from men. In their looks and in their manner. Because it's a male pursuit.'

‘I wouldn’t know,’ I said, not looking up from my plate. ‘I don’t know any artists.’

‘Women think differently to men,’ Olga said pleasantly, like this didn’t pertain to any of us. ‘Just as a man’s fist is larger and stronger than a woman’s, so it is with their brains. The same is true throughout the animal kingdom. I’ve read the Englishman Darwin.’

‘I heard that they’re mostly unmarried,’ Maria interrupted. ‘Women who paint.’

Olga cheerfully waved this comment away.

‘Frau Vogt says painting is more interesting than needlework. You see, she’s alone in the evenings. She has her children. But they aren’t good company until they’re older. And her husband works a lot.’

The conversation ticked on. I listened half-heartedly. I didn’t want to paint to give an empty life the illusion of meaning. I wanted my work to enter the body of those who regarded it, as air was brought into the lungs. A drawing that didn’t just hint at emotion, burying it under demonstrations of technique, but could instead produce that emotion, become that emotion. I did not say any of this, but not out of shyness. The sensation felt closer to greed.

I poured myself a large measure of brandy and took my plate into the kitchen. I fought the urge to fling my leftovers against the wall. I drained the glass just as Maria walked in.

‘The other girls weren’t like you. Hardly ever left their rooms.’ She paused to stack her plate under mine, and slowly wiped her hands with a napkin. ‘Unable to express a single interesting thought about anything. They were like children, eating their meals in silence. Trembling when spoken to.’ She raised her empty glass in my direction and winked. ‘I think we should have a little more.’

~

I quickly settled into a routine that first spring. I sewed by candlelight while Olga and Maria shuffled around the surrounding rooms, water moving musically through the pipes. I slept with the curtains drawn back and woke early with the birds. I made myself a blue jacket with a lining of yellow and purple stripes, a pocket for my pencils, hair pins and a small spiral-bound pad. I borrowed Olga’s unused bicycle and rode around the parts of the city

that hadn’t existed to me only months earlier. My services were recommended to others, and although I didn’t earn much, it was more than I had ever been given in the shop. I could discard the clothes that made me resemble Mother. I pushed the dark dresses to the back of my wardrobe and understood that everything from my former life was like this: useless and ugly but easily forgotten about.

I no longer kept vigil over the embers of childhood. The envelopes received from the front that Mother wouldn’t let us read: *Dear Ruth*, one began, *I don’t sleep*. A cut of meat small enough to fit into the pocket of a child’s coat, divided between four, the hunger that gnawed at us through the night. The elderly man with thinning pomaded hair who had Mother iron shirts stained yellow at the pits, who brought us soap and butter the second winter of the war. How my brothers had argued over whether a sewing needle alone could end another soldier’s life.

When I had money left over at the end of the month, I bought second-hand books about art with decrepit binding. Cold cuts from the butcher in a white box tied with string. Double features in the cinema across the street. Three sugar cubes in a cup of coffee at a nearby cafe. Maria insisted she would eventually teach me to swim, but I didn’t mind just watching her in the water at the Strandbad Wannsee, admiring as a nursemaid. Reunited with Olga in the evenings, we would read novels as the gramophone hummed, Olga distractedly singing stray words. Maria and I began doing more together. She was often in the apartment engaged in tasks designed to draw comment. I presumed the letters Maria fed into the fire were from men, only because their appearance put her in a philosophical mood. Afterwards, she would climb into bed and talk about love. What you let men do, what you didn’t. How to get meals and clothes and cash while giving them nothing in return. What they would want from your body, what you would want in theirs. Her letters, some from men, others from women, were read aloud, slowly and impersonally, so I might learn their language of seduction and refusal.

Quickly we became inseparable. Maria’s gramophone played throughout the afternoon, our voices loud underneath it. Trying on lipstick, brushing each other’s hair. We didn’t need men to bribe us with stockings or chocolates, Maria said, if we bought them for each other. Our friendship was conducted entirely in the present tense, with neither of us mentioning how or why we had ended up with Olga. We promised to remain in the

apartment forever, and I imagined us at Olga’s age in those very rooms rearing a pair of young women of our own.

At first, I never quite shook the feeling that I shouldn’t be there, that Mother needed me. I dreamt about garments, and my hands ached when I woke. But I let go of this fear so gradually I didn’t notice when it departed for good. That summer a space opened in me for something else. I held a pencil up to the light. A sheet of paper laid flat on a desk. Birds chirruping through an open window, the sky white before it was blue. Maria dozing in the adjoining room. I drew what moved me. Gradually filling the emptiness, the same risks repeated on every page. Each mark a spark of feeling. A good line could feel like that, a match being struck.

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ONCE THE RUN on the banks began, my fees were bartered so low the jobs hardly felt worthwhile. Work I had picked up at the Manheimer department store stopped when it folded. The other shop I relied upon, N. Israel, didn't need me either. I saw the same women at all the big department stores asking after spots in the workroom. Some carried infants on their hips to underscore their need. The city's seamstresses were pigeons waiting to fight it out over a handful of stale breadcrumbs. One sent me the number for a brothel madam, another claimed she had become adept at picking pockets. 'No use wasting these hands,' she said. Olga began to make panicked requests for more rent. Purposefully loud conversations with her sister suggested she might clear out the storeroom for another lodger, or even give up her own room and set up a cot for herself in the lounge. Like the family dog, she repeated. A grown-up niece who had sent her ten marks a month for many years could no longer afford to, and we never heard the end of it. I pawned my fur coat, a gift from my parents, unsure whether I would ever get it back. I sold all my better clothes to men who traded in second-hand garments, who I hoped hadn't taken pity on me because they recognized me from the neighbourhood.

It was out of desperation that I first thought of Elke Grese. I looked through the almost empty address book I had brought from home, and there she was, the only customer who visited so often that she had earned a place amongst my aunts and uncles. I asked for Olga's permission to call the

number as I lifted the telephone to my ear. From another room she replied in a hoarse voice that only on the condition that I wasn't calling any men.

I told the maid who answered that my name was Hannah, that I was Frau Grese's seamstress, and waited.

'I thought you had abandoned me,' Elke said as soon as she got on the line. Her tone was playful, as though carried over from a conversation with someone she knew better.

'You remember me?'

'Of course.'

I had prepared to convince her of our past acquaintance. I felt my face grow hot and briefly took the receiver away from my cheek. I noticed Olga stood barely at arm's length away from me, not so much eavesdropping as participating in a conversation it was her right to join.

'Your mother was angry when you left. She gave me to your brother, but I'd rather have a woman – and she seemed unwilling to do it herself. I've tried a few other seamstresses. They weren't as good as you.'

I gave her my new address and we agreed she would come over the following day with several items to clean and mend. Over dinner, half listening to Olga present her latest findings on hereditary diseases, I let myself think about Elke. She was warmer, almost conspiratorial. Perhaps I would laugh again with Elke about Mother's wilfulness. I remembered Elke's expression in the shop as I pinned the skirt tighter, smiling disinterestedly at her reflection in the mirror like she was admiring a mannequin in a shop window.

I took a long time getting ready the next morning. My only nice clothes were borrowed from Maria, and I rarely had cause to wear them. This seemed the right occasion to struggle into a dress I had never worn outside my room. The silk was thin and slippery and tingled as it moved over my body. Olga insisted on meeting customers on the grounds that she wouldn't have any men or odd characters in her apartment. As I waited in the lounge, I sensed the dress arouse her suspicion. The doorbell rang a full fifteen minutes before the agreed time.

When I met Elke at the door, she raised her cheek to be kissed. This wasn't our usual greeting. I liked its implication: we were friends. I leant down and lightly pressed my mouth against her skin. When I withdrew, Elke frowned.

'You took my rouge with you,' she said. A square of silk appeared and

was dabbed in a circular motion near my lips. ‘There, it’s gone.’ It all happened so quickly, I only realized I had stopped breathing once she had breezed past me up the stairs.

Olga was visibly taken aback by Elke, who was older and more finely dressed than anyone I had ever introduced before. I could sense her recalibrating the matronly act she put on naturally with other women of my age.

‘I’m very selective about who lives here,’ Olga said. ‘Nobody ever leaves unless it’s to marry. My sister says I should start a finishing school. They’re all very good girls.’

‘I see that,’ Elke said, her hand on my shoulder. I was still thinking about the square of silk in her pocket, soiled by my mouth and her skin. Elke surveyed Olga and, with an opaque smile, the surrounding rooms. ‘Shall we?’ she said to me.

I shut the door to my room. ‘She’s a little overbearing, but she has a good heart.’

‘I assumed you would live in one of those airless courtyard apartments,’ she said. ‘This is much nicer.’ She looked around the bedroom, her lips pursed. ‘I went straight from my family’s home into marriage. Women have a lot more freedom these days. I might have liked it myself.’

I received this comment as a deeply personal compliment. I nodded in agreement with all of it, my luck as the recipient of this freedom, and her own right, should she want it, to that freedom herself.

‘The skirt needs adjusting?’ I asked. She was wearing the familiar navy-blue suit.

It was easy to return to the choreography of seamstress and customer. I held her body in the indifferent way I always had, but found I noticed new details. There was a slight bend in her posture, a supplication that only emerged when I touched her, and the response was immediate, automatic, like a long exhale of breath. Her bones were prominent and hard but didn’t give the impression of frailty. I had a vision of metal bars moving against metal plates, a perfectible machine. I was wondering whether taking the skirt in another half an inch would cut into her hip bones when I heard her ask a question.

‘If you don’t mind my asking, why did you leave?’

She took a breath as I began to fix the pins in place. The button at the waistband bit at her navel through her slip. Her body was warm underneath

her clothes. The silk of my dress slid over my thighs and tickled my knees when I moved. The pins were cold and hard between my tongue and front teeth. More sensation, more feeling: that was why I left. I would be careful who I confessed this to, I decided. I watched our reflections in the mirror. A woman kneels at the feet of another. Tense and hierarchical, that was how we appeared. But that wasn't how it felt. Elke made a small noise of contentment.

'Your mother said it was sudden,' she added. 'You weren't in any trouble, were you?'

'Oh, Mother wanted me to get married,' I said.

'Not an unreasonable wish for a mother,' she replied.

I hesitated. I added in a smaller voice that I was training to become an artist. Not at any school, but from books. That was why I couldn't marry.

This comment appeared to touch a spring within Elke. Gently she moved my hand off her skirt.

'Leonardo received no formal education,' she said. 'Once he was apprenticed, he learnt so quickly he outpaced his master within months. His earliest work was so extraordinary, del Verrocchio vowed he would never paint again.'

I blushed. Training had been too grandiose a word. I opened my mouth to correct myself.

'You should try sitting down in it,' I said instead, pointing at the waistband of her skirt.

'I learnt that from my governess. Renaissance Italy was her great passion. A fascinating woman. Dead for close to fifteen years, but I think about her every day. She took us to the Kaiser Friedrich Museum once a week until my brothers left home.'

I paused.

'The skirt will only take me a few hours.'

'Have you been there yourself?'

I shook my head.

'You might find it interesting.' She smiled at me. 'And you're right not to marry just yet. I'm sure your mother will understand that eventually.'

I watched Elke leave from the window of my bedroom. I had kissed her again on the cheek as she left, this time only miming contact, and she had laughed like this was an established joke between us. Customers treated me like an object, functional but dull and fungible, a dishcloth that could be

forgotten about when it wasn’t in use. I wasn’t acquainted with interest, friendliness. I couldn’t risk assuming it would always be like this between us. Precarious, that was how her attention felt.

‘Very fine-looking woman,’ Olga said as I passed the lounge. ‘Where do you suppose her family made their money?’

The next day, Elke collected her skirt. I found myself thinking about what she had done in the hours since our last meeting. I pictured her bent over a bureau writing letters by lamplight, passing a silver spoon through a bowl of soup, her mind elsewhere.

She was talking again about her governess as she counted out the last of the pfennigs, her long white fingers detailed with gold rings. She then reached into her handbag and took out a package wrapped in patterned paper. It was for me, she said. I waited until she left to open it. A book on Michelangelo, worn at its edges, the pages fattened by damp. On the title page she had written: *The artist invents what the seamstress merely serves. Your friend, E.G.* I was so thrilled that I left the mending I had that day and went for a walk. Elke had seen something in me: I was more than Mother or Olga thought. When I arrived, I saw that I had gone automatically, as though moved by a hand across a board, to the gates of the Kaiser Friedrich Museum.

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4

I GOT THROUGH that winter only by agreeing to fees that would have enraged Mother. At least most of it was mending. I hated washing clothes, not just for its drudgery, but – out of pride – because of its artlessness. Maria, who spent the days typing in an office off the Kommandantenstrasse, was unsympathetic to these complaints. We did what we must to pay the rent, she repeated, and if I was practical about it, I would find time for my other work. Maria achieved this by economizing on sleep. One day felt like two if you retired at three without washing the grime of the clubs off your face and were ready to receive a manager's dictation at eight. I wasn't as tough as Maria. But I discovered that I could be an artist in the morning if I was a seamstress from midday until nightfall.

I woke early the mornings I went to the museum. Smelling like the clothes I had hung to dry the night before, a stale roll and a notebook in my coat pocket. I left with Maria and Olga still in their robes, rubbing their eyes as water hissed in the kettle.

24 January 1930

Christ more animated in death than most commuters this morning. A gallery contains all the episodes that compose his life, little else but the outer edges of mortality. Newborn, dead, newborn, dead.

Mary looks rested, suggesting the infant Christ sleeps through the night, tangled in dreams, weighed down with adult concerns.

Same two men as yesterday unwrap sandwiches on the steps of the

museum and, once finished, walk away without going inside, as they would a canteen. They lean into each other's ears to talk. A brief touch on the elbow. His hand drifts onto his back, lingers. He lightly shakes him off. Their mouths are tense for a moment, soften. I like how they look at one another. Smell of liver lingering afterwards. A child reaches down to eat the crumbs, bolder than the rats.

2 February 1930

A woman says to her friend, 'Christ doesn't look like any baby I've ever seen. Head the size of a cauliflower. Weird little eyes.' (Laughter). 'Do you remember that man at Freia's party? He never wrote to me, by the way. They're like his.' I want to interject with one of Maria's stories. (Last night: 'Younger than I thought, with large ears that caught the sun, bright red, but once I got him into my room and his underwear was off, his skin was so white it was almost blue.') Before I can speak, her friend laughs and they move into another gallery.

Christ big as a felled tree, pulled from the tomb by his mother. Mary's mouth is prised open, the same shape as the wound on his chest. The wound talks back, Mary moves close to listen, but it's private. We wouldn't know its language.

15 March 1930

The young women in ruffled collars and sumptuous gowns do not move me, nor do the few landscapes the colour of broth.

A woman drops her lipstick on the floor and a man leaps back, cringes and shakes at the sound. (Father, unable to cope with small noises, footsteps or strong wind or fiercely run taps, had enough sound on the front to last a lifetime, Mother said.) She says, 'No need for that,' and he goes green and runs towards the exit. Ashamed, she scans the room for witnesses. Close enough I can see her blush underneath thick beige powder, I let go of my bag and let its contents spill out.

I was standing before Saint Sebastian, smiling with an improbable coquettishness as arrows pierced his chest, picking blossoms that had just come into bloom from my blouse, when I first saw him. He crossed the room in conversation with another man and disappeared behind a door I hadn't previously noticed. Our eyes met briefly as he walked past me. Hazel

and speckled with black, like a sparrow's egg. I tried the handle of the door, still able to hear the squeak of their shoes and the low drone of speech, but it was locked. I wrote nothing in my notebook, but I drew a small arrow that pointed at me, accusatory. I was distracted for the rest of the afternoon and went back to the apartment earlier than usual. At my desk, I devoted myself to tall buildings specked with sunlight, the purple flush of the sky at dusk, and banished the shape of that man. I drank wine with Maria in the lounge after dinner. A man had promised to buy her green leather boots, she said, but she wasn't sure he could be trusted. I didn't notice myself draining glass after glass. Every song the gramophone played was about love. I excused myself after an hour and slept until the next morning.

Each week brought more sightings. On a staircase, he stopped, turned towards a spoke of sunlight. Lightly, quickly (apologizing as he went) he moved down a corridor. He resembled a boy painted by Caravaggio. Dark curly hair made darker by the fairness of his skin, a mineral white. Guileless eyes that looked small behind spectacles, full pink lips. When I got closer, I noticed that I was a few inches taller than him, and there was a shock of silver in his hair despite the youthfulness of his face. His trousers were too long and appeared to have been hemmed (badly) by his own hand. Like the paintings themselves, he was different each day. In a gallery, preoccupied, he withdrew a small leather-bound notebook from his pocket. (No ring on his hand.) He paced, wrote briefly in the notebook. Frowned, tapped his feet, and passed right by me as he left. Close to a picture's surface, another afternoon, he paused. Visibly excited, almost laughing, he disappeared. (Did laughter make all men look so young, so good?) But these glimpses soon failed to satisfy me. I began to follow him until he re-entered the museum's subterranean quarters.

These were the crude tactics of inexperience. The only men I had ever spoken to were from the neighbourhood, and those interactions had not been a success. I rebuffed even the gentlest flirtations, aware even the mildest interest in any man might be taken as enthusiasm for a match. I regarded such feelings as the illness preceding the death that was marriage.

For months the man took no notice of me. As I waited for him to appear in the gallery, I would think about a painting in the museum by Rubens I hadn't previously liked. The goddess Diana chases deer with a hunting party riding in her wake. Strongest, self-evidently the leader, the tip of her weapon is sharp on the hind parts of an enormous stag. She plunges

forward, the expression on her face neutral, and despite the dramatic exertion of the hunt, her body is relaxed. Desire acts upon Diana, and there is peace in surrendering to its singularity of purpose. I was the same. I had to see him. Afterwards, I had to see him again. I settled into this rhythm like I had never known anything else.

I tried to imagine what about my appearance might appeal to him. Whether its faults might be repaired, if I could hold that threaded needle myself. I caught my reflection in shop windows and saw a tall woman with dark eyes peering out from a long face, not unattractive. This was when I became careless. Caution fell away as I got closer. I was now able to name the brands of soap and tobacco on his skin. This had seemed like a positive development, a true marker of my talent for invisibility, until his colleagues began to snigger when I entered the room.

That summer it was hot even at night, and Olga's fan made no difference, its monotonous whir like a giant insect on the other side of the wall. I left earlier each morning for the museum. I was sitting below the Rubens searching my bag for notes I had made the week before when I sensed someone behind me, unnaturally close. The smell was familiar, and I knew it was him. Diana's powerful arms gripped her spear, and I prayed to them for assistance. I tipped backwards, like I was simply looking at the top corner of the picture. Up there a hunter sounds a horn, a call I had always heard as a shofar. The back of my head grazed his belt, and a strand of hair caught in its buckle. I remained completely still, fought the urge to laugh. Neither of us did anything until an elderly couple entered the room and seeing us, conferred with each other and coughed loudly. I wondered what perverse act they thought must be taking place. Carefully his fingers untangled me from him, touching my neck as he smoothed the hair back in place. His hands were hot and damp with sweat, as my own were. But there was also a slight tremor to them, a nervousness.

'I'm sorry,' he said softly.

A refined accent, coarse from cigarettes. My eyes were closed. When I opened them and began to speak, swivelling on the bench, he had already left the room.

~

The next morning Maria looked up from her romantic novel at breakfast.

‘You look ill,’ she said, smirking.

My body was empty and light, liable to disturbance from the slightest external pressure, like a single sheet of paper. Nothing seemed to help. I had eaten three slices of toast with marmalade and enough coffee to scald the roof of my mouth, oblivious to Maria watching. Olga had just left the room, humming tunelessly under her breath, the tray quivering with drained cups. From the kitchen she shouted, ‘Do you girls need anything else?’ Maria glanced in her direction meaningfully before she carried on.

‘You need to wear rouge. He’ll think you’re consumptive. And it wouldn’t hurt to brush your hair before leaving the apartment. I’d rather you saw whoever this man is looking halfway decent.’ I blushed, and she smiled triumphantly. ‘You’ll tell me all about him, won’t you?’

It embarrassed me that I had nothing to tell. I considered letting the situation continue for months, burning from his slightest acknowledgement. Really what I wanted was for him to initiate something – anything. I thought about covering my entire body in Maria’s rouge, whether that would have the desired effect.

One afternoon he stopped short of evaporating behind a door and turned to me. I paused, took a step backwards. He swayed, steadied himself. For a moment we studied each other’s shoes, and I was glad to have worn new socks. Does she look weightless to you, I might have asked, nodding at the Diana behind us. I didn’t notice him lift his head to look at me.

‘My colleagues think you’re a thief,’ he said. ‘That you’re trying to slip in behind me. Often you’re close enough to lift the keys from my pocket.’ He took them out of his pocket and held them in front of me. ‘Is it true?’

I told him I was an art student there to study the Old Masters. I waved the pencil in my hand as proof. I said that when the *Mona Lisa* was stolen it was by an employee of the Louvre.

His vest was visible through a shirt damp from the heat. I imagined the air growing so hot that sweat would turn his skin transparent, revealing organs arranged in his chest like the contents of a woman’s handbag. In the silence three middle-aged women entered the room. They exchanged a large painted fan as they walked, agitating the air around us.

One said loudly as they passed, ‘He hardly knew her, or should I say them, there were at least two. I wouldn’t have known any of this if he just sealed his letters properly.’

‘They want to be found out,’ said another. ‘They’re all alike. Those

women have no scruples either. It's just money to them. They couldn't care less who they're doing it with.' They noticed us, but only slightly lowered their voices. After a chorus of loud, unintelligible reassurance, they were gone.

He grimaced, mouthed oh dear, and we both smiled. I wanted to keep looking at his lips, but knew it was my turn to speak. I asked him what he thought about the Rubens picture of Diana. He turned to look at it and furrowed his brow.

'There's something conceited about the dogs. It's typical of Rubens. The composition is already full of detail, but he can't help himself. He wants to show how a dog's fur catches the light unlike a deer's pelt or a woman's skin, and he can make us see that difference.'

'But the dogs are part of the story.'

'Oh, remind me?'

We were smiling still, almost laughing. The proximity of our bodies transformed these facts into jokes.

'A man stumbles upon Diana bathing and she punishes him for looking at her immodestly. She's angry and embarrassed, I suppose, but she's also afraid. She turns him into a stag to teach him a lesson. Let a man feel hunted for once.'

'Ah, yes, of course. His own dogs rip him apart.'

'They don't recognize him. They're loyal, but easily misled. It's sad really.'

He was staring at me intently, and from the corner of my eye I saw the dog's teeth gleam, covered in lavishly painted saliva. I asked him his name, and he told me it was Saul. 'Gans-Meyer,' he added. I let a few moments pass before I said that my name was Hannah. 'And your family name?' he asked. I told him it was Sherman.

'I'll see you, then,' I said. I stepped backwards and gave a small, awkward wave. I hoped to narrate this encounter to Maria like the exchange of names was a sexual act.

He nodded. 'Goodbye, Hannah Sherman.' He walked quickly out of the room, without turning back.

~

I continued to watch Saul revolve methodically through his routines. At

midday he left briskly from the main entrance and stopped on the steps to light a cigarette, which he smoked in its entirety before he set off along the river. We hadn't said so much as a hello in the galleries in the fortnight since our conversation. I sensed each of us waiting for the other to act. I drew a Saint Sebastian in modern dress against a telegraph pole, his sapling torso spotted with holes, and left it in the doorway to the museum's offices, unsigned.

There was a sickly yellow cast to the sky the day I followed Saul out of the museum, and the self-consciously agile way he moved suggested he knew I was behind him. There was no harm in this, I thought, I was simply part of the throng of workers innocently returning home to their wives for a hot meal. When we arrived at a set of townhouses, frontages polished to a shine, he turned.

'I've wanted to ask you to lunch. I thought you would say no.' He adjusted his tie as he spoke, loosening it at the neck. For a moment I peered into his thicket of hair. He then lifted his head decisively and met my eyes. 'Would you like to come inside?'

I liked that he was nervous. Something unfamiliar welled within me. I knew the answer was yes.

'Good,' he murmured, and retrieved a key from his pocket.

'You live alone?' I said.

'Yes. It's rather a mess, I'm afraid. My mother is threatening to employ a charwoman.'

He beckoned me inside. He hung his jacket on a hook and took mine from me as I stood awkwardly in the doorway. The room was large and cold. Flowers stood in a vase of cloudy water on the table. In the sink, glasses were silted with red wine. Behind a Japanese screen, the foot of a bed was just visible. Saul explained that he had been in the apartment since he began at the museum, and the two places were becoming increasingly connected in his mind, as though these rooms were simply an annex of the Kaiser Friedrich, accessible only to him. There was so much thinking to be done out of hours, and without the pictures in front of him he was quite helpless, his memory congested with art from his studies and other institutions in Germany. He gestured at walls covered in postcard reproductions of artworks, all from the museum collection, curling at their edges, almost white from exposure to light.

I sat on the only chair in the room. Saul was talking about the angel in

Botticelli's *Annunciation*, how his divine status is shown through the ease of his knees bent low on the hard tile. How he ached just looking at that pose, and that was the point. Our bodies were frail, unlike the angels, who were immortal, boundlessly capable, like air or light. I wanted to say that angels didn't have knees, they had no joints at all, that was what Father had told me. I ran my hands over my legs, remembering this. Saul had been standing against the wall, but now knelt next to me and took my hand. He kissed it and looked up enquiringly at me. I leant over and pressed my mouth against his.

I watched myself follow him to the bed like this was just another fantasy I was controlling from the safety of my bedroom. He unfastened the top button of my skirt and eased it down my thighs with a steady grip so the fabric wouldn't rip. I liked this so much I tore off my blouse too quickly. I liked the light weight of his body against my own, how his hands had their own way of touching my neck that was different to how they touched my breasts. When he took off his underwear, I began to wonder almost abstractly what I would do next. My body continued to respond, and did so hungrily, like it had had enough of my abstemiousness. I had the sensation of floating free of myself, without bones or ordinary human fears, my colourful feathered wings buoyed up by a draught under the door. I sat up suddenly.

'I haven't—' The rest of the sentence stalled in my throat.

'I understand,' Saul replied. He pushed himself up against the headboard.

There was a long pause. I felt intense physical longing just looking at the side of his head.

'You've read Boccaccio's account of the life of Marcia?' he said.

I said I hadn't. I worried I had already derailed what Maria had diligently prepared me for.

'She was an artist working in the Roman Empire,' Saul said. 'One of the first of her kind, apparently. Boccaccio claims she was a virgin. This seemed very important to him – a precondition, you might say, for a woman to become an artist. Sofonisba Anguissola and Lavinia Fontana, though they were painting two centuries later, were probably referencing this belief when they signed their works "Virgin".'

I laughed and Saul echoed me uneasily, turning slightly pink.

'I'm being a bore, aren't I?'

'No, it's just – they were both married,' I said, pleased to finally make

use of the books I'd been reading. 'They were probably enjoying the irony. Who knows, maybe they were even mocking Boccaccio.' I studied my bra on the floor by the bed, which I had taken great pains to sew the week before in a colour I thought was mature. I was now unsure. 'I'm not like them. They were painting to commission at my age. I'm completely inexperienced – in everything.'

Saul lay back down, eyes closed. But he raised an eyebrow to acknowledge he was listening.

'Tell me what you want,' he said. His tone was relaxed, almost sleepy.

I considered the question quietly. Saul was playing with my hair. He brushed it from my forehead, tucked strands behind my ear, and touched its lobe, smiling. Content, like this was pleasure enough. His lips were still wet and swollen from kissing me. The mouth of a perfume bottle, tipped so the scent dampens the skin, should be pressed against your neck and your wrists, Maria said. I was explaining this to Saul as my hand searched for his, pulling his body over me. But why not your ribs, I said to him, or underneath your breasts, on each of your nipples, or in the hollow of your navel?

~

I left his room at dusk. I walked rather than take the tram. What a waste to move in this dull way when I now knew what was possible. I passed women deep in conversation in cafes, animated as though performing monologues for the camera. They discussed how to best apply Vaseline to their eyelashes and not, regrettably, the quick, slender bodies of men. When I was close to the apartment I began to run, not caring about scuffing the shoes Maria had given me only days before, new in their box. A pale suede with a small heel that made a pleasing clip against the pavement. Light, that was how I felt, impossibly light like ash from a cigarette, and like I might never stop laughing. I asked Olga for hot water as soon as I got through the door. I lay in the bath until it went cold, until Maria rapped on the door and sniped something inaudible about her hair. Before it grew dark, I mended the small tear to my silk blouse, a crescent which had opened under its arm. I used a scrap of coloured fabric. Red would be too obvious, I decided. I chose violet instead.

~

A letter the next day from Saul read: *Fontana and Anguissola were both of noble birth and trained in their fathers' studios, themselves professional painters. You are right to say you are not like them.* Attached was a postcard reproduction of the Rubens picture. It was cut in half, just the animal in flight from the hunters.

I spent the day laundering lengths of muslin, their function unspecified. Olga watched me with the breathlessness of a novice witness to a sacred ritual. The palms of my hands felt hot, enlarged, and I was intensely conscious of them as I worked. I tried not to think about Saul. I let my mind rest on the roughness of the cotton fibre, the soft, enveloping touch of steam. It felt good to take the flat iron from the fire, to let a tide of heat break over my body as I bore down on the fabric.

In a portrait by Petrus Christus, one of my favourites in the museum, a girl wears a veil of material so thin and translucent it's visible only in the tiny pin that holds it in place at her chest. The knowledge of what had happened between us that afternoon was like this. I felt it as vividly as something brushing against my skin, but it was so private and impossible to express that it was only discernible to those who were willing to study me at length and in the most intimate proximity. The only person who had ever been so close was Saul.

When I laid the table that night, the silver felt smooth and somehow heavier, almost sensate, and its weight in my hands made me blush.

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5

ON FRIDAY AFTERNOONS, around two o'clock, Olga would retire to her room to write a letter to her sister, and Maria, who was released from the office at lunchtime once a week, would begin preparations for the night ahead. That week it was getting colder, the trees were rusting and beginning to shed, and Maria was talking about our plans earlier than usual, at breakfast on Tuesday.

I watched Maria tidy her hair in the mirror with the careful touch of a florist handling stems in a bouquet. She put on a dress (red sequins), changed her mind (black silk), examining her reflection over her shoulder, dissatisfied, then went back to the dress discarded on the floor. I wore whatever Maria instructed, normally her cast-offs, which seemed to lighten the burden of her own choice: tonight, I was her understudy in black silk. Maria hurried Olga through dinner, only eating what wouldn't disturb her lipstick. Olga participated in our conversation like she thought she was coming with us. Was there somewhere to put your coat, and did the young men know how to treat respectable ladies? Afterwards, in the lounge with the gramophone on, Maria mixed large, potent drinks that gave the room a filmy quality and put Olga to sleep.

Abruptly, Olga's snores resounding from the bedroom, Maria judged the hour precisely right for us to leave. She spoke ceaselessly to the taxi driver, who took corners like he had been drinking too, while lamp posts, overcoats, doorways and multicoloured lights streamed by. Maria walked us in by a back entrance where women were already cradling cigarettes in one

hand and holding each other's wrists with the other, mouths filled with talk and smoke. Monosyllables were shouted into my ear over the music, rushed introductions. I couldn't stop thinking about painting. I followed women around the room. I had to be direct. Most told me to get lost, but a few didn't. Would they mind being drawn? Flattered, some agreed. They struck poses that appeared practised, arranging their faces in front of me like I was a mirror. I sketched them on napkins and till receipts with a sharpened kohl. I sent the better drawings to Saul in the post the next morning. I wanted women with a dark, severe energy, but they were rare. Most were wild in a temporary way, just as I was.

The resemblance was strong enough once that I actually said her name aloud. The club was full of ersatz Elkes, women who borrowed her features and emulated her gait, if only for a moment, who became themselves again when the weak light of the overhead lamps found them. 'Tell me where you go in the evenings,' Elke would say as I pinned her skirt, 'and who you meet and how late you stay.' The stories amused her, and they passed the time as I made the adjustment. But I sometimes wondered if it was because she might drop by the clubs herself.

Laughter, lit cigarettes, dark lipstick reapplied in the bathroom. A woman's hand on my neck, a tray of cocktails that replenished itself, my hand on a woman's thigh. Lying about my age and occupation and origins, later removing my shoes to dance. A small vial of white powder that changed hands in a corner of the dance floor. An earring glinting on the floor, women slumped against the wall. Silk soaked through with sweat, a feather loose from a hat. Shattered glass, the sound of a woman crying into a porcelain bowl. A rip in my stockings that ran like a hand up beneath my skirt. Maria steered me across the bar, proprietorial. The strap on her dress broke, and exposed a cup of her bra, her breasts like eyes fixed in a wink. I sat in a snug wooden booth and dialled the first two numbers for the telephone Saul shared with the neighbouring apartment. Maria knocked on the glass and pulled me out as my finger touched the third. Wine that tasted of vinegar drunk in quantities as though it was water. In the cab home, darkness erased Maria's features but not her beauty.

The next morning, I crawled across the hallway into Maria's room. Behind a wall of smoke, she was awake, sat on the floor, her dress askew, thoughtfully puffing on a cigarette.

'Someone left these lying around,' she announced. 'Six pfennigs a pack.'

‘Could you spare one?’

Maria grimaced and tipped the packet upside down. It was empty.

I covered my eyes with my hands. Dimly I remembered Olga fussing in her nightgown, two glasses of lukewarm water. Aspirins, two each, bitter on the tongue.

‘Did we wake Olga?’

‘Oh, she won’t care,’ Maria said. ‘She enjoys it really. Vicarious living. Did you meet anyone interesting?’ She rubbed her eyes, inspected her fingers. ‘I was trapped next to some old general half the night. Couldn’t get rid of him. Tried to explain the state of the world to me as he fumbled at my dress. Said he’d pay to have it repaired but that meant giving him an address he could write to. You know the type.’ She rolled her eyes and raised her hand in a salute.

I had noticed them, it was impossible not to in their distinctive yellow-brown uniforms, the colour of horse manure, Saul said. In the past, there had been one or two in the clubs we rarely went to – nasty places, only entered out of necessity if everywhere else was packed. But last night, as was becoming the norm, there were a few of them carousing at our favourite bar. Wet with perspiration, noisier with each passing hour. Boots that stank of piss from the men’s room, bottles of beer necked one after another. Laughter, eyes oily with volatility. ‘Ignore them,’ Maria had said. ‘It’s only ten o’clock. Let’s just go somewhere else.’

The party leader’s voice on the wireless in the apartment could be heard most mornings, his whine louder as the dial turned, Olga crouched with her ear cocked, uncharacteristically alert. Saul assured me repeatedly that the party was unserious. Give them a year, he said, they’ll be bored sick, they’ll have turned on each other, they’ll have taken up with another political cause. I wanted to believe him, but I wasn’t just imagining that their numbers had increased. They’d had a fruitful mating season, inbreeding like rabbits. ‘Too bad, I thought he was alright,’ Maria had said the night before about a man I’d seen her disappear with several times. I responded to uniformed men as many young women did to midnight being struck on the clock. I made my excuses and left.

Soon Maria and I were going out together twice a week, talking until our voices were hoarse, ordering drinks she wouldn’t let me pay for. Maria would bob her head agreeably at the evasive answers I gave to any questions about my lover.

‘Let’s hope he isn’t married,’ she said to me on one of those nights, ‘the man you’re seeing. There’s no point denying it. They can get you into rotten situations, trust me.’

She tipped her handbag upside down, flicking crumbs and sweet wrappers onto the floor, her tone carefully offhand. I opened my mouth and took a sip of my drink. I hadn’t eased into the script Maria assumed fit my situation, the relentless themes of men’s desire and men’s stupidity. Maria nodded as though I had responded, and drummed her long nails against the marble tabletop.

‘I want to become an actress.’ Her eyes were bright and cheerful again. ‘I wouldn’t let them cut my hair. Otherwise, I have the right appearance for it. Olga has said so. Quite a few times actually. Don’t I?’

A new phase of the evening would begin when Maria drifted off with a man, the floral garnish from our last cocktail still stuck to her wet lips. She would disappear for an hour or more, and return without explanation. A hectic flare in her eyes, a bitten fullness to her mouth. She would prise the glass out of my hand regardless of how much was left, and return it seconds later emptied. Then we would go home. Outwardly she was the same as always, and we never discussed where she had been. Once, in a taxi on our way home and drunker than usual, she fished a roll of notes from her bag and waved them in front of us.

‘Not bad given he couldn’t even get it in,’ she said.

~

I went over to Saul’s apartment most afternoons. An adjustment to my routine with unanticipated results. Hands used for pleasure held a pencil with greater confidence. I thought Saul wanted to talk about my work only because he was embarrassed about our becoming lovers. It didn’t occur to me that he might be taking me seriously. Or that I was asking to be.

Saul explained that in art school students learnt about anatomy through drawing from people rather than pictures. I had shown him my drawings of Olga and Maria, conscious that only their faces were right. The slight snarl in Maria’s wide-set mouth, the deep recesses from which Olga’s eyes flickered. Their clothes I happily transcribed, knowing them intimately from the washboard all the way down to their stitching. But the bodies underneath remained a mystery.

‘And they study anatomical diagrams,’ I said, wanting to defend my methods. I was reading one of Olga’s books. The lungs were made up of small passageways that not only carried air but cleaned it, an arrangement which seemed to guarantee that some intelligence was always caring for you, even if it was buried deeply and largely imperceptibly within your own body.

‘Diagrams are for doctors,’ Saul said. ‘They don’t show how a body moves. How it feels.’ He took the book from me and placed it to one side. ‘Beauty has very little to do with science. Even if you only ever draw people with their clothes on, you need to know what they look like undressed.’

I said that requesting Olga and Maria pose nude for me might cause a scandal. Privately I suspected they would agree to it. I imagined Olga presenting her bare chest to me as readily as she did the dirty garments in her wardrobe.

Saul shrugged. He said I could use him as a model. Renaissance artists often used male bodies as the basis of the Madonna. It wasn’t always well concealed. The muscles were too large, the breasts non-existent, the hip bone overly pronounced, her jawline heavy-set.

‘They couldn’t look away. They wouldn’t compromise on the beauty before them.’ Saul took a sip of water and grinned. ‘Holy pictures that betray how men desire other men. Arguably disastrous.’

‘I would rather not make the same mistakes,’ I replied.

But I was thinking about what it meant to have permission to look. How I rationed myself in Saul’s company. How conscious I was of my need. Only when I was alone did I turn his body over in my mind slowly and thoroughly, leaving nothing unseen or untouched, like peeling the rind from an orange. I forgot about the drawings of Olga and Maria. I told him we could start right away.

Saul shifted an ashtray to make room for a cup of coffee, one of the many he got through each afternoon. We were quiet as the static of the street below floated in through the window. He began to unbutton his shirt. I told myself I needn’t look away. His maroon woollen socks had two small holes that required darning. He said he would keep them on, if that was alright with me; he would feel the cold otherwise. This was where I tried to focus, on the frayed red strands at the very tips of his feet. I learnt more about the body from him than I imagined I would. How the skin of the thigh

and the face and the groin absorbed light in distinct ways. How the muscles in the arm could be as expressive as a mouth. Saul was an obliging model, and insisted we practise several times a week. My willpower was weak, and it wouldn't take much to break my focus. He would say, 'Hannah, come here please, I need to check the proportions are right,' and we would be distracted, and I rarely drew afterwards. I cannot say these sessions were the most efficient pedagogical exercises. But the small slate grey sketchbook was soon full, and I bought another.

'I enjoy this,' he said, one afternoon as he was getting dressed. 'Talking to you. Our lunches in the apartment.' He put on his glasses and squinted up at the lightbulb that hung from the ceiling. 'When you aren't in the museum, I find myself less interested in the pictures. They suddenly seem to lack something.' He paused, shook his head. 'Do you understand what I mean?'

I didn't say anything then. I saw myself walking through the backgrounds of the pictures in the museum. How I would pause to light a cigarette, blow smoke and flick ash. I would leave a trace of myself as I went. In a letter that night I wrote to him:

> I went home via Gerson, as you recommended, to see if they needed an extra hand in the workroom. Success – all thanks to your friend! It's pitiful pay but I can't complain. You must tell me before you buy anything from there, or any department store for that matter, in case I could make it for you instead. I must break this off here – Olga is waiting. Forgive my crudeness, what you would call my boldness, but I thought it might also be worth mentioning that I'm in love with you.

'Where do you go in the days?' Maria said. 'Be honest.' We were chopping vegetables for Olga, heads bowed, peels dyeing our fingers unusual colours. Outside, wisps of cloud marbled the blue like fat in a cut of meat.

'To heaven,' I said under my breath.

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6

I WAS BUYING a drink at the bar while I waited for Maria to emerge from the bathroom. As I fished a maraschino cherry out of the glass, I turned towards the bar's large mirror. Out of habit, I raked over the usual scrum of intensely animated faces and thought about drawing. Tucked into a far corner, I was surprised to see Saul and another man absorbed in conversation. Instinctively I began to walk towards him. Their mouths moved, but I heard nothing except the music from the band. As I got closer, I saw that they were staring into each other's eyes. Their bodies were close, their knees continually finding new ways to touch. I stopped in the middle of the dance floor when Saul placed a hand on this man's dark, angular face. They moved into an embrace as two women hurtled into me. I let them think I was close to tears because they had spilled wine on my dress. I lifted my glass and tried to ignore the churn of jealousy in my stomach. Maria marched over and began saying something to me, but I nodded without listening and she soon wandered onto the dance floor without me.

Saul and I had never spoken about what we did at night, and hardly ever referred to our lives outside his room. We only had an hour, and his body always interested me more. When I asked Saul if he was married, he had just laughed. If he was, he'd said, it would be too late to develop a conscience about it. But I hadn't really considered his affections to be divided as Maria had warned. The cocktail tasted like Olga's floor varnish smelt, and was almost pleasant once I drank another. I remained there watching them until a lull in the noise and density of the crowd revealed

me. Embarrassed, I gave an involuntary wave with my free hand. If Saul was surprised to see me, he didn't show it and returned my gesture with warmth, beckoning me over.

I feared what might happen if I stayed any longer. (The girls in toilet cubicles who wept and wouldn't be comforted.) I couldn't find Maria. I suspected she was in the club's back rooms with one of the men who had approached her earlier in the evening. I left a note scrawled on a napkin for her with the barman. *Remember your coat. Knock for me later*. I thought about writing something else, an eviscerating line about men regurgitated from one of her own lectures on the topic.

When I returned to my room, I lay face down on the bed and cried. I remained like that until my face was hot and I was forced to turn over. I stared at the ceiling, where I had pinned two drawings of Saul. Olga cleaned the room with her neck permanently fixed at a perpendicular angle, so I could decorate up there as I pleased. Saul's body drawn from below, how he appeared when he had one hand steadying himself against the headboard, sweat beading his chest. The other was his face in profile, smiling, glasses slightly askew. I closed my eyes and could feel the light touch of his fingers on my forehead.

I often wondered why Saul didn't simply ask me to marry him, even though it wasn't something I especially wanted. Contemplating marriage felt like a form of compliance with my mother's wishes, a way of being close to her still. It now seemed my life would have nothing in it that Mother understood. I lay awake thinking about whether any painting in the museum depicted this kind of disappointment. Women gazed out unhappily in so many portraits, and given the opulence of their surroundings, I assumed it was love that troubled them. I tried to summon the rage or righteousness that frequently characterized Maria's accounts of her own affairs. But I couldn't.

I heard Maria return to the apartment at dawn. I knocked on her door a few hours later. She made a noise that sounded like yes, and I stepped over a pile of dirty laundry into her room. She was lying on top of the bedclothes in her sequined dress. She hadn't even taken off her shoes. Sunlight sliced through the thin curtains and made quivering shapes on the carpet. Her eyes were smeared shut with kohl.

'What happened?' she said. 'You were gone by eleven.'

'Oh, nothing really,' I said. 'I saw someone I didn't want to see.'

Maria pushed herself onto her elbows. She flicked a clump of hair from her forehead and studied me.

‘There’s a letter for you in the kitchen. It’s probably from him.’

‘I’ll read it later.’

Maria frowned. ‘They’re all bores, and none of them are trustworthy.’

‘Could you come to my room and help me with something?’

Maria said she was tired, her head ached, and standing up made her dizzy. This meant that even getting her across the corridor to my room took longer than anticipated. But eventually she was sat on my bed looking at the painting supplies I had saved for months to buy. The easel was set up by the window. I had spent the day before preparing the canvas with gesso. Selecting the right angle for sunlight, lining the tubes of paint along the windowsill. Holding the brush experimentally. I sensed I was nearly ready to begin. I couldn’t eat or concentrate on my washing. I remembered how it felt those first weeks with Saul, the feeling of compulsion and inevitability. There seemed little difference between that desire and this.

‘I thought you might model for me,’ I said.

Maria was watching me through narrowed eyes. From the way her expression kept clouding, I knew she was contemplating repeating her axiom about men.

‘Dressed like this? I’ll need to run a bath. And do something with my hair.’

‘You’re fine as you are. But would you mind doing it without your clothes?’ I tried to sound nonchalant.

Maria hesitated. I sensed the request pass through some inner adjudication, proficient from her dealings with men. She shrugged. Her dress was pulled over her head and tossed to the floor with the same neutrality I had seen her remove gloves. Her body was as I imagined it would be, sturdy and curved as a lightbulb. She took off her underwear and did nothing to hide her nakedness. Her stomach was the same shade of white as her face, like she walked the streets of Berlin completely undressed in all weathers, unwilling to compromise her body’s consistency of tone. I looked at Maria and immediately looked away. There was a brief silence in which I thought I could hear her heartbeat, in which all her physical sensations and functions were suddenly visible to me.

‘Well, what now?’ Maria asked, gently. Like I was the one compelled to undress. I was embarrassed that my unease was so obvious.

‘I used to work with other girls in a house around the corner,’ Maria continued. ‘We were naked around each other all the time. It was strange in the beginning. I thought everyone was looking at me. But I got so accustomed to it I would get mixed up and think I was looking at my body when I wasn’t. We were all so alike.’

We were quiet then, and remained like that for hours, as though simply falling asleep in one another’s company as we had done so many times that month.

I painted Maria with a bow and arrow in her arms, a saint of sorts. Solitary, empty. Capable of violence, fierce with vocation, but vulnerable. In the background, a plum tree heavy with fruit. An evening mood, an air of desolation. A balance of shadow and light and line, a shape beneath the colour. I had to remind myself I had never worked in oils before and that was why this was so difficult.

‘Are you going to tell me what you’re moping about?’ Maria asked after a few hours.

Her annoyance was somehow more conspicuous without her clothes on. Laughing, I began to tell her what happened at the club. I was hoping to sound brave. Maria interrupted me.

‘That’s it?’

‘Yes, I suppose.’

Maria put on my dressing gown, sighing theatrically. She strode into the kitchen and returned with his letter.

Dearest Hannah,
You might be wondering about what you saw at the Resi last night. I was never sure how much about my own life to share with you. I am sorry for the shock it likely caused. Joe is a friend of mine and has been for some years. I cannot think of an elegant way to express the heart of the situation, which is that I love you both. I hope you can see why I did not share this with you. Some are intolerant of such feelings existing between men. My colleagues, my family. Women I have grown close to. No doubt you have heard it described as a form of vice and criminality. As sexual degeneracy. [Here something had been written and crossed out forcefully.] All the recent furore around Paragraph 175. I confess that I thought the way you spoke of this – perhaps you remember our conversation, only a few weeks ago – was

more than usually compassionate. Perhaps it was shame, above all, that prevented me from telling you. But I do not wish to make excuses. I have been dishonest, if only by omission. Would you come to my apartment tomorrow, so I might explain myself?

Saul

– written in haste, as might be obvious. To prevent your landlady steaming this open, I glued the envelope shut.

I posted a drawing to him less than an hour later, running down the street with my nightgown tucked into a pair of trousers. It was a copy of Rembrandt's *Jacob Wrestling the Angel*. I liked talking about this painting with Saul in the museum, where it hung close to the doorway of his office. It struck me as too tender to depict a fight. The Angel appears content, his robe suggestively falling from his shoulder, a hand on the back of his opponent's neck. Jacob lifts the Angel, whose leg is wrapped around his waist and braced against a rock, a position so brazenly sexual it felt indecent to look at in public. It was an image of desire in all its self-defeating ambivalence and violence, and it moved me. I had asked Saul whether he thought that loving his young mistress Hendrickje as well as his wife Saskia made Rembrandt sympathetic to other forms of transgression. To men who longed to be held by men like this. Saul had grimaced, laughed.

'What is it that Jacob says to the Angel? "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." That sounds like a lover's threat to me.'

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PART 2

1931

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7

I HAD BEEN washing and mending Elke's clothes roughly once a fortnight since she first visited Olga's apartment. The jobs were typically small and easy – the garments rarely even noticeably worn, let alone dirty – and she always insisted on paying more than I asked, waving away my objections like the money was nothing. I left my sketchbooks out when she came round, and would sometimes notice her examining a page with an unusual amount of focus. She tended to call on a Monday morning to arrange an appointment for Wednesday. I was lying in bed waiting for the phone to ring and when it did, just after nine, I felt the entire apartment prick up its ears. As I put on my dressing gown, I heard Olga talking excitedly into the receiver.

'Three brothers, all dead in the war,' she said. 'Thankfully my parents didn't live to see the treaty.' Placidly she handed me the phone as though such intimate details were an ordinary greeting.

'Your landlady seems intent upon sharing her family history with me,' Elke said. I was relieved that she sounded amused.

I didn't say that Elke had begun to loom large in Olga's imagination. Elegance and good breeding were, as Olga repeatedly said, a rare thing nowadays.

'What will it be this week?'

'I thought you might like a break,' Elke said. 'You were very industrious over Christmas. Perhaps you would like to come with me to the cinema?'

Two days later I was waiting for Elke outside the Wintergarten cinema. I

nearly scalded myself from ironing all the creases out of my blouse, which took the better part of half an hour. This meant I had to run most of the way there. I was worrying about the state of my stockings when I saw a driver with a tall peaked hat and cream gloves open the door of a car across the street. Elke emerged without looking at the driver and walked towards me, leaving the car door open. She wore a pair of wide-legged dark grey trousers and a blue knitted jumper underneath a long fur coat that grazed her ankles. Her appearance was more understated than usual, but the overall effect was not of subtlety but of glamour.

‘You don’t mind if I choose what we see?’ Elke said. ‘You aren’t fussy?’

We chatted about her garments as though they were our mutual friends and Elke bought the tickets. Once we took our seats, Elke went silent. Her gaze seemed to enliven the blank screen, and the young women around us began to settle.

The film was about a cabaret performer who was cruel to men. She worked at the Blue Angel. Saul later told me that this was how Satan was once imagined; he had seen the mosaics at Ravenna himself. ‘Do you suppose they want us to question her virtue?’ he joked. I was becoming absorbed in the story when I felt Elke’s hand on my own. Her touch was heavy and detached, clearly intended for the armrest rather than me. I ought to have immediately alerted her to the mistake, but I left it there for a few minutes. Her palm was warm, smooth in the satisfying way of stone rather than silk. The singer married a fan who saw beneath her stage persona and came to regret his choice, and still Elke’s hand was there. Eventually I wriggled my fingers.

‘Oh, excuse me,’ she whispered. ‘I wasn’t paying attention.’ For a moment longer her hand remained. Then she lifted it into her lap. I still felt the weight of her palm on my knuckles when the film ended.

‘They say it’s supposed to be the Stork Club,’ Elke said as we left the cinema. ‘I haven’t been. Have you?’

I said I hadn’t.

‘What a pathetic man,’ Elke went on, gesturing at the male lead on the poster. The film seemed intent upon punishing him for his weakness. I had been disturbed by the laughter that followed his every new humiliation. Elke had massaged her neck and turned in her seat to look at the audience during the climactic scene of his death.

‘The actress was beautiful,’ I said.

Elke read her name aloud off the poster: ‘Marlene Dietrich.’ The crowd surged noisily through the foyer. More than one woman stared openly at Elke. She didn’t appear to notice the attention. But the air of disinhibition moved over us like a breeze.

‘Beauty can inspire the most queer, debasing behaviour,’ Elke said thoughtfully. ‘Have you ever been in love?’ Her tone made the question seem impersonal, like she was asking for a light.

‘Well, yes. I am in love.’ I said this with an unintentional piety. But Elke didn’t baulk at the sincerity of my answer. She smiled widely, catching the attention of two passing women.

‘Is he an artist?’

‘He works at the Kaiser Friedrich Museum. He’s a scholar.’

I was conscious of wanting to impress Elke with this fact. I hoped she understood her encouragement made her partly responsible for the relationship. I studied her unmoving expression.

‘What’s his name?’ she asked.

‘Saul Gans-Meyer.’

‘You intend to marry him?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Because?’

I suddenly felt embarrassed. I opened my mouth and closed it again. Saul and I were still seeing each other most days but he now spoke openly about Joe, a musician who I was relieved to discover was more often than not working or abroad. I was politely curious and enthusiastic about Joe, taking every opportunity to restate my acceptance of the situation, behaving as I imagined a mature, modern woman would. I hoped I would eventually become as nonchalant about it as I acted.

‘He has other lovers?’ Elke asked.

‘He does,’ I said, surprised.

‘It’s very common these days. Presumably you do too?’

I shrugged.

‘More sensible to concentrate on your work,’ she said. ‘Which reminds me, I wanted to talk to you about that.’

‘Mending for next week?’

‘Actually, I wonder how you would feel about sending your drawings to me. You’ve noticed me looking at them. They’re rather good. I might even offer advice on how to improve.’

Elke didn’t wait for me to answer and started walking towards the exit. This meant we couldn’t see each other’s expressions as her question settled. Saul already looked over my drawings. But it was hard to disentangle his attention to my work from the knot of our intimacy. I could see the advantage of having another perspective, and there was no question that Elke had good taste, that was clear in her garments. Something else needled at me as I watched the long line of Elke’s hair glide through the congested set of doors. I wanted to be more to Elke than just my sewing. I already knew what a pleasure that could be. I might receive her admiration as freely as I gave it, a symmetry laden with possibilities.

‘Do you have something in mind you would like me to draw?’

Elke took a long drag on a cigarette as she considered this. She had smoked throughout the film, finding the packet and lighting cigarettes without ever turning from the screen, conjuring them from the surrounding darkness. I was amazed that her clothes never smelt of anything but perfume.

‘Anything you like.’ She motioned at the scene around us. Women deciding on where to have a drink. Young couples embracing. A man biting into an apple and, his hand sticky with juice, offering it to a friend. Any of this will do, she meant.

The hand that had touched my own fiddled with a loose strand of her hair. As it moved down her head to her neck, it checked the presence of an earring in her lobe, a small diamond. It brushed the seat of her trousers and slipped into her pocket.

‘Alright,’ I said.

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THE NEXT DAY I returned from Saul's at the usual time and couldn't settle on my sewing or mending. I didn't feel like drawing either. When I looked out the window, all I saw were thin, dismal figures with their heads bowed pushing themselves across the pavement. Dinner wouldn't be served for a couple of hours. Maria was still at work. A friend of hers I liked to sketch had told me about a club near Friedrichstrasse station. Different crowd, the woman had said, I would enjoy it there. I wished I had pressed her for more details once I found myself walking up and down the nearby streets. I was close to giving up when I passed a promising-looking doorway. Black velvet curtains were drawn across the windows, but just perceptible was music and, underneath that, conversation. There was no sign or bell. From the boy who eventually answered in a dove grey tuxedo several sizes too large for him, I learnt it was called the Sibyl Vane. Plainly he looked me up and down in assessment, then began to shut the door. I hesitated.

'May I come in?' I asked. Politely, as though to a prospective landlady.

His hand stopped pulling at the door. I waited as he moved one eye into the gap to examine me again.

'I'm an artist,' I said stupidly. As though this granted me admission wherever I went, like I was a policeman.

But this appeared to work. He nodded and solemnly wrenched the door fully open. The kerosene lamp illuminated his face and drew attention to dark purple paint on his eyelids, the waxy black of his lashes, the gleam on his lips like the polished peel of a fruit. His long gloved arms waved me

inside. We passed through a carpeted corridor, similar to the one in my own building, with the umbrellas, hats and shoes of female lodgers congregated around a stand. Cooking smells and laughter wafted down a staircase, but the boy pushed on through another door that led onto a courtyard. Flowering vines snaked around an entranceway through which a small bar was packed with women. Shards of light bounced off sequin and silk. The air was glutted with scents. My satchel still slung over my shoulder, I took a seat.

I ordered something small and astringent, counting the coins carefully from my purse. I didn't stay for more than a few songs that night, enough time to sip to the bottom of the glass. An elderly woman played jazz badly on a dimly spotlit piano next to a low stage, pausing to turn her sheet music for longer than seemed necessary. Two young girls with long bead necklaces that accentuated their thinness kicked their legs in jerking movements that didn't quite approximate a dance. In the breaks for applause, women swivelled in their seats, regarding one another. They were unembarrassed, at ease, enjoying themselves. 'Only four marks for a night in a room,' I heard one woman say to another as they passed the bar, settling at a table close to the stage. My unfamiliarity was noted, and several eyes followed me as I left.

Three times a week I told Saul I had to work, left the museum at noon and walked to the Sibyl Vane. The late afternoon slot was filled by a troupe of dancers in ankle-length white dresses that looked like they hadn't been laundered properly in months. If I wanted to return to the apartment for dinner, I only ever heard the first few minutes of the act that came after them, a tiny burlesque performer in a transparent sheath. By then women were fighting to get in, dethroning one another from the best seats and shouting to be heard over the band. But I was always more interested in the dancers. The club was normally empty when they began, and arriving in time to see the entire performance quickly became a point of principle for me. I would swallow a glass of beer and take out my sketchbook. Drawing them, I was part of their intensity, I wasn't just copying their movements. I felt it in my own body when they leapt and, after a moment suspended in the air, landed. Maria only accompanied me once, and after an hour asked me very earnestly in a near whisper if I knew this was a bar for Sapphists.

One day I arrived slightly late from an errand for Olga, but the

barwoman had saved my seat. A drink slick with condensation was waiting for me on the counter.

‘Have I missed them?’

‘Running behind again,’ the barwoman said, not looking up from the glass she was drying.

We said variations of this to each other most afternoons. The barwoman seemed to understand the bid for reassurance buried within these queries. I wanted to be told that I should stay.

When the dancers eventually came on, their performance, as usual, bore no resemblance to dances by other acts. They rose and fell and rocked from side to side in a frenzied rhythm. My hand followed them. The sketchbook filled with wavering lines.

As the next act arrived to set up, one of the dancers appeared in front of me. She was around my height, taller than most of the other women there. The make-up she wore on stage had been wiped off and a dark coat covered the dress she had performed in. Almost white from bleach, thin and silky blonde hair that had hung around her cheekbones as she danced was now smooth against her head, secured with two small black barrettes. The freckles that covered her wide-set features were not, as Maria’s were, applied with a pencil. I was taking my satchel to leave, but she stopped my hand. She began to speak as though we knew one another already.

‘You’re always here,’ she said. ‘We’ve been wondering why.’ She signalled to the dancers standing around her, engaged in their own conversations, uninterested in me. ‘We know the other regulars, women with nothing better to do from the apartments above. They’re all gone by dinnertime. We used to have a livelier slot. Then she came along.’ She gestured at the burlesque dancer, who was sat alone at a corner table in an enormous fur coat with three drinks.

‘I prefer your act,’ I said too quickly.

She let out a fierce laugh and knelt to tie the lace of her shoe, a battered man’s brogue. I thought I could discern women in the booth to our right fall silent to listen to us. She asked whether I was a dancer. I shook my head.

‘Good, I was going to tell you we’ve no room for more novices. I’ve tried my best with these girls but they’re lazy. They aren’t exactly committed to the craft. It’s just an attempt to shock their parents. They want better allowances, an amnesty on marriage.’ She frowned.

‘You’re very good,’ I said.

‘I am?’

‘I can’t be the first to tell you that,’ I replied, smiling. I was trying to say this casually. It wasn’t clear if I was succeeding.

She smiled ironically. She said that she had once thought so too. But it was harder to feel that way now she was nearing thirty and no closer to a proper career. She knew she was wasted on the Sibyl Vane. I asked her where she had trained and she said Dresden, with one of the great innovators of dance, Mary Wigman. She was talented, she was willing to work hard, she said, and she didn’t even have the ego of some of those girls, but nothing significant had materialized since arriving in Berlin. A stint in Klein’s naked revue might have lasted longer if the money had been better. She had a regular slot at the White Mouse, while it lasted. Other jobs came and went as clubs opened and closed. It quickly became clear that most directors in the big venues only offered parts to girls who’d go to bed with them. She was just about scraping by on small roles when she argued with the wrong person, a promoter who knew everyone in the industry. Suddenly there was no point attending auditions any more.

‘I suspect there are other reasons too,’ she said, stretching her arms and yawning. ‘Word got around, not just about my so-called obstinacy. Many of those characters hate Jews.’ She rolled her eyes.

I sensed this comment was also a question. I was impressed by her boldness. What a risk to take on a stranger. We exchanged a look.

‘And not just them,’ I said. ‘I find it’s everywhere these days.’

‘You do?’ she said.

‘I do.’ I held her gaze.

She smiled and nodded, seeming to understand, and reached over to take a sip of my drink. Something new pulsed between us. Not just curiosity, but sympathy. The band had started up and she turned towards them, her arm still resting on the counter. I would have said anything to keep the conversation going. In profile her face had an unshakeable look of composure, like a model in an advertisement.

‘It’s better here?’ I asked. ‘People seem friendly enough.’

‘I suppose. I would rather not dance here forever though. I feel like a schoolteacher with these girls.’ She pulled a face and shook her head. ‘Anyway, do you have a cigarette?’

‘People come to see you,’ I said. ‘It doesn’t matter about them.’

‘You do, you mean,’ she said, looking steadily at me.

I told her my name, and she responded with her own: Charlotte. I resisted the urge to give her all the cigarettes in my case, and to examine her too closely as she moved a step closer to light one from my hand. The lighter clicked a few times before sputtering to life. She withdrew onto her bar stool and took a long drag. I watched her tongue push through her teeth, and dislodge a strand of tobacco.

On stage, harshly lit, the dancers all looked the same. Eyebrows thickly drawn over white faces more painted than powdered, stamped with bright red lips, framed by hair cropped at their ears. Some routines exploited this likeness, and gave the impression of watching a single dancer perform the same routine from different points in time. In the bar afterwards their resemblance to one another dissolved so definitively it was as if they'd all been wearing masks. I realized that I had known Charlotte from the others all along. She bore her experience like a difference in lighting or height, which meant that even when all the dancers performed the same moves, even if she had positioned herself in the far corner of the stage, it was Charlotte who always drew attention.

'What about you?' she said. 'You're not a dancer, but you're always at Sibyl's. So what do you do?'

There seemed nothing less interesting in that moment than my own life.

'I'm a seamstress,' I said.

'That's all?' She nodded at the barwoman, who brought her a drink. A small glass of beer, mostly foam. I watched her lower her mouth to its lip. She gulped down half immediately and made a long, satisfied noise. She reached towards the counter and flicked a page of my notebook forward. A sketch of her, one leg raised to a kick. 'And this?' she asked.

'Oh, that's nothing really.'

I saw with embarrassment that these sketchbooks were nothing but Charlotte. Her arm carving lines into the air; the calligraphic curve of her back. Smudges where her body lengthened, paused, quivered.

'You're very good,' she said, impersonating my voice, which was higher than her own. She leant back and regarded me again, smiling.

'I'm still learning.'

'So, you're an artist?'

'I like drawing,' I said. 'Just the other girl in my apartment, and people we meet in clubs.'

Charlotte was watching me thoughtfully.

‘Like me?’ she said. She swallowed foam from another beer that had materialized before her. She stubbed her cigarette out in an ashtray and turned back to me, her fingers still poised around the now absent cigarette. ‘How about I come home with you now and you draw me in the morning?’

Charlotte took me by the wrist and led me out by the performers’ exit. I followed, watching strands of her hair move over an emerald green silk scarf sprinkled with stars. We walked back to the apartment quietly, hardly looking at one another. I thought about how Saul touched me, whether that touch was unique to me or if it was a blueprint through which other bodies could be understood. Neon signs gave Charlotte’s profile a similar luminescence to the one she had on stage, like we had walked for an hour without ever having left the club.

‘I live here,’ I said, waving up at the apartment.

‘Could I possibly’ – Charlotte took off her hat, and put it under her arm – ‘try yours for size?’

Obediently I removed my hat. She pulled it on and smiled.

‘Tell me I look ravishing,’ she said. ‘And try mine.’

Our faces were so close I could smell the light floral scent of her face powder. She lowered her wool beret carefully over my head and pulled it down over my eyes, naturally as though this was how it was habitually worn. She kissed me. Her mouth tasted of the last hour, cigarettes and beer and lipstick. We pulled apart, and I pushed the beret off. Under the glow of a streetlamp, Charlotte gazed back at me, undaunted.

I told Charlotte we should be quiet as we stepped into the building. Charlotte mimed sealing her mouth shut but tramped noisily up the stairs into the apartment anyway. She took my hand in the dark hallway, and I matched my step to hers: to anyone listening, we were just one woman returning to bed. In my room, I watched Charlotte undress. I found myself echoing her gestures. One button undone, a shoulder manoeuvred out of a sleeve. She was talking about Leni Riefenstahl, how she had watched her read for a part with such drastic woodenness that a speech about peasants from *Florian Geyer* sounded like instructions for heavy machinery. I wasn’t concentrating closely. I had to kiss her again; there was nothing else I could think about. When Charlotte switched the radio on, I reached over her to muffle the sound with a blanket. I should have kissed her then, but I wasn’t ready to stop looking. She was more muscular than she appeared on stage, and I was surprised at the colour of her body hair, darker and more

abundant even than my own. She put a third cigarette into the ashtray. I wanted to be held and spent and discarded like that. The air in the room was thick with smoke and very still. Charlotte ran her hands through her hair and stretched her arms up to the ceiling. Warming up, as though to dance. She was naming other actresses she knew – had I seen *Pavement Butterfly*? Anna was a darling – but when she met my gaze, she stopped talking.

‘You want to touch me,’ Charlotte said. It wasn’t a question. Or an order. More like how a dancer’s body is adjusted, refocused, by their teacher. It was a relief.

‘I do,’ I said.

‘You might need to come closer then,’ she said.

Charlotte told me to tell her what felt good. Your fingers on my neck, I might have said, your lower lip in my teeth, the pressure of your hips on mine, close and hot and dogged, your knees parting my legs. And your mouth, I could have said so much about her mouth. ‘Good’ wasn’t sufficient devotion.

Early the next morning as Charlotte slept, I eased myself silently out of the door into the hallway. A simple crucifix the size of a silverfish strung on a slim, tarnished chain had appeared in the bathroom overnight. On impulse I slipped it into my mouth and bit down. It didn’t calm my nerves, and neither did running the taps and breathing deeply. Brahms echoed faintly from the lounge where Olga read yesterday’s broadsheet, stuck on the same page I had seen her linger over the previous afternoon. ‘November criminals,’ she muttered, her face maroon, the paper flattened against her knees. She noticed me stood in the doorway and asked if I could buy a few things for dinner. I agreed, grateful to have something to do. She said that the woman at the bakery would find a fresh loaf if I gave her name. There was an instruction about milk and something about green potatoes. I opened my notebook to write this down, but instead drew the downward curve of a woman’s breast. Olga was still talking when I pressed the pencil hard on the nipple.

‘And a small cabbage, not another enormous one with a rotten core,’ she said.

Maria poked her head out of her door as I walked down the corridor. Crowned by a damp towel, her face without its usual glaze of colour.

‘You have someone in there!’ she whispered, pointing at my room.

I answered in the way Maria did to similar queries. A vague, insinuating

smile. I thought about Charlotte moving slowly against me when the alarm clock in Maria's room began to blare. Charlotte, not stopping, saying softly, 'Is that the typist?'

Charlotte pulled the bedsheet over her head when I told her I was going out to shop for my landlady. I wasn't afraid Olga would judge me if she discovered Charlotte in my room. She had cheerfully explained to me that her sister lived with a woman, and it was a very nice arrangement for two spinsters who would otherwise get very lonely. I was more concerned about what Olga would choose to discuss with Charlotte. Only days before over dinner, Olga had read aloud a graphic account of a man's syphilitic decline into decrepitude and madness. 'He caught it off his wife, not his mistress,' she'd repeated smugly.

Outside, the air was unusually warm for the hour. Uncombed pieces of hair stuck to my forehead and neck. All the stoned fruit at the market felt like the skin of Charlotte's face, and I couldn't touch any of it without a jolt of heat in my stomach. There was nothing I saw on the stalls that morning that didn't remind me of the previous night. How my blood had flowed according to the movement of Charlotte's hands, how afterwards my skin felt warm all the way through to the bone, like I'd been left out for hours in the sun. I walked into housewives and housekeepers, women intent upon their tasks and frustrated by my aimlessness, forgetting to apologize. I was only feebly attempting to concentrate on Olga's list. I pressed my hands against the outer leaves of several cabbages, as a physician might touch an ailing body, hoping they would communicate their rightness or wrongness. I knew I didn't have long before Olga detected a whiff of unfamiliar perfume in the hallway.

I could hear Olga talking when I pushed the door open to the apartment. On the table was the morning's post, including a letter from Saul. As I slipped the envelope into my pocket, I imagined the sincere way Saul would enquire after Charlotte's training with Wigman, the approving nod, the interest in details I hadn't considered. I went to the lounge and saw Charlotte smiling in a cane chair opposite Olga, a cup of coffee in her hands.

'If they simply set fire to the Moabit prison,' Olga said cheerfully, 'there would be less to worry about.'

'The only way to deal with Communists!' Charlotte said in a scandalized voice. She lifted the cup to cover her face.

There was an acknowledgement of something larger in the way Charlotte hid her smile and continued to listen to Olga. I knew that from watching Charlotte dance each night at the club before we had even spoken. I had wanted to fill my head with information about her, regardless of how small or meaningless it might be, and my sketchbooks had become an encyclopaedia of that desire. I saw Charlotte building a similar diorama of my own life. Did love always start out in this way, I wondered, with openness, curiosity? We never said the word lovers. But that was the beginning.

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9

I WAS EATING breakfast one morning, my thoughts already on the pictures I would see that day in the museum, when Olga shouted my name. Elke had telephoned the apartment. She was running errands, she said, but had a few blouses she wanted cleaning. Could I meet her outside Café Josty at twelve?

Elke had her back to the street and was gazing expressionlessly towards the windows of the cafe, both hands wrapped around the shoulder strap of her bag. Her forearms had turned a buttery pale gold. Spring hadn't yet arrived and washed the city with colour. I was curious where Elke had been.

'There you are.' She handed me the bag. 'You'll have to remind me how much you charge for clean and press.'

'I'm still forty-nine an hour,' I said.

Elke didn't appear to be listening. She was studying my face.

'I've never seen you wear kohl,' she said.

'My landlady says it doesn't suit me.'

Charlotte had left a kohl pencil in my bedroom, a stub I assumed she no longer wanted. I had tried to draw Charlotte with it on a sheet of discarded writing paper before I gave up and dragged it faintly over my eyelids.

'I disagree. You need to be careful with it smudging though.' She remained almost entirely still, and only her arm reached over and, with the slightest pressure of her forefinger, wiped under my eye. 'My husband met that friend of yours. Gans-Meyer, is it?'

'Yes,' I said, surprised.

'I must have mentioned that my husband was a scholar himself. He was

impressed with your knowledge of Rembrandt. We've both so enjoyed seeing your recent efforts. You draw beautifully.'

Elke had recently asked for a self-portrait. I spent an entire evening copying hats from Rembrandt's self-portraits, colouring them with great care. A cream turban with the texture of whipped cream. A large black disc of crushed velvet, like an open mouth. A rose-coloured cap with an ochre band, threaded with gold. Plump sage felt with a feather like an exclamation mark. Each a mood, an attitude.

'I really should offer you some payment in return. After all, paper and pencils aren't cheap.'

'Oh, that's alright. I like doing it. They're only practice, really.'

'Do you paint as well?'

'I've just started. You have to be more careful with oil paint. Because of the expense.'

This wasn't an interesting point, but Elke gave the impression of listening closely as though it was. She cast her eyes up dramatically, as though to say, what a shame.

'I would like to see anything you finish. And you would have to let me pay you then.'

We said goodbye and I watched her enter the cafe alone. She selected a seat by the window. She sat very upright in her chair and resumed looking at nothing. How she spent her days remained a mystery to me. Perhaps she merely moved from one room to another, without exertion or purpose, displaying herself. I thought about her husband, who had only recently entered our conversations, though they had been married, she told me, for over a decade.

When I got back to my room, the bed was unmade. Charlotte had still been sleeping when I left and was now at rehearsals. An afternoon of bright sunlight had faded to pink and gave the air in the room a pale, milky quality. Her blue cardigan was slung across the desk, its arms outstretched in appeal. I suspected she left things behind to secure my attendance at the club that night, her pride preventing her from asking me directly. I gladly accepted any reassurance of her affection. As I lit a cigarette, I noticed a postcard reproduction of a print by Mary Cassatt on the desk. A woman sits at a desk sealing an envelope, a chignon tight at her nape. The wall is papered with flowers in a pattern of horizontal lines that resembles cracks in a vase. The letter is on the desk, ready to be slid into an envelope. To the

viewer the letter and its envelope are blank. Cassatt allows her this secret. On the back, Charlotte had written:

> A woman's tongue against an envelope's seal. Perhaps you are aware of the pleasures of this already. My governess claimed Cassatt was not simply moved by the elegance of this everyday scene, she had another image in mind, a scandalous reference most would have missed. A Japanese print shows a courtesan with a towel in her mouth in a pose just like Cassatt's sitter. The courtesan wipes a man's taste from her mouth, readying herself for more. Alone in a room, an ordinary woman is surprised by her desires. What kind of letter has she written, and to whom? Perhaps she is not so reserved after all.

These postcards would become our private game. *The fur slips from her shoulders*, Charlotte wrote of Rubens's portrait of his second wife, *and releases Fourmant's ample, dimpled arms. What will she take hold of now?* Hers tended to be flirtatious, whereas mine had a quality of worship. In Raphael's *La Fornarina*, the model lifts a transparent veil like a layer of bathwater between her breasts. *You feel you could put your hand straight through it*, I wrote, *cold, colder than water left to stand overnight, and underneath, the warmth of her skin under your fingertips.*

When I eventually visited Charlotte's apartment, four large messy rooms she had failed to mention were a fifteen-minute walk from my building, I asked her where she kept my postcards. Hers were in a shoebox under the bed, wrapped in a single layer of blue tissue paper. Charlotte pointed distractedly to a drawer. She was trying on a new costume in front of the mirror when I pulled it open. A jumble of envelopes, press cuttings, banknotes, photographs, piles of unopened fan mail and a few of my postcards. Letters that at a glance were clearly from other lovers.

I didn't begrudge Charlotte this carelessness, this lack of sentimentality. I was happy to be counted amongst her admirers. It helped that I didn't rely on her attention alone. I saw Saul that afternoon, having written to Charlotte in the morning, telling her I would be at the club in the evening. His cologne was still on my skin when Charlotte undressed me in the apartment that night. I moved between their rooms as I did the different selves their love summoned. There was nothing unusual about living like this, split in

two. I could see the beauty in the arrangement. My life was like a diptych, painted scenes intrinsically linked through wooden nodes and hinges but separated by their own frames. I often wondered whether the action of one side was supposed to be visible from the other, if the figures could see through the structures that enclosed them out onto those adjacent worlds. How much real space were we to assume existed between one panel and another?

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ON MOTHER'S BIRTHDAY I discovered I could no longer draw her face from memory. Not her eyes, though they were like mine, not her mouth, which was thin and fringed with fine lines, not her unusually dainty ears. All of her was gone. I hadn't written to her since my first week in the apartment, a few stilted lines that had taken days to compose, and I hadn't given her an address to write back to. Not because I feared she would come to collect me, but because I knew she wouldn't and how much that would hurt. I dashed a letter off to Mother and sent it in the evening's post. I crossed out all the pleasantries, language I'd grown accustomed to in my correspondence with Elke. Instead, I just asked her to sit for me.

In a large, unsteady hand on a discoloured stub of paper, Mother responded simply: *Friday, 22 March*.

I had forgotten that such audacity was typical of Mother. She would see my new circumstances for herself and would be proven right that I had lost my senses.

Two days later, I stood at the window waiting. Mothers moved on the street below. Some were visiting their daughters, others were ignoring their letters, while others still were conducting tender conversations with them in their heads, their ageing bodies encased in dark winter coats. The bell rang.

Olga called from the living room, 'Expecting visitors?'

Mother was clutching a tattered handbag on the steps of the building. We greeted each other distantly. Mother looked me up and down. Judgements flashed over her face. Unwomanly haircut, unflattering clothes. I studied

her in return. She looked thin, thinner than I'd ever seen her, but not unhappy. Mother walked slowly behind me up the stairs in silence. She betrayed no interest in the new surroundings, as though out of fidelity to the family home.

'Thank you for coming,' I said with a formality Mother visibly bristled at. 'You look well,' I added, lying.

'As do you.'

'Was the U-Bahn busy?'

'Not really.'

I couldn't remember if this bluntness was normal or an attempt to unnerve me. I could only dimly recall our last interactions. I was a stiff foot pedal, a faulty instrument warranting brute pressure. I had stood next to a dress stretched over a table, Mother examining my seams. 'Another hour,' she'd said. 'Do it again. Hardly your best work.'

Olga was now waiting in the corridor with her feet planted firmly on the floor and one arm raised in welcome, like a monument. I mouthed the word customer, and guided Mother away from Olga towards my room. I had always been vague with Olga about my parents. I had to remember I was Schmidt and all that implied, not Sherman. When she asked questions, I described middle-class Germans in a suburban house with manicured gardens and geraniums in the window. A fiction that bore no relation to my family.

I was afraid my wording in the letter was too vague, that Mother expected a portrait not unlike those she'd had taken at a photography studio as a young woman, overdressed in her own mother's ancient fur, her body arranged precisely so as to conceal its worn patches, a flash of satin evening glove in her lap. I had enlisted the help of postcard reproductions. On the underside of Botticelli's *Venus*, I'd written: *This is the kind of picture I intend to paint.* On Titian's *Venus with an Organ Player*, I had added: *You needn't wear the gold necklace, or risk bringing any of your jewellery – I can paint those pieces from memory.* The appearance of Cranach's *Venus and Cupid* forced me to remark: *I wouldn't advise studying yourself at length in the mirror beforehand*.

'You will need to—' I tugged at the collar of my shirt.

Mother sighed. A familiar sound.

'You can't just – imagine it?' The look she gave me insisted I should.

Don't plead with her, I thought, you aren't a child.

‘No,’ I said simply.

Mother gave another sigh. Defeat, this time, not incredulity. She removed her shoes, rolled down her stockings and unbuttoned her blouse. She stood up to unhook her wool skirt and we both watched it drop to the floor. The order in which she undressed seemed precise, almost rehearsed. Awkward in her underwear, she said, ‘Everything off?’

I nodded.

As a seamstress, Mother had taught me to regard a breast as no more shocking than a nose. We worked with bodies every day, including our own, and couldn’t be prudish. But I knew her show of obedience wasn’t about honouring those lessons. Becoming an artist wasn’t a real rebellion if Mother found its indifference to propriety pedestrian. She refused to be shocked and was too proud to lose her nerve now.

Mother unfastened her corset, its panels ragged and browning from use. Instinctively I looked away. Midday sunshine moved over the white curtains in the window, turning them transparent. It was somehow easier once she had completely undressed. I told Mother to pose however she liked, and she perched on the wicker chair as though travelling at a clip on the tram.

‘Are you cold?’ I asked.

‘It’s better than the stove,’ Mother said approvingly, and gestured at the radiator.

Painting his mother had allowed Rembrandt to make subversive innovations to the genre of portraiture. In my favourite, his mother’s ageing skin resembles wax, the wrinkles etched into her flesh echoed in the detail of her embroidered cloak, life weighing so heavily upon her she can hardly keep her eyes open. She is weakening – dying – with each brushstroke. The tronie, as this type of portraiture was called, made light of all varieties of human strangeness, including each individual’s eventual obsolescence. But I saw the cruelty of it, this vision of his mother hurtling towards death, the dark wager of love, and of truth.

‘How do you afford all this?’ Mother said after a long silence.

I couldn’t be honest and tell her that I regularly took money from Saul, who was always gravely insistent I take it, in order to pay the rent. I hated taking in washing but that still seemed all anyone ever wanted, except Elke. The skin up to my elbows was now permanently dry and flaking from the hours spent submerged in detergent.

‘The same as you,’ I said.

I didn’t need to look at Mother. I knew loyalty to our former life together would please her.

The canvas slowly filled with Mother. I had spent hours that morning mixing the colours of her skin and hair on a palette. Consulting memory, those dim fragments, the years in which I had evidently never properly looked at Mother. I saw now I had made everything too dark. I jotted things down in my sketchbook whenever I had the urge to speak.

22 March

coarse black hair, a mole on her thigh

from Alexanderplatz to Nollendorf Platz, 10 stops on the U-Bahn, a great distance when she rarely has cause to cross the Spree

fine lines around her eyes, eyes bigger and darker than my own

‘Your father wonders about your health,’ Mother says

long pause, breath, stifled cough

‘What have you done to your hair?’

In Yiddish, under her breath, words I can’t make out

‘Are the boys still at school?’ I ask.

Mother says no. That’s it.

I could have spoken about the garments I had recently made or mended, a concession to an expired idea of myself that remained a comfort to her. Clothes were her wardens, her companions. They were her animal brood reliant upon her sustenance and love. Nude, her body’s idiosyncrasies were pronounced. She’d been reshaped by decades of sewing, its unforgiving angles and scale. Gnarled hands, hunched shoulders, a permanent squint. She’d been curled inwards, like a damp sheet of paper.

Mother said goodbye almost shyly on the steps. She stood awkwardly there for a moment, seeming to weigh her words. She asked me if I had

thought any more about marriage. I was lucky that the widower had waited. I nearly laughed. That afternoon I would take Mother's canvas with me to see Saul and would hear his opinion on its progress, just as Mother asked Father for advice on garments. I wondered what she would make of Saul. I shrugged and said something about painting being enough. 'For now,' Mother said, and she smiled like someone who knew better.

I only saw Mother twice. She was too busy to sit more than that. I wasn't offended to be lower in her priorities than a stranger's coat. She never asked why I had left or about the money I had taken. In the second sitting, she warmed up slightly. She spoke about how Ben and Isaac were learning the trade, becoming better tailors even than Father. I ought to have felt excluded from the familial harmony she described. But I had my own household now. We chatted about Olga and Maria, Father and my brothers. We were just two women who might exchange notes about our dependants.

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11

THAT SPRING, I submitted the portrait of Mother to a show at the Gurlitt Gallery titled ‘The Visionary Woman’, which was for women artists only. Saul was as surprised as I was when a letter arrived requesting it be transported to the gallery. I hadn’t properly considered the fact that I would be publicly displaying a picture of Mother nude. Uneasily, I began a letter to her explaining this. Hedging little phrases Mother would hate: *Would you mind if? Do I have your blessing for?* I gave up, and instead found myself writing a letter of invitation to Elke. I asked Charlotte, who was initially non-committal about coming. She had recently started dancing with two of her better disciples at a larger venue on the other side of the city and she happily affected exhaustion at how busy she’d become. I had a feeling she agreed largely out of curiosity about Saul, who I had let slip would be there too.

At the opening, I watched Saul move around the room. He shook hands with someone and went back to looking at a picture, only to be interrupted again. I liked observing him being polite, professional; it seemed to take an extraordinary effort. ‘Hello, how are you?’ he repeated. ‘Yes, I’ll write tomorrow.’ He kept turning back to offer me an encouraging smile. Twenty minutes had passed, and I was still standing near the entrance, attempting to look occupied. I hadn’t looked for my picture yet. I read the name Saul had formulated for me from the sheet of paper that listed the exhibiting artists. I mouthed it quietly to myself. He had advised I use another family name,

one that wasn’t recognizably Jewish, instead of my own. Not Schmidt, that was too dull. Something French to suggest cosmopolitanism: Soulier.

I glanced up from the index and saw Saul approaching me. He looked troubled.

‘I don’t want to worry you, but there’s a problem.’ He spoke to my side, not meeting my eye. ‘Whoever hung the room has no taste. They’ve put your picture next to the work of an amateur.’

‘Aren’t I an amateur?’ I said.

‘No, and you aren’t the talentless wife of some Brownshirt.’ He looked around, worried about being overheard, and continued in a whisper. ‘The quality is as you would expect.’

‘Does that matter?’ I said.

‘I think it might. You can see for yourself.’

The paintings looked much the same as in any other gallery in the city. That we were women didn’t seem to alter our choice of subject matter. A circus interior filled with lurid figures. A club with cartoonishly made-up women draped over portly men. Wounded soldiers dying in the mud. Death and desire, I wanted to say to Saul, weren’t all the pictures that touched us indelibly about one or both of these experiences? But Saul didn’t look amenable to conversation. His grip was tight around my elbow. As we moved through the crowd, his silence began to unnerve me. By the time we had reached my picture, I was frightened.

Outside my room, Mother looked different, larger and impersonal, totemic. When people took turns to move close to the canvas, exiting whatever conversation they were in for a moment alone with Mother, I wondered what they hoped to see. Most people only glanced in her direction. A woman walked straight into me, and I watched as she moved unapologetically into a crowd of people huddled in front of the painting to the right of mine.

At first, only fragments of this picture were visible behind men standing four abreast in front of it. A patch of green, yellow and blue, the suggestion of a landscape. The glint of a spading fork held aloft by an arm. Saul grunted impatiently and pushed me to the front. Two women were at work in a field and piles of cut hay surrounded them. Sweat darkened dresses the colour of fresh cream and cows grazed in the distance. The women’s faces were small and clear and unsmiling. At their sides milk pails had been left unattended as they worked. At the very edge of the frame, another female

figure looked out at the viewer, short and squat as a barrel. A dark gown enveloped her, indistinguishable from the lank black hair that reached down to her toes. A withered hand pointed at the pails. Her lips were parted, and the back of her throat was visible, a deep maroon. Her nose was huge and hooked.

This imagery still had the capacity to shock me. I drained my glass of champagne and turned to look at Saul, who was staring at his hands. The card stated that the artist's name was Gertrude Muschler. The painting was untitled.

I thought about the kind of remark I would have made in other circumstances. Saul had shown me the paintings of J.M.W. Turner, how he mixed rain and fog with that man-made weather, steam. Here the pollution wasn't from industry, but a people. I walked off and Saul followed.

I wanted to talk quietly but found I couldn't.

'Do they see my picture as similar? Like I was painting a type – the Jew? Like how August Sander photographs farmers?'

'No, you're women, that's all,' Saul said. 'The logic doesn't extend any further than that.' He stopped as two men with hair teased into shivering white domes passed, exchanging nods and greetings. 'Let's try to enjoy ourselves,' he said once they'd passed, his voice low. 'Muschler is just somebody's wife, soon forgotten.'

I suddenly felt exhausted.

'It's badly painted,' I said weakly.

'Propaganda has different criteria, I suppose.'

We were quiet, the buzz of the gallery enveloping us. I had already forgotten the face of the caricature, and it was fast becoming indistinguishable from Mother. I was now struggling to look at my own painting. The apparent ease with which it absorbed this new meaning felt accusatory, like I was partly responsible for its susceptibility to being misread. Saul excused himself to go and speak to a dealer just as Charlotte entered the gallery. I was relieved to not have to deal with their meeting just yet.

'The Jew covets their milk,' she said after a long pause. Even she knew to keep her voice low. She refused to get close to the painting. 'I can see it fine from here,' she said, twice, from the middle of the room. It was unusual to see her rattled by anything.

'Saul tells me it's an allegory,' I said.

Charlotte scowled. ‘Not a very subtle one.’ After a silence she said, ‘Would you like another drink?’

Charlotte wandered off but didn’t return. I felt the picture of Mother required my protection, and I remained close to it, still unable to return its gaze. I was swilling dregs of champagne around my glass, trying not to look too dejected, when I saw Elke making her determined way through a crowd that had parted to accommodate her. She was beaming at me with her arms outstretched. I dimly hoped that she might resolve the problem for me.

‘You must be proud,’ she said, putting her hand on my shoulder. ‘It’s beautiful. Most unusual to have an artist paint their own mother nude.’ She thought about this for a moment. ‘Though perhaps that’s because of age. The nude is for the young.’ This was said quietly, mostly to herself.

‘Thank you,’ I said, flatly. I pointed at the Muschler. ‘What do you make of that painting?’

Elke cleared her throat and followed my hand like she hadn’t noticed the painting was there until now.

‘Oh. Crude. Lacks control.’ She was saying this loudly and definitively, almost announcing it to the room. ‘Not yet able to marshal her talents, if indeed she has any. Frankly unworthy of its proximity to your painting.’ She took a step closer to me, so our shoulders were touching. ‘Surely you must agree?’

I felt instantly lighter. Elke had already moved on, and was talking about Joachim Lüchteke, how his allegory of art had the devil appearing like a worm from the ground to breathe fire onto the painter’s thighs. There was something in the way she held herself as she spoke that captivated me. She was performing herself on stage and mustn’t let anyone miss the meaning of her gestures. I noticed the attention in this corner of the gallery was slowly shifting away from Muschler’s picture towards Elke. Two men fell silent as they passed us and, exiting the gallery, twisted around to take another look. Elke paused as she sipped from her glass.

‘You seem to have forgotten your promise,’ she said.

I looked back at her blankly.

‘You said you would show me any painting you finished,’ she went on. ‘I suspected I would like it for my collection, and I was right. I know exactly where I would hang this. What do you think?’

She disappeared into the crowd before I answered, and when she returned ten minutes later her fingers were stained blue with ink from a

fountain pen. The sale was done. Would I join her for dinner? There was a restaurant she liked nearby, a favourite of Wilhelm II, so she'd been told, and it would be her treat.

Mother already looked different, like changing hands meant her becoming Elke's mother. The anxiety of the last half hour dissipated completely. I forgave the picture and myself. I said yes.

Elke took my elbow and began to march us to the exit. I hesitated, scanning the room. The event was winding down, and most of the crowd had dispersed. Saul and Charlotte were waiting with their coats over their arms near the door. I could tell Charlotte was in the middle of telling one of her stories, impersonating a club owner, an established villain. Their laughter reverberated through the gallery.

'I should say goodbye to my friends,' I said, prising her hand off me.

Elke watched me walk away and gave an anxious little wave as I glanced back.

'I'm told Charlotte has read my letters,' Saul said. He was smiling, but there was a quality to his tone I didn't recognize. Discomfort, even annoyance. I began to feel uneasy.

'He seems like a bit of a sap,' Charlotte had said a few days earlier, holding the corner of Saul's letter like the ink was still wet, 'but I expect you like that. Sending you his own translations of Proust.' She'd grimaced, put the letter down, and begun talking about something else. She had wanted me to know that she forgave me the embarrassment of these feelings.

'I was exaggerating,' Charlotte said. 'Only a couple.' Her voice was loud, her vowels slurred. She had two empty champagne glasses that she only infrequently remembered she was holding.

'Saul has seen you dance,' I said, feeling unexpectedly awkward, struggling to think of a normal comment.

We had gone together to her show the week before. All Saul had said afterwards was that Charlotte was clearly very talented. 'She's good with the crowd,' he'd said flippantly after I pushed him for another comment.

'So, it's only fair that I should read his poems to you,' Charlotte said.

Saul blushed up to his hairline. He opened his mouth and shook his head. He was smiling vaguely as he only did when he was drunk. I realized they were both several drinks ahead of me.

'I can't join you for the time being,' I said. 'One of my customers has

bought the painting. Now she wants to take me out for dinner.'

'That's wonderful, Hannah,' Saul said, lurching forward to press his hand on my shoulder.

'If she makes any attempt to seduce you,' Charlotte said, 'have the waiter order a taxi immediately. They've seen it all before, so don't be embarrassed.' She moved in front of Saul and put her arms around me. 'Unless, that is, you're interested. She's a little old for you, isn't she? Not unattractive, but her husband might make a fuss.'

'Don't be vulgar, Charlotte, she's a collector,' I said. 'Aren't we obliged to take women like her seriously?'

'Why? We've nothing in common save for an interest in you.' Charlotte made a face at me and lit another cigarette.

'Don't waste time talking about her husband or her mother-in-law or anything like that,' Saul said. 'Tell her you have other pictures she might like and lie if you must. Say there's other collectors who want your work.'

'We'll have to leave now if we want a decent seat,' Charlotte said, putting her hand on Saul's face to silence him. 'It's where we'd normally be, you know the place. Or forget us, and write from the country once you've eloped. It doesn't matter to me.' She took hold of Saul's chin. 'There are so many people I'm dying for you to meet.' Saul smiled at me weakly. As they left Charlotte turned to me and whispered, 'You didn't tell me he looked like that.'

I watched Elke say goodbye to three men in suits. She was giggling behind her hand, and each man looked at her very intently, as though alone with her, waiting his turn to speak. When they'd left, she noticed me looking at her and crossed the room to take my arm. It came to me that I had washed the sweat out of every item she was wearing that night.

'Everyone is raving about your work,' Elke said warmly into my ear. 'There are very few young painters like you. So simple, traditional, and non-didactic.' I kept my head close to hers in case she might say more. She didn't, but she held me tightly against her body as we left.

The restaurant wasn't far, Elke assured me again. She began to walk ahead of me as soon as we got out into the street. I thought this was because there might be a problem securing a table, but when we arrived the restaurant was nearly empty. Two elderly women close to the entrance had their faces lowered into their bowls, as though washing, not eating. Our table was so far at the back of the room that the noise of other diners

reached us only faintly. Large prints of hunting scenes were placed in a row along the wall, implying a sequence, but they were all by different artists. In all of them, the kill was imminent. When hunting birds, men aimed their guns at the sky, as though God was the sport. The napkins were cloth, not paper, so I couldn't note this down. Elke was talking animatedly to a thick-set waiter as we took our seats. She was well, thank you, as was her husband. They had been in South Africa, she said to him, she had only stayed a week, but her husband was still there, and in his letters he complained that he missed dining here most of all.

'This is a precious place to me,' she said once the waiter left. She stroked the silver cutlery with the tips of her fingers. 'My husband and I came here often during our courtship.' An image flashed up of Elke undressed, bony and white as a fillet of poached fish. A boorish man touching the small curve of her waist. I tried to put this out of my mind.

'I like it very much,' I said.

Elke smiled at my overeagerness. We had only been there long enough to receive a jug of water. Her lipstick was a dark red that showed off the whiteness of her teeth.

'It's a nice place for lovers. You could bring Herr Gans-Meyer. I assume that was him, the handsome man you hugged goodbye?'

We talked in a light, satirical tone about acquaintances Elke had encountered at the opening until the food arrived. The server treated Elke like she was alone at the table. Elke had ordered for me, and I hadn't listened. A steak dressed with fresh herbs, a lattice of thinly sliced potatoes, a sauce so delicious I wanted to drink it from the jug. Around the plate's outer edge, a chain of cherubs strummed a tune on harps. Elke was describing a George Grosz painting I was unfamiliar with, a man fallen to his death in a city painted red for blood and lust. It was several pictures crammed into a single composition, she said.

'He has benefited a great deal from his relationship with Count Kessler,' she continued. 'I couldn't promise to commute a death sentence, but I've been wondering whether you would be interested in my support?'

'Yes,' I replied carefully. It seemed important to pretend I understood what she meant.

'I have a few artists I pay each month,' she said, pouring more wine into my glass. 'It ensures they concentrate on their painting, and needn't worry about paying their rent or affording dinner or anything like that.' A compact

mirror was produced to check her lipstick. ‘If this interests you, your work will come to me once it’s finished, and I will manage its exhibition and sale.’ The compact was snapped shut, and placed on the table in line with her knife like it was an unusual piece of cutlery. The rest of her meal went untouched. She took a notebook and pen from her bag and opened it to a blank page. She didn’t pause to think as she wrote down a number. She said that I could expect this amount each month. The notebook was rotated to face me.

‘What would I paint?’ I said, not looking at the number.

‘Well, you might start by sending me anything else you have in your studio. Then I suppose you would just paint as you please.’

I nodded. I glanced at the number. It was larger than I’d expected. I tried to appear unsurprised.

‘Though, if I’m honest, what I would really like is for you to paint me,’ she said quietly.

She leant over the table and pushed her plate and notebook to one side. She looked suddenly serious.

‘A portrait?’ I asked.

‘Not exactly. Like how you painted your mother. As a Venus. I’ve posed nude for artists in the past, I’m no stranger to the process.’

My fingers were light and tingling from the wine. Fitting her for clothes meant I had a sense of how Elke’s body looked. A long hair comb made of pearl. Its beauty was undeniable. I remembered grazing her navel as I pinned the skirt around her waist, the feeling of breath filling her chest. How her ribs fanned out and furled back into themselves.

I knew I had to decide quickly. I thought about everything I might buy with the money. The hours it would take to earn that sum sewing. How I had counted pfennigs from my purse for a hot drink that morning – I hadn’t enough. The endless washing of strangers’ garments that regularly made my hands unfit for drawing. I heard myself say yes.

The pavement was wet when we finally left, shallow puddles smudged with the coloured lights of surrounding buildings. Elke lit a cigarette and immediately dropped it on the ground. The air was cold and pungent, the pigeons as bedraggled as those seeking shelter in bars. A woman staggered past us. She turned and asked for directions to the Potsdam Platz. I began to answer, and she edged across the pavement towards us. Craterous, inflamed skin rose up from the high, frayed collar of her coat, and was spread tightly

over her skull. When she lifted the edge of her hat, I saw with a start that she only had one eye. The socket was smooth and empty. I could now discern clearly what she was saying.

‘I said no,’ she repeated. ‘I told him no.’

I offered her a cigarette and pointed her in the right direction. Elke clutched her handbag and took my elbow and hissed something inaudible, hurrying me on.

‘The streets are worse and worse at night,’ she said as she hailed a taxi. ‘Can I take you anywhere?’

I said I would walk back to the apartment. I needed to be alone to think. I watched Elke fold her long body into the seat. I thought about towers of silk scarves, layers of neat squares displayed in department stores all over the city. How still they were, shining and supple, inviting touch. I said goodbye from the kerb, and Elke responded that she would expect any other paintings from my studio to be delivered to her house promptly.

‘Just the nudes,’ she said. ‘And don’t be embarrassed to send me any of Herr Gans-Meyer. He would make quite an enticing model, I’m sure.’

With that she shut the door and rolled down the window, waving until the car was completely out of sight.

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I WOKE UP with a faint headache. I had lain in bed thinking about Elke's proposal until it was almost light out, imagining all the pictures I might paint to make the arrangement worth her while. I now looked at the sheet of paper from her notebook, the number I briefly forgot corresponded to money. I reminded myself that the evening had been a success. When I eventually got up, I saw a letter had been pushed under the door.

> I hope you've recovered from the excitement of last night. Charlotte is very charming, though she abandoned me almost immediately once we arrived at the club. I cannot say I entirely understand what the two of you talk about. She seems unnaturally obsessed with celebrity, not to mention very uninterested in your art. I wonder what you really think of her performances. I sense they might be improved with rehearsal. In Klaus Mann's essay on the dancer Anita Berber, he uses a phrase I thought about for weeks after I read it: fascinating, but revolting. Charlotte doesn't deserve such unkindness. (And I am sure Charlotte, who no doubt knew Berber before her death, would object to this judgement in any case.) This is all besides the point: you must tell me about your evening with Frau Grese. I met her husband recently at a lecture. It was brief, but sufficient to discover that he was a terrible bore.
>
> Yours, Saul

~

I sent four nudes I had painted in the last year to Elke. They were all of the same model, the woman who had recommended the Sibyl Vane to me. She never made it to the apartment for a sitting, in spite of her promises, so they were all constructed from drawings executed haphazardly in the club's back rooms. The canvases were small, easy to hide from Olga. In each one the model was laid out in a recline, but the background figures changed. Maid, page, musician, lover. I modelled for this inventory of the genre's secondary characters, borrowings from Renaissance nudes that Saul had shown me in reproduction. In my favourite, I painted myself as a lute player in velvet pantaloons and a brocade jacket, twisted towards the model with my hands strumming an instrument. I didn't interrogate why I wanted a role. Why this desire to be looked at as well as to look.

Elke wrote back a day later. I was disappointed that the envelope had another scent, a rose cologne, not her own. *You make a very handsome young man*, she wrote. *There's a film you must see by Ernst Lubitsch. It's about a girl who longs to be a boy. But of course, you must be very busy – especially with our new arrangement. These Venuses are exactly what I want. Call the house so we can set a date for the first sitting*.

After that, in a state of excitement, I assessed the other paintings I had finished. I sent Elke a picture of Maria and Olga arranged around the kitchen table in which only Maria was nude: *Repose in the Rooming House*, I called it. I hesitated over sending a nude of Saul. But it was one of my best, and I couldn't see how he would ever find out.

'I thought you might want to meet other collectors,' Saul said when I telephoned him the next day. 'This isn't sixteenth-century Florence.'

'Weren't the Medicis good to Michelangelo?'

'Yes, until they sentenced him to death.'

I overstated Saul's enthusiasm about the arrangement to Charlotte in bed that night, hoping to make it seem more legitimate.

'He said it was how Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel,' I said. 'Patronage is very freeing, creatively speaking.'

'Really?' Charlotte said, unconvinced. She turned on her side and leant on her elbow to look at me. 'It sounds proprietorial to me. Like what men do with their mistresses. If you can't afford your rent, I would rather give it to you.'

I kept talking about the Medicis, but Charlotte was drifting off to sleep. Generosity was a matter of pragmatism for Charlotte, who spent her family's money as lightly and carelessly as she gave it to others. She had what appeared to be enduring friendships with the disfigured veterans who begged for money near the Friedrichstrasse. She put everybody's drinks on her tab wherever we went and never groused about settling up. Her earnings at Sibyl's were paid in cash, and her handbag was always filled with these faded banknotes, which smelt of alcohol and made me think of the elderly women at Sibyl's, the skin under their creased shirts. I doubted she kept much of it week to week.

Only Maria understood why I had agreed.

'It's basically money for nothing,' she said, visibly impressed. 'I can't imagine how you persuaded her to do that.'

It was prudent of Maria to consider new strategies. Anxiety about money had recently cast a pall over the apartment. Olga's parsimoniousness produced small, tasteless meals fashioned out of the cheapest cuts of meat, eaten with bread sliced so thinly you could see your hand through it. Worse, a lock had appeared overnight on the alcohol cabinet. Olga never asked me directly how much I made from sewing, but I noticed she had begun to open my letters from Elke.

I struggled to sleep that night. I went over it all again. Agreeing to the arrangement seemed practical and harmless, a form of charity that at least gave me the illusion of having earned money from my art. Just after dawn, I decided to call Elke. We weren't permitted to use the telephone this early or without Olga's permission, but I knew how deeply she slept. I crept into the corridor, my nerves taut. I hadn't considered whether Elke would be awake. She picked up on the second ring. I asked when I should come over and added, this is Hannah. Elke chuckled. She gathered that, she said: how about Wednesday morning? That was fine, I said. Good. Mice chattered in the walls in the quiet that followed, the static sounding like Elke's breath.

'Don't call so early again,' she said.

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THE TRAM CRAWLED along as though it too had been surviving on watered-down bowls of soup. Close to Elke's house, I passed a hair salon that had an old promotional photograph of Charlotte tacked in the window. It was from a famous club Charlotte had briefly danced in years ago. Her quizzical expression conveyed indifference to the stature of the venue and the fact of being photographed. I made a note of where it was, knowing Charlotte would be pleased. I wondered how many replicas it had inspired, if young women went in hoping to become identical to Charlotte in everything from their eyelashes to their memories and were disappointed when they emerged with only cut and coloured hair.

Elke told me she would provide painting materials. All I had to do was arrive on time at the address provided. I followed the map Maria had drawn for me inside my sketchbook. I banged the knocker on a grand, manicured house and a maid with a fair curly bob that shimmered in the morning sunlight opened the door. I said my name and she ushered me inside and down a long corridor. The house was large and gloomy and furnished expensively. Dark wood enclosed us from all sides, and ormolu encrusted objects stood to attention on mantelpieces. There were pictures everywhere, hung in the academy style, one on top of another with very little space between. The maid walked too quickly for me to see more than a blur of landscapes. Gilt frames with unpolished name plates. The occasional portrait of a stern patriarch who didn't resemble Elke.

We had reached the third floor of the house, and I was wondering how

many more corridors the maid could conceivably take me down when a door was pushed open. Elke was sitting in a nightgown in a dressing room painted and carpeted in cream. She resembled a candied fruit in the middle of a vast mille-feuille. Mirrors lined the walls, and produced several versions of Elke, who all moved in unison, like dancers practising a routine.

‘I thought we could set ourselves up here,’ she said. ‘Forgive me, I’m always a little overexcited in the first sitting.’

She continued to talk as I set up the easel and laid out the paints on a small card table that wobbled whenever I placed anything on it. That Elke was naked underneath the nightgown was obvious from the way she moved her upper body with her legs clamped together. Pink silk with voluminous cap sleeves and a low neckline edged with frills. I knew it from a repair I had once made to a cigarette burn on its skirt. I could see the outline of her breasts underneath, and, below the tie at the waist, a glimpse of her stomach. A clear line of opaque powder separated her neck from her head. The skin below was somehow even paler still, like cow’s milk, marble, a cold white.

‘How long do we have?’ I asked. ‘When does your husband come home for lunch?’

‘Oh, he hasn’t done that in years,’ she said and laughed. ‘Sometimes he won’t bother returning for dinner either. He’s kept very busy with his work. We can take our time.’

I would later take care dissecting this comment. Perhaps a marriage might be painted with the eye of an Impressionist in a landscape. Watching for changes in light and temperature. Depicting what was felt as much as what was seen.

‘I will need a few days, at least,’ I said. ‘I hope you’re available for the rest of the week. I’m sorry, I forgot to ask. You see, my other models typically sleep all day.’

This seemed like the right tone to strike. I was a professional assailed by the unseriousness of those around me. Until now.

‘Of course.’ Elke smiled. ‘How nice for your models. Like something out of the Brothers Grimm.’

‘I think they’re just lazy.’

We were both laughing now, disproportionately to the mildness of these jokes.

‘I imagine my husband says the same of me. To him I might as well be

asleep. He has no idea what I get up to, and never asks.' She raked her hair back with her fingers and shrugged.

Either she was confiding in me doubts about her marriage or she was performing a disaffection with men that women often did in each other's company. Either way it was a bid for intimacy, and it pleased me.

'I won't finish the painting here, but I'll do as much of the preparatory work as possible,' I said. 'I have your photograph, so I won't take up too much of your time.'

'You can if you like, I'm often in need of company.' She shook her head and looked back at me. 'My husband won't let me smoke upstairs, he says it ruins the upholstery. But when I can't smoke, I talk too much. Here I am doing it already.'

When it was time to remove her nightgown, Elke threw it off with the enthusiasm of a child stripping on the beach. Her body was small, her pale skin lightly scored with veins like patterned blown glass. It appeared to glow when exposed to light and air.

'Do you prefer your models to be quiet?' Elke asked.

'Not really. You're less likely to fall asleep if you're talking.'

'Good.' Elke cocked her head to one side. It took a few minutes for her to select a topic. 'Your apartment is nice,' she said eventually. She settled back onto the chaise longue. 'What fun to live with other women. I never had friendships of that kind at your age. We were all so formal with one another.'

'We would probably benefit from a bit more formality,' I said.

'You girls argue?'

'We get along very well. It's only a problem when we go out at night, as it's easy to get carried away. I didn't know I had the strength to lift a woman into a taxi.'

'You calm down as you get older,' she replied. 'But that's a meaningless thing to say to someone so young. Your own fortieth birthday must be impossible to imagine.'

'You don't look forty,' I said. I thought about my mother, who was only a couple of years older, who looked like she could have lived several lives in the same span of years.

'It's been a few years since I turned forty,' she said, and let her eyes rove past me towards the easel.

Hours passed in which the maid twice knocked on the door with a tray of

coffee and biscuits. Elke refused all food and drink. Tense and focused, she lay in one position then another, adept as a gymnast. But she wanted to talk, and seemed uninterested in the kind of conversation I associated with women of her class. It wasn't gossip about her friends or complaints about the servants. She was asking if I had read Goethe. Did I know he drew landscapes while travelling around Italy? Their skill and feeling surprised her, and she hoped to one day purchase a drawing for her collection. I tried to answer her questions coolly. But I found myself reacting instinctively to the shape of her body. Her breasts didn't look how they had felt when I had touched them through her clothes. They were small and full, the colour of foam in a champagne coupe, moving gently in time to her breath. I had to force my hands to draw. I had to remind myself to look away. I drank all the water from the jug the maid provided and had to ask for more. I wanted to pour it over my head.

The maid entered at dusk and opened the curtains that had been drawn all day. A rough gust of wind blew leaves and birds into view. The evening air was moist, the sky dark and clear after rain. The streets below glistened with shallow puddles, and it felt good knowing those glossy eyes were turned up towards our room.

The dust sheet placed underneath my easel and table was covered in flecks of paint, fragments of Elke. I wiped the paintbrush on a rag and dipped it in turpentine. I watched the solution cloud and take on its colour as I agitated the brush. I imagined drinking this and covering my body with the soiled sheet, what sort of ritual that might be.

'I can be here the same time tomorrow,' I said.

I stood with my back to the door. I hoped I might hide my exhaustion. My wrist ached, and when I shifted my weight from one leg to the other, my hips trembled. But I didn't want to leave. Would it be so unusual to curl up on the floor by the chaise longue and sleep like a dog until morning?

The same maid returned with a bottle of wine, and Elke waved it towards us. She wrapped a dressing gown around her body.

'Stay a little longer,' she said.

~

A nude wasn't just a painting of a naked woman, it was an idea about beauty and womanhood and the purpose of art. I knew this already from

conversations with Saul. But I was beginning to understand what beauty meant in this context, and what kind of woman might embody that beauty. I was painting Elke, and I was painting her wealth, what gave her the freedom to spend time with artists like me rather than work, what bought the tonics and lotions that kept her eyes glowing and skin soft. I was painting the discipline that meant I almost never saw her eat, and I was painting what Olga would have described as her health, her taut muscles, pale but freckled from summer hikes, her full head of hair, the complete set of teeth behind the enigmatic smile.

Elke asked how I was doing in a non-committal way at the end of the second sitting. I didn't tell her the truth, which was that I had become prone to undoing my own progress. A detail that had appeared perfect the first day – the faint crease of skin a few inches below her navel, its thread of shadow – appeared totally wrong the next. I had to paint over it and start again.

Elke first requested that I read to her from a novel after our third sitting.

'The maids are useless at it,' she said. She had put on her dressing gown but left it untied. A column of white flesh was visible between the silk lapels. I had struggled to depict how the shape of her bones was just visible underneath the skin of her chest, how they resembled silverware placed under rather than above a tablecloth. 'None of them have an ear for speech.'

I found myself repeating chapters of the latest Vicki Baum so the characters made the same mistakes, experienced the same event several times, just to elongate those nights. I wasn't sure whether Elke noticed. This was how we passed the time until the evening of the sixth sitting. The book wasn't brought in by the maid as usual.

'Are you close to finished?' Elke asked.

'I don't need you to sit any more,' I said. 'I could do the rest in my apartment.'

'My husband's father is visiting from the countryside,' she said. 'He must be entertained for a fortnight.' She gave an exaggerated grimace. 'One of the maids will bring the canvas to you in the car once it's dry. Write to me when it's done.'

I was silent with Elke and then silent with Olga when I arrived home, panting and sweating from walking fast through the warming city. Of course the sittings were finite. I couldn't help that I had privately envisaged painting and repainting Elke's body to acknowledge all its subtle, everyday transformations for as long as I could pass this off as a normal working

method. When the canvas arrived the next morning (with a note attached that read, *In safe hands, I hope, E.G.*) it looked far worse than I remembered. I was embarrassed that Elke had seen it in this state. There was a body, sure enough. But it could have belonged to anyone slim, pale and attractive. I would have to get hold of the part of Elke that was eluding me, and I had no way of knowing how long it would take. I wrote hasty letters cancelling all my plans with Saul and Charlotte.

I thought again about Rembrandt, who dressed his sitters in biblical and mythological costume, had them play roles. I began to see that Elke was also in costume, a subtle costume, that of her social self. This was how she wanted to appear for public display, a facade with few chinks through which her real essence might shine. I would have to draw on other sources. I was there, I realized: Elke passed through me on her way to the canvas. The painting improved quickly once I accepted I wasn't merely a vessel or a conduit. I found I could paint for longer, without any need for rest. I asked Olga to leave my dinner on a tray outside my room. Everything I owned now stank of turpentine. One week became three. The painting wouldn't just be competent, a first attempt. I saw myself triumphing. *I can feel things growing greater in me, expanding*, Paula Becker wrote in her journal, a recent gift from Saul, *God willing, I will become something*. I wrote this quote in full on the back of the canvas in pencil, and added, *Becker speaks for us both, H.S.*

I was waiting for the kettle to boil for another cup of coffee one morning when I noticed Olga staring into the newspaper. I read a line over her shoulder. *The Jew is the cause and the beneficiary of our misery.* I looked away and thought, I must remember to add the silk tassels on the chaise longue. For volume and texture. Because the sheen of the silk tassels would accentuate the delicacy of the sitter's hair. I turned back to the article. *Corrupted our race, fouled our morals,* it read, *undermined our customs and broken our power.*

The allegiances in the apartment were becoming harder to gauge. I studied Olga. Her expression was neutral, as it always was, her finger tracing her slow movement down the page.

The rest of the day as I painted, I was conscious of the newspaper in the neighbouring room, and kitchens all over the city in which people sat, enraptured, before it. I considered sending Mother the money I'd earned from her portrait and telling her to stow it away. I was returning what I had

taken when I left home, I might have written. But I knew how Mother would respond. I was her child. I had no business telling her what to do.

I put my earnings under a loose board in a corner of my bedroom normally covered by a small bureau. It was surprisingly spacious down there. I started work on another painting only because I knew I had somewhere to hide it. A canvas cut down to the size of a hardback book, unprimed. Black paint built up in thick layers with a palette knife. It was a portrait of the woman in Muschler's painting. When I couldn't sleep, I worked on it at night. A single candle burning in the bedroom. Hardly making a sound. A woman's eyes pricked into the surface of the canvas with a brush thin as a needle. The sweep of her nose. I thought for a long time about a title. I remembered stories from my childhood about the demon who was Adam's first companion. She wasn't made from his rib as an afterthought. She was an equal grown from the same soil, and it was her likeness to Adam that made her a threat. Belonging to the night, that was one translation of her name. I titled the picture *Lilith*.

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I WAS STANDING amongst a crowd of people in front of the window of the Gerson department store idly looking at things I couldn't afford when I recognized a face reflected in the glass. Unmistakeable creases around his eyes, large and mud-coloured, exactly like Mother's. Ben startled when I said his name. We looked at each other in disbelief. He took off his hat and held it against his chest. The sockets around his eyes had grown dark, and were not so much grey as deep brown, like his irises. Even to articulate a basic greeting seemed to risk losing each other, like the figures in myth permitted a reunion with their beloved only under the strictest conditions. Eventually he spoke.

'You look well. But different,' he said. He spun in his hands the hat I now saw was Father's and pressed it back to his chest. It had been three years.

'I cut my hair,' I said. 'And I'm older. So are you.' I stepped back to survey him. 'Isaac must be enormous now too?'

'He's eighteen,' he said. 'As stubborn as he always was. Built more like Father though. Wiry. Eats more than all three of us combined.'

'Mother says you're a talented tailor nowadays.'

'She said that to you?' He blushed. 'All she tells me is that I need to be able to earn enough for a family. She wants me to marry soon.'

'Does that interest you?'

'Not really,' he said. 'If I could choose her, maybe. But I'll probably just do what Mother wants. I'm not like you.'

I laughed, and he shrugged as though to say: but it's true. Reconciliation

seemed simple in that moment. We began to walk arm in arm, very slowly with our eyes cast down at our feet.

‘Mother worries a lot,’ he said. ‘You know what she’s like. These days she’s not even the worst for that in the neighbourhood.’

I could see him readying himself to say something in particular. I felt myself go tense, aware of what it was but unwilling to help him express it.

‘Trade in the shop is slow?’ I said carefully.

‘Well, yes. Not just for us, for everyone. It never really picked back up again after what happened with the banks.’ He turned back in the direction of the department store and ran his hands over his face. ‘We’re able to manage that. It’s everything else.’ He looked at me. ‘Those thugs in the streets, prowling around looking for trouble. It’s even worse at night, and the police take no notice.’ He stopped to shelter behind a kiosk and lowered his voice. ‘David and Leib returned from an errand with their heads kicked in, nobody to defend them. They want to kill us, it’s completely out in the open. All the rubbish they publish in the newspapers. Have you not noticed?’

Only that afternoon Saul had thrown the broadsheet into the bin and the mood had taken what was now an unmistakeable turn towards despondency. Saul had said that to their credit the sleight of hand was ingenious. Unlike the stock market, Jews could be confronted on the street and beaten to death. Lies about Jews needn’t have any internal logic, which gave those engineering them boundless creative possibility. I had remained silent and continued to work on a drawing of him lying in bed. The truth was I couldn’t bear to talk about it, even with Saul. I was afraid, and my fear had become buoyant and persistent; it no longer subsided with sleep or reassurance as it had before.

Charlotte never wanted to discuss it. If pressed, she flatly repeated the same statement. ‘They’re all idiots,’ I’d heard her say wearily to Saul. ‘That house painter for a leader. A prize parvenu.’

‘It’ll pass,’ I said to Ben. I didn’t even sound convincing to myself.

Ben and I carried on down the street together, which as night fell smelt intermittently of beer and smoke from the surrounding taverns. We spoke about the baby recently born to Rachel, a friend from childhood, who I hadn’t even known had got married.

‘You could come with me now and meet him,’ Ben said brightly. ‘She would be so happy to see you.’

‘I must get back,’ I said. I squeezed his hands. They were broad and cold and heavy as bricks.

‘Another time,’ he said. He swallowed. ‘I need to ask you for something.’ He stopped walking and frowned. ‘Friends of mine have already decided to leave. Father could be persuaded, but Mother – she’s adamant that we stay. What would we do? That’s her view of it. We don’t have relatives or customers anywhere but Berlin. And we don’t have the money.’

I thought about the letters to Mother I had left unfinished. Always with the intention of sharing what I had earned.

‘I have enough,’ I whispered. ‘I make a lot of money now if you can believe it. Not from mending, but from my pictures.’

‘You would come with us?’ Ben said.

‘I can’t leave, not yet,’ I said. ‘I have work I need to do.’

Attempts at ordinary conversation faltered on the tram back to the apartment. The entire length of my body was pressed against the back of a stranger’s mackintosh. It hadn’t rained in what felt like weeks, but the carriage stank of sodden clothes, as if nobody had hung their laundry to dry for long enough. When we eventually alighted, I could smell it on my skin.

When we got to the door it occurred to me that I had never brought a man into the apartment.

‘My landlady is a little eccentric,’ I said. ‘You know the type.’ Ben’s blank gaze asserted the opposite. ‘She has a rule about men. Would you mind waiting outside? I won’t be long.’

I took the stairs two at a time. Truthfully, I sensed Olga would panic if she encountered any presence that might threaten her ‘colony of ladies’, as she called the apartment. The way she handled Saul’s letters, opening them without apology and reading them like notices intended for her attention, served as a warning. Olga called to me while I struggled with the key in the lock.

‘The programme you like is on the wireless,’ she shouted from the lounge. She paused, waiting for me to answer.

I tried to ignore her as I went through my drawers. I was furtive, frightened, like the money wasn’t mine. I kept back enough for next month’s rent and put everything else uncounted into a handbag. I went as far as writing ‘Dear Mother’ at the top of a sheet of paper. Nothing came naturally after that, no question or news or apology, so I abandoned it.

‘Write to me if you need more,’ I said, handing it all to Ben. ‘Mother has my address now. Get a taxi.’ I grabbed his hand, emptied into it the contents of my purse, and pushed past him to find a car. Ben acted as though he couldn’t hear me, as though he was struggling to even remember who I was when I called his name from the other side of the street, a taxi stalled at my side. As he ducked inside, he turned to me with a panicked look, opened his mouth, and said my name.

‘What is it?’ I said.

But the driver had twisted around in his seat. Car horns blared impatiently around them. Ben lowered his head, and shut the door. I continued to wave but he didn’t look out of the window as the taxi slowly drew away.

When I got back into the apartment I made excuses to Olga, who had turned up the wireless to a volume that made it audible even on the staircase below, the broadcaster’s voice pounding down like divine instruction. I sat on the floor of my room and fought back tears. A letter from Saul I’d received that morning was by my bed. *I’m told the Metropolitan Museum of Art has just been given three, scramasaxes,* he wrote, *adorned with gold leaf and bronze hilts, the work of skilled Frankish craftsmen who dwelled near the Rhine. It would have been beyond these men’s wildest imaginings to have their weapons displayed on the other side of the Atlantic.* Joe had recently returned to America for good and had suggested Saul go with him. I sensed he was more tempted by the offer than he let on. We could keep thinking about New York, I’d said, feigning enthusiasm, knowing even the vague possibility of leaving would please him.

What would have happened if I had got into the taxi with Ben? I would have folded Mother in half and packed her flat in a case like any other garment. Put Father into a trunk as though he was just another heirloom. Each brother would have filled a sturdy leather bag. I would have carried all the luggage out the door. Foreign cities would have been called out over steam and whistles on a train platform. But where would I have taken this cargo? I locked myself in the bathroom and, with all the taps running, wept.

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15

I WANTED ELKE'S feet to look sturdy and capable, to capture the dancerly quality of her long toes. After that the painting appeared to be done. It had a new aura that made it relaxing to be around, because, I reasoned, it no longer required anything from me. I wrote to Elke suggesting it might be ready. She telephoned the apartment the next day asking if her maids could collect the painting in the next hour. I said yes and there was a short pause. Could I meet her at the house, she asked, to discuss the results that afternoon?

A maid I didn't recognize opened the door. She wore her hair manipulated into a tight plait and had the plump cheeks and carved, colourful features of a porcelain doll. A house this size surely didn't need so many servants, I thought. They formed a collection and Elke was eager to show them off. The maid pushed open the door of the drawing room and stood aside.

Elke was on a chair in front of the picture with the curtains closed. A small chintz sofa was dressed with so many pillows there was no room to sit down. I hovered at her side.

'You exceeded all expectation,' she said softly, not moving or turning to face me.

I wanted to pour it all out to her, to somehow make her see all the hours I had spent reassembling her body. How I knew the uneven concentric circles that lined her knuckles as well as I knew the doorknob of her knee bone.

'I wanted you to like it,' I said. I thought about reaching out to touch her

shoulder. Even raised my arm slightly.

‘It’s perfect.’ She leant forward, resting her elbows on her legs and her head in her hands, never once taking her eyes off the painting.

I couldn’t deny that the nude was spectacular. I could hardly believe it was mine. We studied it quietly. Cars passed down the street beyond the curtained window in an endless rush of atonal sound that began to sound rhythmic, deliberate.

‘You must rest now,’ Elke said. ‘You have great talent and we can’t have you dying of pneumonia because you never stop working.’

I frowned. I was behind on my washing and had a large pile of mending to do for customers who all believed they should be my priority.

‘I can’t,’ I said.

‘I’ll pay you whatever you need. You won’t be a seamstress for anyone but me. And I won’t have you wasting your time with washing clothes or small repairs. It would help the maids to learn a few things.’

The implications of this proposal sprang into view. I had ignored my aching back. Held a compress to my stiff neck. That work was slowly doing to me what it had done to Mother. A body unpicked.

‘Really?’

‘Name your price, and don’t be modest.’

I was anxious not to appear too eager. I had an idea of a number. I would wait and while I waited I would look at Elke’s face.

The dash of her nose, the severity of her jawline.

I proposed an amount, deciding as I opened my mouth to make it much larger than I needed, and Elke immediately agreed, not seeming to register the figure.

I thanked her calmly. I felt elated, powerful. I wanted to tell her that I was grateful to her beauty for opening up my life. It meant I might finally be able to live by desire rather than necessity. Another way of putting this, I could have added, was that I felt, for the first time, important.

‘That’s very generous,’ I said instead. ‘I won’t let you down.’

~

I returned to the apartment that night with enough money to last for months. I stopped taking in laundry and did the last of my mending. I suddenly felt I deserved nothing less than total freedom.

Saul took me to see the Ancient Greek sculptures at the Pergamon Museum. They would help my understanding of the body, Saul said, precisely because they were wild fantasies at several removes from ordinary reality. We discussed the statues' missing limbs, how miraculous it was that it didn't alter their beauty, even when you knew they were broken apart centuries later so looters might make more money.

'It must be unique to statuary,' Saul said. 'A museum wouldn't show a Leonardo that had been cut into parts by vandals.'

'It would be interesting to see how a thief would dissect a painting for sale,' I said. 'Perhaps the face would be judged more valuable than the stomach or the feet.'

Saul drew me closer, his hand firm on my waist. I felt a pang of longing.

'If it was your painting, like the one you made of Frau Grese, and thieves forced you to take it apart, how would you do it?'

'Well, you would feel hard done by if you received the part of the painting that's mostly drapery. Perhaps backgrounds of paintings would all be more interesting if we imagined they might one day become their foreground.'

I slipped behind a statue of a young man whose arm was poised to throw something. But there was no longer an object in his hand. It was gone, already thrown long ago, out of sync with the figure's gesture.

'Was Frau Grese a good model?' Saul asked.

I was reluctant to explain what Elke was like to him or to Charlotte. I knew their assumptions would cruelly misconstrue her character. A wife spending her husband's money. Ignorant, frivolous. I feared their cynicism would bleed into my own perception of her, and it was precious to me, the image I had of Elke. I sometimes felt it was my only proof that I was a real artist.

The next day at the Sibyl Vane, Charlotte was telling me about an abortionist who had cheated one of her dancers.

'I wrote him letters claiming to be a detective. We even followed him one night and confronted him in a bar. I haven't had time for anything else. That's why I wasn't at Sibyl's last week, but apparently you weren't either. What were you doing?'

'Just painting,' I said.

Charlotte motioned with her hand: and? I shrugged. She shook her head,

but she was smiling. She wanted to make clear she was humouring this insistence on my own mystery.

‘You were with Saul, I suppose.’

I mimed trying to remember.

‘You know you don’t have to marry the first man you make love to,’ she said.

‘Maria already made that clear,’ I replied, trying to lighten the mood.

‘Alright, well. Just be careful. You know you’re competing for his attention. The boys aren’t as beautiful as you, but he can share their shaving cream. Not an insignificant consideration in this economy.’ She lifted her chin and frowned. ‘Though it can be worse when they take fidelity too seriously. One fanciful afternoon and years later you’re still receiving letters about your divorce.’

Charlotte was referring to her own short-lived marriage. In Dresden, Charlotte had told me, around the time she started training with Wigman, she had eloped with a man she’d known since childhood, a journalist, to avoid a match contrived by her parents. Her wedding day had been a blur. The limp bouquet in her lap in a moving car, his large teeth in her mouth, a silk dress stained with claret borrowed from a friend, a leather case with a broken latch laid flat on a bed, the thud of a walnut headboard against a wall. Her reflection in the ornate mirror of the town hall, the pair of insensate little coins that had stared back at her, like those placed on the eyes of the dead in Greek myth, blandly accusatory. The marriage had only lasted a few days, shorter than most relationships she had now, Charlotte liked to say. Ten years had now passed and her former husband still wrote to her every so often wondering what had gone wrong between them. Whenever Charlotte mentioned her divorce, which she claimed only her parents knew about, she would flash me a rare look of appeal. She wanted to be praised, reassured.

‘I would be the same in that poor man’s position,’ I said. ‘I doubt he’s met anyone like you since. But you couldn’t have stayed married. I wouldn’t have liked it.’

I was glad that the conversation had settled on me only for a moment. As soon as I could, I moved the discussion back onto how Charlotte had dealt with the abortionist.

~

I took the remainder of the summer to rest. I drew whatever came to mind with a serene, directionless energy. One morning I was lying in bed reading when Olga knocked on the door. I knew from the look on her face that I had received a letter from Elke.

She asked to visit my studio as though she had never visited the apartment before. Her husband was mentioned unnecessarily in a way that made me wonder whether he'd had some part in composing the letter. I responded that I painted in the same place that I sewed, but she could come over whenever she liked.

She arrived a few days later early in the morning with a jacket slung over her shoulder despite the forecasted heat. It was pale yellow velvet, with small metal buttons. She followed my gaze, and gave a knowing laugh.

'I feel the cold,' she said. 'It's all the smoking, apparently. The doctor wants me to drink glasses of milk before bed.'

She didn't remove her shoes either. The high heels made her even taller, almost the height of the light fixtures. She looked around like the apartment was unfamiliar to her.

Olga stood in the doorway to the lounge. The habit of pleasing her was still strong enough within me that I steered Elke in her direction.

'You remember my landlady, Olga?' I said to Elke.

Olga looked like she was about to curtsey to a schoolmistress.

'Of course,' Elke said.

These words produced the desired effect on Olga. She beamed with pleasure.

'Would you like a cup of tea?' Olga implored.

Elke demurely shook her head.

Charlotte had performed the night before and was in the kitchen making coffee. I noticed Elke glance in her direction. She announced she needed to retrieve something from her bag in the hallway and I watched as she lingered in the doorway to the kitchen, the bag untouched.

'I should introduce you to Charlotte,' I said. 'She's a friend of mine.'

'Oh, hello,' Charlotte said, turning around and offering her hand.

'You live here too?' Elke said.

'I wish,' said Charlotte. 'Just passing through.' She winked at me.

I was aware of Elke seeing this gesture as plainly as though it was meant for her. But she continued to politely smile. Maria was standing in the hallway in her work clothes, stalling as she often did by the door.

‘Good morning,’ Maria said. She faced me, but her eyes were on Elke.

‘This is Maria,’ I said to Elke.

‘I would recognize you anywhere,’ Elke said to Maria. ‘Hannah’s favourite model.’

Plenty of women would have been embarrassed. Maria was naked in most of the works Elke had seen. But Maria instead smiled at Elke and accepted the glory that was her due.

‘Goodbye,’ she said, ostensibly to me, but still looking at Elke. ‘Goodbye!’ she shouted for Olga’s benefit.

In my room, Elke positioned herself before the easel. She raised her arm, mimicked a grip on a brush, and drew her hand through the air.

‘Did you ever have lessons?’ I said. I was happy that we were alone again.

‘A few. I wasn’t very good.’ She smiled at me in a way that suggested she was happy about it too.

‘Some of Van Gogh’s early work was bad. But he kept going.’

‘With mixed results,’ Elke said with a laugh. ‘Unlike you. I’m very impressed with what you’ve produced so far. In fact, I have a proposal.’ Her expression grew serious. The evenness and fluency of her speech gave what followed a recited air. ‘I see the same group of women most weeks. We’ve all known each other for years through our husbands. They’re very envious of my picture. You would blush to hear their opinions of you. A German Leonardo!’ A short pause was taken for effect, after which she seemed to select her words carefully. ‘They want their own pictures and are happy to pay whatever price we set. But they would like them to be more personal.’ She offered me a cigarette from a large dark leather case. ‘Take more than that,’ she said eagerly when I pulled out one. ‘I want to commission portraits of us all. A similar setting and,’ she waved her hand around her face awkwardly, ‘the same genre.’

Our cigarettes were unlit, and she made a face to indicate her absent-mindedness. I could hear the kettle whistling in the kitchen, Olga rushing to meet it. Elke reached into her bag and produced a heavy gold lighter. Her hands and my own were reflected on its surface as the lighter passed between us. I almost laughed. The first drag on the cigarette went straight to my head.

‘More Venuses,’ I said.

‘Exactly,’ she said and turned her head at a slight angle to exhale smoke.

‘They’re all rather shy, a different generation to your own. All these notions of modesty and so on. It means you’ll have to work from photographs.’ The large bag was opened again, and from it she produced a thick folder and placed it on the desk by my easel. ‘But that might be easier in any case. Women like that are always at one luncheon or another. We have enough trouble meeting ourselves. And there are seven of us altogether, so it could easily become impossible to organize.’

She fanned the photographs out in a line on my desk. They seemed younger than Elke, and more modestly turned out. Thin eyebrows, fair hair worn in long, neat plaits, unsmiling expressions. Starched collars over dark wool cardigans, pearls tight around their necks. I saw these women retiring to narrow beds with frilled counterpanes in floor-length nightgowns, the same their mothers had worn, lifting their cheeks to be dryly kissed by their husbands. Long, dreamless sleep in locked rooms. Maidservants to help them wash. It took me a moment to understand the problem. They were fully dressed.

‘You want the bodies to come from other paintings?’

‘You have my Venus already,’ Elke said. Her cigarette was only half-finished, but she dropped it into an ashtray and extracted another. ‘You also live amongst young women. The blonde, Charlotte, would do nicely. It needn’t be’ – she hesitated and sucked on the cigarette – ‘completely realistic.’

I thought I heard Charlotte cough in the corridor.

‘Or I could model on their behalf,’ Elke said. She was staring out of the window with her back to me and I wondered briefly if I had heard her correctly. ‘We’ve been mistaken for sisters and cousins before. I’ve sat for you already. We know we work well together.’

I knew I shouldn’t convey how happy this prospect made me. I gave what I hoped was a detached nod.

‘Sounds sensible,’ I said. ‘Would economize on time, certainly.’

‘Precisely,’ she said, and turned back to face me. She was smiling so widely her back teeth were visible. ‘I’m so glad we agree. Now do take some more cigarettes before I go.’ Elke drifted away from the door and towards the small bookshelf. ‘I’m not a great reader myself. Books feel rather lifeless now that we have the cinema.’ She fingered the spines. ‘It drives my husband mad. He doesn’t regard it as a sophisticated art form.’ She opened a copy of *Anna Karenina* and fondled the pages, then snapped it

shut and put it back on the shelf. With a smile she reached into her bag and produced a thick envelope. ‘An advance on the new work. That’s on top of our usual fee. It’s a large sum to reflect the discretion that’s required. They’re respectable women. They can be very close-minded, and dreadful gossips. You must keep it to yourself. Not even your friends or your landlady can know. You promise me that?’

‘Of course,’ I said.

I heard Charlotte stomping down the corridor again.

‘Good,’ she said, and dropped the envelope on my bed.

Olga responded with real distress at the idea of Elke leaving without accepting any tea. Like a visiting dignitary without the time to offer an explanation or excuse, Elke merely pressed her hands against Olga’s and continued on her way. On the street outside, over the rumble of her car’s engine, we agreed to arrange a date by telephone for the first sitting later that week.

Climbing back up the stairs I was able to think calmly about the contents of the envelope, which I was struggling not to imagine as indecent pictures of the same women. Charlotte was pacing round my room when I returned.

‘Nudes of her friends with her body attached to their heads,’ Charlotte said admiringly. ‘How perverse!’

‘It’s probably more ordinary than we think,’ I replied. ‘They merely want their husbands to look at them. We might succeed in distracting them from their mistresses for a few hours.’

I pictured a damask curtain being slowly pulled back in a large villa in the west of the city, and a woman with greying hair remarking with false off-handedness, ‘I nearly caught my death when I posed for it.’

Charlotte looked thoughtful.

‘Maybe not. The pictures could be for each other. They might be each other’s mistresses.’

‘I doubt that,’ I said quickly.

In the window long branches from the one large tree visible from my bedroom shuddered and scraped their arms along the glass. I thought about Elke sweating underneath her velvet jacket in a chauffeured car, how a body like hers would smell under stress. Like ripe fruit. Nothing as ordinary as an apple. More like a plum.

There was a pause. Olga burst into the room with a tray of drinks in her arms. Mismatched glassware trembled with clear liquid, and at their side

was an unopened packet of crackers, a sliver of cheese wrapped in paper from her recent birthday.

'I tried not to listen in,' she said, 'but from what Charlotte heard I believe there's much to celebrate!'

We drank a bottle of champagne between us in under an hour. Maria went out to buy more. Charlotte couldn't stop laughing. We studied the photographs, Olga and Charlotte impatiently tugging them from one another's hands. ('Beautiful,' Olga stated. 'Not really,' Charlotte muttered.) The women's faces were plain and interchangeable, almost featureless, like they'd been gone over with a rolling pin. I thought about telephoning Saul, who would make affirming remarks into the receiver, his qualms only perceptible to me. Charlotte dropped a glass – 'I've too many of these,' Olga insisted, like it had been disposed of as a favour – and I picked up the nearest newspaper to clean it up. It was the *Völkischer Beobachte*. I had never seen it before in the apartment. A caricature of a Jew filled the first page. I froze. Olga appeared next to me and looked absently at the sheet.

'Whose is this?' she asked. 'Better use for this than for reading.' She took it from me and bent over to pick up the glass, her face red.

Before I could answer, the phone rang. Olga hurried out of the room and shouted my name. The taste of Elke's clove cigarettes was still on my tongue.

'How nice to have seen you today,' Elke said, more formal than she'd sounded earlier. 'Now you must meet my husband. Are you free to have lunch with us on Friday?'

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16

ELKE ANSWERED THE door while I still had my finger pressed against the bell. She shielded her eyes from the setting sun as she greeted me, warm but distracted, craning her head to scan the street below as she beckoned me inside. She wore a cream silk blouse with a matching skirt that exposed her calves, the silk a similar shade to her own skin, a set that sat so close to her skin she had me wash it each time she wore it. I was pleased that this would no longer be my responsibility. Elke led me down a different corridor towards a wing of the house I had never seen. Pictures of fields and mountains and storm-swept seas, greens and browns and blues, rushed by. Occasionally a frame was touched, a finger inspected for dust. Many of the doors were blockaded with chairs. A young maid appeared from behind one of them. Elke touched her shoulder as she passed. The maid's eyes followed Elke as she moved down the corridor. She was like a brass rubbing of Elke, the same symmetrical features and pale colouring filled in with subtle make-up.

Elke struggled with a ring of keys and unlocked a door that led onto a sparsely furnished dining room. A small round table and three mismatched cane chairs were positioned against the wall. A blue and white vase was the only object on the mantelpiece. On the table, a long dirty candlestick was encased in sinewy wax. Dark paintings of figures in low-lit rooms covered peeling wallpaper. The air stank of cigarette smoke. I wouldn't have been surprised if the door had taken us to another house altogether.

'We're usually on the other side of the house,' Elke said unnecessarily.

‘It’s more private here.’ I had expected her tone to thaw now we were alone together, but it hadn’t.

‘Some interesting pictures on the walls,’ I replied. ‘Are they relatives of yours?’

‘They’re not mine. We inherited them. My husband’s father was a collector.’

‘That’s how your husband became interested in art?’

‘Yes. You may call my husband Kurt.’

I put my hands on the back of a chair and tried to meet her eye. I sensed her bristle at the question.

‘Kurt,’ I repeated.

She motioned me to sit down. ‘He isn’t feeling entirely himself. He’s having problems with his eyesight. He will join us later.’

The same maid reappeared with two crystal glasses and a bottle of wine. She leant towards the table and revealed a gold necklace strung with a single pearl below her neckline.

Elke put the palm of her hand against the bottle. She looked satisfied and nodded at the maid. ‘That’s all,’ Elke said, addressing her glass. The girl bowed and withdrew. A tarnished mirror on the far wall reflected glinting masses with our general shape. Our chairs groaned with each small movement. I noticed Elke looking at me.

‘Comfortable?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Good.’

‘I’m sorry your husband isn’t feeling well.’

‘It’s a war wound,’ Elke said. ‘He was young when it happened. Gas. He’s lucky he isn’t completely blind. He won’t mind my telling you.’

Elke examined the ceiling and seemed to brace herself to begin. She said that it was a miracle for a young man like her husband to have lived. She had known so many men killed in battle in circumstances so gruesome it still kept her awake at night. There was Kurt’s older brother, who had watched the slaughter of his schoolfriends before he lost both legs to amputation and descended into madness in a medical tent far from home, conversing with insects, raving at the nurses. Several of her cousins left wives and children destitute. To them, when the war ended, another had immediately begun against penury. She paused. Her expression subtly darkened. The man she had intended to marry, whom she had loved

passionately as a young woman, died as soon as he got to the front. Shot like a piece of game. Painless, she was told, though it wasn't clear how anyone but him could describe those final moments. Everyone was terribly sorry, but it wasn't uncommon, as her mother kept repeating, as though the banality of his death might prove helpful in her grief. His first letter arrived soon after she had received the telegram informing her he had perished. Like he would simply continue to correspond with her from wherever it was his spirit now rested, as though death were equivalent to a change of address. Kurt was a friend of the family. She had known him for years. Given his age – he was just nineteen, she was nearly thirty – their match was initially met with some resistance. At first, Kurt had seemed unharmed by his experiences. He wasn't one of those men who trembled at loud noises and couldn't sleep through the night, who returned to ordinary life as to infancy. His injuries healed, and he ascended quickly through the ranks of the university in which he worked. He was consistently praised for his level-headedness, his competence. For many years she had been the envy of all her friends, many of whom had been left stranded in a precocious widowhood. Isn't he handsome, they would say, and accomplished, and so young! It was hard to say when it began, the pains and sleepless nights, the raging tantrums no bargaining could soothe. The doctor could find nothing wrong with her husband. Perhaps he needed a new hobby? A dog to hunt with? The same doctor eventually prescribed her husband painkillers, and there was no denying that they had helped. Though it troubled her to think why the morphine worked as it did, as he didn't seem to be in pain in the ordinary sense.

'We're fortunate he's better nowadays,' she concluded suddenly.

She moved on to general comments about the bravery of soldiers. I thought about mentioning Father, how altered he was on his return from war. But Elke's manner made me cautious. She had become visibly more nervous and no longer seemed to be addressing me. 'Women could do more than write letters in wartime,' she repeated angrily, like I had disagreed.

A discreet knock at the door silenced us. Through some finely tuned awareness of her husband moving silently through the house – the floorboards hadn't so much as creaked – it seemed she knew he was coming downstairs. An insubstantial young man in a formal suit stepped into the room. It was hard to connect this almost adolescent figure to Elke's

description. She inhaled quickly and readjusted her skirt, tugging its hem down over her knees with both hands.

‘I’m sorry to have kept you waiting,’ he said.

‘Women prefer a little time to themselves, don’t we?’ Elke’s bared teeth urged me to respond.

‘You have a beautiful home,’ I said.

Kurt did not register this comment. He did not even look at me. He lurched forward and sat down heavily, not entirely in control of his body’s proportions. Elke knew to hold on to her glass, and when the table shook, only mine nearly tipped over.

‘You are the artist my wife has told me so much about,’ he said.

Elke stiffened. The maid returned with another glass. Elke took the bottle herself and filled the glass to the brim. Kurt received it without looking at her.

‘Now tell me,’ Kurt said. He turned his eyes on me. ‘What do you make of the movement that calls itself New Objectivity?’

I had expected this, some sort of test. I knew to lie. I responded that the work wasn’t to my taste. Wasn’t it all rather obvious? And who were they to expound on politics?

Kurt nodded, pleased. Elke took a large mouthful of wine. Our eyes briefly met. Hers were wide and liquid with feeling.

‘What about the men who gather under the banner of Dada?’

I was vague. I gave an impression of ignorance. I wasn’t interested, I said. I hardly knew them.

‘What’s your opinion?’ I asked.

Elke was bent intently forward.

‘I couldn’t name a single artist in Germany at present who has any interest in beauty,’ he said. ‘Without that, what is there? Crackpots, cripples and whores. The Cubists and Futurists are much the same. Canvas-smearers without morals.’

I was able to look more closely at him as he spoke. He held his glass effortfully with hands he continually glanced down at, anticipating their disobedience. His face was pitted with scars as a window is with rain.

‘Sensation sells,’ Elke said, more to Kurt than to me.

‘Dix would have you laugh at the crippled veterans,’ Kurt said.

‘Not like Uccello,’ I interrupted.

‘Pardon?’ Kurt was trying to sound good-humoured.

‘The Florentine painter, working in the fifteenth century. He did paintings of battle. I’ve only seen reproductions. But I think you might like them.’

‘I know Uccello,’ Kurt replied. ‘He’s excellent.’ He pouted, unable to hide his annoyance. ‘As I was saying, Grosz is just as bad. And prosecution has been no deterrent. We should imprison him. That fool Herzfelde too. And Dix.’

I wanted to say that Otto Dix had received an Iron Cross. George Grosz was sent to the front twice. They knew what was at stake.

‘Do you like the Italian masters?’ I tried.

This was the right question. Kurt let out a sigh.

‘Very much. Partly because my mother did. She wanted to see the Giotto chapel before she died. Angels like disgruntled children, she said. It wasn’t possible for her. But we saw them last year.’

‘Spectacular,’ Elke confirmed, and smiled. ‘We said, didn’t we, that students at art schools should all be taken there on a pilgrimage?’

‘My wife has even said she’d like to take you to Padua,’ Kurt said fondly. He reached for Elke’s hand. They looked pleased with themselves and with me.

Food was served. Boiled potatoes and large wedges of pink meat. I couldn’t remember when I had last seen so much food and ate every unappetizing mouthful. The scrape of silverware filled the room for what felt like an hour but was probably less than ten minutes. A fly could be heard buzzing around a light fixture. Kurt chased the meal around his plate with a fork, then dropped his cutlery and pushed the remains away. Immediately the maid charged forward and removed our plates.

‘I’m pleased we agree on the mediocrity of contemporary German art,’ he said. ‘Muck shovelled in from Paris and Rome. I’ve said before it will prove a fad. Lord knows what they’ll make of our acceptance of it in a hundred years’ time.’ He rubbed at a fleck of meat on the tablecloth. ‘The last century had much more to admire, wouldn’t you say?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Such as?’ He was almost smiling now. Some trust had been won.

Elke looked at me imploringly. I took a deep breath. Names of artists ran through my mind, none of them relevant.

‘Adolph Menzel,’ I said eventually.

Kurt pursed his lips. ‘Who else?’

‘Caspar David Friedrich, of course,’ I said. ‘The Romantics. Joseph Anton Koch. The Nazarenes.’

‘They never painted the female form as you do,’ Kurt said. Unlike everything else he had said that night, I couldn’t tell whether he meant this with approval or condemnation. Candles had been carried in and illuminated our faces. Elke was pale and glistening with perspiration.

‘Thank you,’ I said.

‘It’s most unusual,’ Kurt said. ‘Beauty without any of the coarse erotic impulses that have become so popular. Women you would want to spend an evening with.’ He leant over to Elke in a gesture that looked like it might conclude with a kiss, but did not.

There was a short silence. Kurt revolved a cigarette case between his palms and stared up at the ceiling. He began to talk to Elke like I had already left. They were seeing a friend that night who threw the most tedious parties. Elke whispered something to Kurt and he laughed with satisfaction. He was relaxed now and as they spoke he sent me the occasional apathetic glance. He was aware of the money Elke was spending on me, I thought. Maybe he wanted to see for himself that I wasn’t a fraud.

Elke said she needed time to freshen her face and hair. Kurt reminded her that a car had been ordered for six. Without looking at me Kurt stood up and began to stagger towards the door. There seemed to be no expectation that either of us would say goodbye. The maid closed the door behind him.

I was exhausted. Nothing I had eaten sat right in my stomach. Elke and I exchanged a look.

‘He enjoys your company, I can tell.’

‘He knows a lot about art.’

‘Naturally. Like your friend, Herr Gans-Meyer.’

I remembered happily that I had arranged to see Saul and Charlotte that evening. Saul was cooking dinner for us both at his apartment and Charlotte had volunteered her help. At that moment Saul might be adding salt to a steaming pot, and Charlotte might be standing at his side, helping herself to another glass of wine.

‘I don’t want to keep you,’ I said. ‘I’m very glad to have met your husband, thank you.’

‘It was our pleasure,’ Elke replied.

I asked if I could use the powder room before I left. Elke directed me

there and said the maid would show me out. We embraced and she flinched as I touched the wet silk on her back.

As I washed my hands in the pewter sink, I noticed a large framed painting draped in a towel against the wall. Like the other rooms, these walls were covered in pictures. People in murky landscapes that gave the impression of rain, even those in which sunlight had been meticulously painted. There was a large gap next to the mirror roughly the size of the painting on the floor. How strange, I thought. I knelt and lifted the corner of the towel. My stomach turned. It was Gertrude Muschler's landscape from the Gurlitt Gallery. A piece of card had been stuck over the plate with Muschler's name. On it in Elke's handwriting was the name Answald Dietrich and two question marks. I covered it again with the towel. My hands trembled as I unlocked the door and stepped out into the hallway.

A different maid was waiting for me, and wordlessly handed over the jacket I had left in the dining room. She was about my age, with fair lashes and brows and fine downy hair. She was pale, almost colourless, her neck and cheeks and eye sockets outlined and shaded in chalk, the rest of her washed in white gouache. In her ears were drops of amber encased in silver. She accompanied me to the door. When I got to the bottom of the stone steps outside their house, when the cries of birds were audible all around me, I began to run.

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A LETTER FROM Ben arrived a week after Yom Kippur. A single sheet of paper, half-filled with large, unsteady handwriting. They had decided not to leave Berlin. But the money had helped them, and they were grateful. Mother had bought a new sewing machine. Everyone had remarked on how handsome it looked on her table in the workshop. They had been talking about me a lot recently. Happily, without any bitterness or worry, as they hadn't been able to in the years before. They wanted to know if I would consider returning home for a visit, perhaps even to paint a picture of them all together? Clothed, that is. Mother told them all about her portrait. They were shocked at first, but she said it seemed quite natural after a while to be undressed, no more unusual than if she were a child and I were her mother. Someone in the neighbourhood had seen the painting in the *Berliner Morgenpost*. He had been studying the reproduction for a while before he realized that the model was Mother and he assumed the artist must be her daughter, Hannah. How nice that she had married a Frenchman! Was he Jewish? They had all laughed about that. They hadn't minded about my assumed name, that seemed prudent to them. Nor had Mother cared that she was stark naked with her long hair down in a newspaper bought by everyone she knew. The image was too small to be so indecent it would cause a scandal, but it wasn't just that. She was proud of me.

I had longed for Mother's approval. Now there it was, unambiguously on a sheet of paper I could keep in the drawer of my nightstand. But their decision was so disheartening I couldn't enjoy this victory. I read those few

lines over and again in the days that followed in the hope they might betray some secret meaning. By the time it became clear to me there was no recourse to argue with Ben, no way of making them leave if they weren't willing, I was on my way to the museum with the letter folded in my pocket. Leaves flung themselves about like small hands in the breeze. I ripped up the letter and threw it into a bin.

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I NOW WENT to Elke's house whenever she was available to work on the commission. I had begun to think ahead – I would spend the remainder of the year realizing the beauty of Elke's body down to the tiniest freckle on her ankle. I was confident this was an achievable dream. The first of the nudes was progressing quickly and we had returned without discussion to our former routine. Modelling and painting in the days, drinking and talking in the evenings until she disappeared to dine with Kurt. I walked back to the apartment with specks of paint drying on my hands, slowly turning over whatever limb I had focused on that day. Elke, rather than a maid, now greeted me at the door.

I tried to put the painting by Muschler out of my mind. Maybe Kurt had visited the exhibition himself, and having taken Muschler out to dinner at the same restaurant, ordering the meat with a ferric tang that Elke had pushed around her plate, he had made his own purchase. Had Elke remembered my distaste for Muschler, and was that why her painting was languishing on the bathroom floor? I had no idea what to make of the name on the card. That mystifying detail somehow made the entire apparition easier to dismiss. A marriage housed countless private rituals. Perhaps this was just evidence of one of them. This was why I decided it was unnecessary to tell Saul or Charlotte.

'I have something for you,' Elke announced one morning. I followed her into her dressing room, and she handed me a bundle of fabric. It took a moment for me to see what they actually were.

‘These are socks,’ I said.

‘My husband’s socks,’ she corrected cheerfully.

They were large and unwashed – as though they’d been worn for weeks – with holes in the toes.

‘Can’t your maids darn them?’

‘They’re useless. Honestly, I would much prefer your hands on them.’

Concealing my annoyance was proving difficult.

‘I’m here all day painting,’ I said. ‘When do you expect me to do this?’

‘Make time,’ she said firmly.

The phone rang and Elke rose to answer it. A change in the pitch of her voice confirmed that it was Kurt. I decided it was unwise to make a fuss. I put the socks reluctantly into my satchel and made a mental note to exact some small revenge against them during the repair. As I was thinking this Elke resumed her position on the chaise longue. I let my glance slide away from her towards the canvas and felt instantly calmer. I would pretend this hadn’t happened.

‘You must be close to the women who commissioned these portraits?’ I said.

Elke was guarded about details of her life that weren’t directly related to her marriage, and even about that she tended to produce vapid phrases I sensed were being repurposed from other conversations.

‘I suppose,’ she replied. ‘We certainly spend a lot of time together. Some of us have even travelled without our husbands. When it was time to write postcards, we sat around a table and composed the message together. Three identical summaries of Madrid.’ She paused and frowned. ‘Do you know Peter Lely’s portraits of the Windsor Beauties?’

I said I didn’t. Her evasions typically took this form. As though wanting to provide an alternative I might enjoy less, but would at least find edifying.

‘Commissioned by the Duchess of York for her women friends in the middle of the seventeenth century.’ She moved a strand of hair from her lips and licked the end of her finger to smooth it against her head. ‘Lely was born in Soest, would you believe? But he became London’s most sought-after painter.’ She regarded me with pleasure. ‘Noblewomen and courtesans. Women with great power in the English court despite their sex.’ She closed her eyes. ‘They’re spectacular.’

I wrote down Peter Lely’s name in my notebook.

‘While it’s on my mind,’ she said, ‘I know we agreed I would sit for all

six paintings, but I promised my husband I would spend Christmas at his parents' house in the mountains. Bavaria is very beautiful this time of year. And you can take a train to Italy from there. He says he will take me to Rome in January.'

My fantasies about our winter together evaporated. I tried to keep my face blank as I listened.

'How nice for you both,' I said. 'You might take more photographs for me?'

I had persuaded Elke that the nudes should resemble Italian Renaissance examples except for the backgrounds, which would be German landscapes. All I knew were the city's parks, so Elke showed me photographs from her trips to the countryside with Kurt. They weren't good photographs. The trees were strips of tar against a light, burnished sky. But I liked how Elke looked at these images. Without modesty she would point at herself and remark, 'Don't I look nice?' I always agreed, 'Oh, yes.' A contented sigh would follow. She would inch closer to me on the chaise longue.

'If we're able to finish this canvas, and perhaps even another in the next few weeks, then you can use those as the basis for the remaining four. You surely don't need me for every painting. And you are insisting you have no time for anything but painting me, which can't be practical.'

I thought about mentioning that she had been the one to demand I forswear all other work. But I just loaded the brush and continued to paint.

It wasn't clear whether Elke understood the silence that ensued as an angry silence on my part. She was smiling with a faraway aspect. Today her warmth seemed to have nothing to do with me.

Elke chatted about Rome and I remained silent. I sensed her slowly intuiting my bad mood. She stopped talking. Reached for her packet of cigarettes. Rather than smoke, she gave the box an affectionate stroke, as you would a cat. She was distracted, considering something.

'I thought you might like to go away yourself,' she said. 'I was planning to give you the money at Christmas. But really there's no point waiting until next month. We can break for lunch, and I'll give it to you now.' She sprang up and wriggled into her dressing gown and left without waiting for a response.

I questioned whether I should accept the wad of notes Elke produced a few minutes later. I already felt embarrassed at having reacted so sullenly to what was an ordinary change of plan. I began to say that she needn't

apologize. The words were there in my mind, petitioning their use. But I found myself taking the money with a weak smile and, not even thanking Elke, putting it into my purse.

~

The next morning at the Zoological Garden, Saul was waiting for me under the pagoda.

‘Is your new approach to my timekeeping to arrive as late to all our appointments as I do?’

‘I’m sorry, I couldn’t decide which coloured pencils to bring,’ I said. ‘You know Emile Nolde came here whenever he had the chance.’ I was being mischievous. Saul had told me this several times already.

‘Very funny. Have I said that his bears look like men in bear costumes?’

Saul was writing about paintings of horses and cows, recent examples in which their pelt was bright red or blue, like a child had coloured them in. They weren’t meat any more, I said, they were magical presences, messengers, capable of oracular insight, as they were for the ancients. We pointed at the animals that skulked behind their bars, and assigned them new colours. The tiger could be purple, the elephant orange. In the carnivore house, Saul waited until a young family had exited, a child yowling at a nursemaid, and pushed me gently against a far wall. I was still laughing as he kissed me.

Saul was touching my mouth with his thumb. Dragging it over my lips. He sighed.

‘Charlotte tells me you’re painting more nudes for Frau Grese. The account she gave was rather lurid. I wondered why you weren’t at the museum.’

I had planned on describing the commission to Saul in a way that allowed me to compare myself to Lely. But somehow it had slipped my mind.

‘I wouldn’t presume to tell you what to do,’ Saul continued.

‘You think I shouldn’t limit myself to Frau Grese,’ I interjected.

‘She isn’t the only woman in Berlin capable of admiring your work and paying for it.’

‘I could illustrate your article,’ I said, putting my arms around his neck.

‘Charlotte thinks—’ Another long sigh. ‘Charlotte suspects you might be

– infatuated, I suppose is the word. With Frau Grese.’

I didn’t know what to say. I made a joke about Charlotte, who was a hypocrite to allege I was flirting with other women. But the accusation stung. The pain lingered on the walk back to Saul’s apartment, long after the conversation had moved on to colour theory. I was saying the words ‘light’ and ‘shade’, repeating what I could remember from Goethe, and all the while I was thinking about Elke. The same thoughts ran through me as I undressed, and as I pressed my body against Saul’s. I was embarrassed, I realized. I had hoped it wasn’t so obvious.

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I DIDN'T NOTICE it setting in, the obsession. I could have been describing either of us. When I arrived in the mornings, Elke would hand me her diary as I struggled out of my coat. Each page was headed with the date, followed by a few lines about the previous day. She encouraged me to do the same, but I was reticent about the notes I kept in my sketchbook. She claimed that when she was at school, with little else to entertain them, she and her friends would share with each other what they had written each day, and if necessary, they would compose one another's entries. She said it wasn't so much about mimicry as intimacy, a way of living each other's lives, a dissolving of distinctions, like they were all water poured into the same jug.

23 November
Hannah wearing blue, delftware blue she calls it, the same blue as the hydrangeas on evening walk. K out until 11. Roast pork for dinner. Irmgard and Astrid at musical hall all evening and return excitable. With today's post there are now three letters from Margrit I must respond to.

30 November
Modelling for Hannah until 6. We discuss how the young Dürer refused to depict his arms and hands, the tools of his trade, in her favourite of his drawn self-portraits. Like he couldn't risk revealing his secrets, Hannah remarks. Crate of champagne from Margrit.

K out until 12.

10 December
Hannah describes a piece of music by Bach, won't be pressed to hum its tune, but from her words alone I can hear it too. Second painting coming along nicely. K late for dinner. Astrid butchers his mother's gateau recipe, he says.

Each detail was a coloured bead I threaded onto the string of our acquaintance. I knew there was more to the ritual than nostalgia for her youth. Elke wanted me to know how she felt and what she thought about. It was a given that I was looking at her. But her diaries made it clear she was looking back at me.

Sometimes Elke wasn't in the mood to pose. She would be dressed when I arrived and would manoeuvre me immediately back out of the door. What a thrill it was to play truant from ourselves. Mostly we took her car to the cinema. Elke had normally already seen whatever was being screened, but she preferred that, she insisted. I never mentioned it if I had. I wanted to be there. Our knees almost touching. Her breath in the adjacent seat.

One day she wanted to buy artificial flowers. A type that looked good against her complexion, she said. I held the small bright blooms up to her face. She kept asking what I thought with a playful flick of her hair. All of them, I wanted to say. They all look beautiful.

I had carried a postcard reproduction of Peter Lely's *Nymphs by a Fountain* in my bag for weeks. For strength, hoping it might guide me. I had planned to give it to Elke when she left for the countryside. I studied it again as I waited for Elke to answer the door on the day of our final sitting. The look of satin as it is drawn off a woman's curves on a warm summer's evening. More than anything, this was what I wanted to paint.

'They're maidservants?' Elke said, studying the Lely print. She lifted it to the light and scowled. 'Not this one, surely. Look at her hands. Not a single callus. She must be their mistress.'

She pointed at the nymph with her back to the viewer, her hand beckoning between her legs.

I snorted, and Elke looked at me quizzically.

'I'm not sure he was interested in realism,' I said. 'Can't you see where the hand is pointing?'

Soon we were both wheezing with laughter. ‘Realism!’ Elke repeated. She leant against me, resting her head on my shoulder.

‘You have a seamstress’s hands, but they’re very beautiful,’ she said, wiping tears from under her eyes.

I stayed until I was certain I would miss Olga serving dinner. Then later still. Until the trams had stopped. Elke was describing her husband’s parents, whom she disliked, and her own parents, who were long dead. I was still painting but the effort of listening had slowed my hand. I told myself these details would add depth to the nudes, a greater sense of her body’s history and personality. This was what ancient statuary lacked. Even the Renaissance artists I admired put violence and possession above emotion. It was important that I honour the singularity of my ambitions, I thought. That was why it was necessary to remain in that room, necessary to fill any pauses with remarks that betrayed the right amount of curiosity. Elke took every offering I laid before her and continued to talk.

You’re missed at the museum, Saul had written that week, and it wasn’t the first letter he’d sent with a similar sentiment. *I take it the sittings are proving absorbing. You do know you needn’t be entirely at her beck and call?*

I nearly left at one, but Elke suggested I take a bath. Hot, Elke told the maid she summoned, almost unbearable it’s so hot. I didn’t spend long in the water. I knew I should go back to the apartment. I felt uneasy about Kurt, who might come through the door at any moment and fly into a rage at the artist’s presumptuousness. The maids shot me interested glances as they retired to their quarters. I was sitting on the floor tying my shoelaces when Elke found me.

‘You can’t go out like that, you’ll catch your death!’

I was already shivering. Elke went into the bathroom and emerged with a fluffy white towel. She motioned for me to lean down. I let myself enjoy the rough, determined touch of her hands on my skull.

A taxi was called at two. Raindrops wriggled down the window. I pressed my head against the glass. A frost would come, the evening newspapers had announced, and Elke said she would write. I took it as auspicious that I was white with cold when I got back to my room.

I woke with a start. I reached in the dark for a match and checked my watch. It was just after four in the morning. I couldn’t have been asleep for more than an hour. My hair felt unusually silky and smelt of apricots. I

remembered Elke’s hands towelling it dry. I told myself not to dwell on it and sank back into the pillow.

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PART 3

1932

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I WANTED TO carry on painting while the memory of Elke was fresh. But something had already left me when I received the canvas the following morning. I picked up the brush, straining to feel what I had felt only the day before. I had the power to create Elke, I'd thought. What pleasure this certainty had given me. I tried to conjure that feeling in the weeks that followed with little success. I was now chiefly capable, or so it seemed, of envious dejection. Elke was drinking hot cocoa by a roaring fire in a lodge nestled in the mountains, I could only assume, while I wondered how to vary the shape of her chest to convey the bodies of other women. I decided I needed a break. I was putting my sketchbooks away – resisting the urge to look inside – when I remembered the money Elke had given me. I wrote to Saul and Charlotte with my new fountain pen, a Christmas gift from Maria. We could go somewhere beautiful to see in the New Year, wherever they wanted, and we could leave that weekend, because weren't they tired of the city as well? Saul telephoned the apartment that night and said we should go to a hotel he knew in Bad Saarow.

'I'm amazed your beloved patron isn't coming with us too,' Charlotte said. I had just greeted her at the door of my building, and she had trudged up the stairs in a brooding silence. 'She isn't good at sharing you, is she?' She pretended not to notice when I said I was sorry. She reached into my wardrobe, took out a blouse, and flung it into her open suitcase.

'You might not get that one back,' she said, and gave me a little smirk.

Sandwiches wrapped in brown paper were pressed into our hands by a

tearful Olga, who watched us from the window as we carried our bags down the street. I had a horrible feeling she'd expected an invite. Saul drove us in a car borrowed from his mother, and we all shouted to be heard over the engine. He drove much like he spoke, distractedly and exuberantly, his hands lightly shifting over the wheel.

Windows were thrown open, sheets drawn off the beds, flasks filled with coffee, apples inspected for bruises, combs pulled through hair. Sitting by the lake, an afternoon had the dimensions of several days. Charlotte plunged into the water and swam – to the horror of other guests – in a full-length costume she'd had specially made. Saul picked up and put down books from his deckchair, selecting lines to be read aloud to us. A small boat transported us across the lake through a layer of reeds onto a bank that was quieter, more private. I spent a few hours each day sketching Charlotte and Saul, who modelled fully clothed outside the hotel, periodically warming themselves up with blankets and hot tea. In our room, I had them both model nude, though Saul insisted that Charlotte go for walks during his sittings, which she only agreed to after much complaint. In the evenings, rum punch was portioned into squat glass tumblers that did not break when dropped, as Charlotte demonstrated more than once. There was a lot of screaming as she taught Saul to dance: he did ridiculous things with his arms, windmilling them through the air no matter what Charlotte told him to do. I was so relaxed I could have fallen fast asleep in my chair, as though selected for hypnosis in a magician's show. I was happy in a way that made the colours of the hotel brighter, the orange juice sweeter, the jokes we tossed to one another on our way to the lake hysterically funny. In the mornings, other inhabitants of the hotel ordered strong tea on trays to be consumed under huge white umbrellas and allowed the clean air to transform them where they sat.

I intended to fill a sketchbook with drawings of other guests. But I could feel my attention being pulled elsewhere. The wedge of fair hair that sat over her shoulders like a shawl. The way her back lengthened when she raised her arm, a plant unfurling towards the sun. I knew I was drawing Elke but told myself these women could be anyone. But Saul and Charlotte couldn't be convinced.

'Can't you think about anything else?' Charlotte snapped. She snatched the sketchbook from me. We were all sitting on a blanket facing the lake.

Everything was impossibly bright and blue. ‘Your adulation is wasted on her. I’m right here.’

‘I’ve drawn you both a thousand times already.’

‘We needn’t be ourselves. I could be a goddess. Saul could be a satyr!’

Only a flash of annoyance, to my relief. Charlotte held a twig behind Saul’s head.

‘Horns!’ she declared.

‘A mythological scene wouldn’t be something to rush,’ Saul said. ‘It would probably take weeks. Months, even. It took Botticelli two years to paint his *Venus*.’

‘We have the scholar’s approval!’ Charlotte said. ‘Neither of us want to waste any more evenings with each other complaining about how little we see you!’

Saul smiled, glad to have pleased her.

I tried to laugh this off and change the subject. Had they seen the elderly mother and her adult son in the breakfast room that morning in matching frilly white outfits? The mother had passed our table and gravely informed Saul that his shirt was untucked, he said. (And winked at him, Charlotte added.) But I knew I hadn’t fully satisfied them. I would sometimes enter the dining room and see them talking only to fall silent on seeing me. I was more careful with my sketchbooks after that.

Charlotte’s celebrity had noticeably increased after she had begun performing a new solo dance, choreographed over a single weekend and full of dark, groping movements. A prominent women’s magazine had recently photographed her in a top hat and a pale silk slip, one eye closed, her leg raised against the wall. A short article described Charlotte as a fixture of Berlin’s nightlife. Charlotte didn’t care that she wasn’t described as a dancer, not now that she had fans. They were even younger than me, these girls. They shared the same badly dyed, likely self-administered haircut that vaguely approximated Charlotte’s own.

‘What do you make of this?’ Saul asked, gesturing at Charlotte signing a photograph of her face for a guest at the hotel.

‘It’s what she’s always wanted,’ I said. ‘Adulation, fame. I’m happy for her.’

‘She once told me her dream was to take lessons with Max Reinhardt.’ He frowned and went back to his book. ‘Not to be a nightclub star.’

They got on well, Saul and Charlotte, or at least better than I had

imagined, though occasionally they would argue about politics in a way that didn't seem entirely about the subject at hand. Mostly they seemed at ease with one another as lovers with equal claims on my attention. It wasn't anything we ever discussed. There had been occasions when rather than disappoint one of them by admitting I was spending time with the other, I would insist I was with Olga or Maria. Once, I asked a gleeful Maria to memorize a lie in case Saul telephoned the apartment. 'She's taken Olga to the cinema,' Maria repeated in a theatrical whisper as I closed the door. I believed that this holiday might create a new amity between us. To a degree it had worked. Around the resort our behaviour was such that we could be mistaken for old friends, or, as Charlotte once joked, siblings. But it wasn't always so simple. 'I'm not the spinster aunt,' Charlotte would say with unconvincing levity if Saul and I exchanged even the mildest of affectionate touches in public.

I made a few oil sketches overlooking the lake, fat brushstrokes of white and silver. On a paper napkin, studies of Charlotte's face. A watercolour of Saul in a woollen hat, a long scarf looped around his neck, which I would later find framed by the desk in his apartment. We became friendly with a few other girls from the city who were staying at the hotel, and they agreed to pose for me too. I drew the one with neat coffee-stained teeth nude in the centre of the deserted ballroom before everyone woke up one morning. She was just the weight and grace of her limbs, the energy of her body in that room. Her friend had an asphalt black bowl cut (applied like paint from a box, she told me) and a loud, infectious laugh. She posed on the street outside the hotel just after dawn, when it was so cold I had to wear Saul's coat over my own. I liked the beginnings of these paintings so much I wondered whether Elke might want them. I was writing a letter before dinner one night when I felt Saul and Charlotte looking at me.

'You're writing to Frau Grese?' Saul said. He turned to Charlotte who rolled her eyes.

'I'm just telling her what I'm painting.' I didn't look up from the letter. *The models are industrious enough, a little awkward in their bodies, unpractised, unlike you*, I wrote.

'Is she really so lonely?' Charlotte asked. 'Isn't she married? Presumably she has her own friends. Why would she want some painter writing to her all the time?'

'You don't know anything about her – except what I've told you,' I said.

‘Hannah, stop being so naive, it’s getting tedious,’ Charlotte replied. She stood up and left the room.

Saul flinched as the door slammed.

‘I understand that you admire Frau Grese,’ he said. ‘She’s been very generous to you. But what Charlotte means, I think, is that you’re in service to her, you aren’t friends, and it’s probably unwise to let her to treat you as one.’

Saul looked appeased when I destroyed the letter. Later that night, I wrote it again on another sheet of paper. Fast, by candlelight, sat on the lid of the toilet as Saul and Charlotte drank on the floor below. I decided not to mention Elke to either of them again. I didn’t need their approval or their understanding.

I finished a nude the morning we left Bad Saarow, a rectangular canvas the size of an unfolded map. It was of Charlotte enclosed by trees that resembled stage curtains, a large silver plate of water visible in the background. I thought about giving this to Charlotte. But when I returned to the apartment and began to read through Elke’s letters, the dozen I had received in the ten days I’d been gone, vignettes of life in the countryside that never once mentioned Kurt, I knew I would send it to her instead.

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I HOPED THAT I would return from Bad Saarow refreshed. I told myself that I had enough material to work from. But the third canvas faltered at the gentle slope of Elke's shoulders. The preparatory sketches no longer felt alive outside her home. I left the picture for a few days in the hope it would develop of its own volition. As a plant might, or an infection. When I returned it somehow seemed even worse.

I accepted that I would need to see Elke again. Subtle things about the body were hard to remember, like the creases at the underarm and the puckering of skin at the elbow, and I wanted to get it right. But I knew it wasn't just that.

She would be in Italy by now, but I wrote to her anyway. Perhaps a maid would see the inscription on the envelope – *important, open right away* – assume it was a medical problem, and call Elke at her hotel. If that didn't work, I was prepared to wait. I hadn't expected Elke to telephone the apartment that night.

'We can't have you making things up,' she said. 'I admire your honesty. Come over tomorrow morning.'

I wrapped the canvas in an old bedsheet and had Maria help me hail a taxi. Outside the apartment the air smelt of gasoline, like the trees were dripping with petrol rather than rainwater. I checked my appearance in the window of a parked car. I assured myself that seeing Elke merely meant I was taking my work seriously. I had discovered that the nude was nothing

without the vibrations of a living body. This was the kind of revelation I imagined a real artist would have.

Elke was sitting on a bench outside the house. She was frowning at a book open in her lap, one hand shading her eyes from the sun. She wore a hunting jacket over a housecoat and had her hair tied up in a loose bun. I could feel her eyes turn towards me when I was still motionless at the bottom of the driveway.

Elke sighed as she closed the book. The title was familiar. I had seen it in the window of bookshops: *Nation Without Space*.

I sat down next to her.

‘I thought you would be in Italy.’

‘My husband cut the trip short. He was needed in the city.’

‘I’m sorry, what a shame.’

‘He might yet take me to Rome. Perhaps in the spring. It will be more pleasant to walk round then anyway, he says.’

Her mouth was set in an unhappy, ironic sneer. I took her elbow and squeezed it.

‘Or you could go by yourself,’ I said.

‘You should come with me. You said you would like to see Canova’s Venus.’

I didn’t dare to press her on this. It was said flatly, insincerely. And yet I felt a flicker of excitement.

Inside, the house seemed abandoned. I couldn’t see any of the maids or hear their faint, hurrying footsteps in the surrounding rooms. Doors that were usually shut had been left wide open. Upstairs, the bed in Elke’s room was unmade, and there was an empty glass and dirty plate on the nightstand. I felt Elke noticing me observe this.

‘I gave the staff time off to be with their families,’ she said. ‘I didn’t expect I would need them. We’ll have to make our own lunch. But we can play the gramophone as loud as we want.’

I set up the gramophone as Elke undressed. The first Venus Elke had modelled for now hung on the wall. The two paintings that had followed and which I’d thought were finished months before were stacked beneath it. The third was on the easel. I was no longer satisfied with any of them.

I would redouble my efforts, I decided. I needed to be there all the time, and Elke agreed. Five sittings a week, which typically lasted seven hours, sometimes more. Not since I was a schoolgirl had I kept such hours. Up at

dawn with the factory hands, I walked all the way to Elke's house even when the weather was terrible and let her driver drop me home afterwards. Suited men glared at me through the windows as the car inched across the Nollendorfplatz. But Elke soon wanted me collected from my building in the mornings too.

The quiet of the house had an almost physical presence, like we were packed inside it. I never heard the doorbell ring in all the time I spent there. Even Olga had more callers. The maids returned and giggled as they climbed the stairs, then descended with the same soft yet perceptible tread. There were occasions when it seemed logical that Kurt was somewhere in the house, in the hours after dinner when the husbands in my own apartment building could be heard whistling up the staircase. If he was there, he must have been even quieter than the maids, and unwilling to say hello.

I had never earned so much money and spent so little. Elke bought dinner and drinks and taxis and gave me all the things I had once needed money for: shampoo and stockings and books and perfume. I sent half to my family and reminded them they could still leave, but received only thanks in response. Olga made exaggeratedly deferential comments about my clothes in a tone that confirmed she knew about the money I now made. I told Olga that I admired her dignity and perseverance, and if she would permit it, I would like to increase the amount I paid in rent. Olga received this offer with an unnerving entitlement and a dissatisfied sniff, as though she had expected more.

Letters became redundant the more time Elke and I spent together. We began to exchange postcards. I knew I had done the same thing with Charlotte. But I never used the same genre with Elke. I sent her reproductions of still lifes. Dutch Golden Age were my favourite, always with a line or two on their underside. Cryptic little notes. The beginnings of stories. Elke did the same. *She went away one day with a small case of cash and never returned*, I wrote. *He cupped her breasts and her throat grew hot*, went another weeks later. My own were always partly about myself, but I wasn't sure about Elke's. *She ran through the garden in a nightdress, the pollen stuck to her skin, and she wouldn't be persuaded inside*, Elke wrote. *He put his hand into her mouth and she bit down, tasting blood*, read one a day later.

I only got to the museum rarely. When I saw Saul, he seemed more

bewildered than angry.

‘I’m writing that piece we spoke about. I have close to twenty pages already – a comparative study of Italian angels.’

I was trying my best to appear interested.

‘Franz Marc’s red cows?’ I said.

Saul went quiet.

‘That was published a while ago. You wouldn’t know as I’ve hardly seen you lately.’

We were sat on the steps of the museum. Sunlight poked through inkblot clouds and sparkled on the brown river water. A flock of sparrows twitched above us. I put my head on his shoulder and he relaxed. He slipped his hand under my own. I told him I was taking in more laundry, and he laughed coldly.

‘Is it the commission still?’ he said, dropping my hand.

‘It’s only for a little longer,’ I said. ‘I’m almost finished. You won’t believe the paintings I’ve produced. Really.’

I stayed too late one night and fell asleep in the armchair in Elke’s dressing room. I woke with a blanket tucked around me, my paintbrushes cleared away. A few days later, Elke suggested I take one of the guest bedrooms in the other wing of the house. The bed was narrow and hard, apparently unused. I dreamt of Elke like she had simply passed through the thin walls that separated us and walked straight into my mind. In the morning, a maid charged in without knocking and dropped a tray of tea and toast onto the dresser. I had to extract a long blonde hair from my mouth as I ate. Elke had left a note tucked under the plate. *Find me in the garden when you are done. The butter is fresh. E.G.*

At the end of that week, Elke produced a bottle of champagne before I had quite finished the day’s work. She wanted us to study photograph albums from her youth. As a girl, Elke’s face was fuller, and there was an intensity to her gaze that suggested not so much hope as a clear, authoritative grasp on her future. She never identified him as such, but a man I presumed was the dead fiancé winced at us from the earliest pages. He stood apart from Elke with the anxious expression of someone instructed against any closer proximity. Their grave expressions suggested they regarded these photographs as possessing some higher, more serious purpose than mere personal recollection. Occasionally I noticed Elke place

her thumb over his face as she spoke, like he was being smothered or beheaded. Or so she might remain unobserved.

I went back to the apartment and passed the time – conscientiously, hoping to move the hours along manually – until I could return to Elke.

A day later, at just after five, Elke rose to indicate that the sitting was over. She gazed into the coming night from the window and tied her silk robe tighter. It was an awful time of year, she remarked. She would have a maid draw me a bath. I lay in the hot water listening to sirens on the street below and beneath that, so faint it was almost imperceptible, music being played in another room. There was a letter by the soap-dish on the large marble sink. The paper sat on top of the envelope neatly, deliberately, the edges aligned. I found it hard to ignore as I dressed. I sat on the lip of the tub and read it, aware of Elke in the neighbouring room.

> My dearest Margrit,
> He insists he won't be a slave to it, not this time. It's a shame that I've no reason to believe him. He caused a great scene at his cousin's wedding – banging his fists on the table when I asked him to wait until we were back in the car. Afterwards, he'd forgotten it completely. Did you have a nice time? he asked, all innocence. His analyst claims that if he can't remember it, I can hardly hold it against him. Promise you won't let your Edward so much as touch any of the stuff. Or your boys. These pills are a fix for everything, apparently.
>
> Do you remember Goya's black paintings, those we saw together in Madrid? An old man listens with resignation to a goblin at his shoulder, his ear the exact shape of his tormentor's mouth. Temptation enters easily, exactly. There is no truer image of dependence – how it haunts me.
>
> Elke

'Are you leaving already?' Elke asked from the dressing room as I left the bathroom. Warmly, expecting I would say no, as I always did.

'What about dinner?' I said, knowing this wouldn't be a problem.

'Sadly, my husband has other plans this evening. We can ask the cook for whatever we like. If you liked the trout, we could have it again.'

She moved towards her wardrobe, assuming I would follow. I had watched Elke dress before. I liked the subtle, methodical way she moved as

she put on each garment. The knowledge imparted by habit, her arms angled exactly to reach the clasp of her bra, the muscles of her back contracting. The dress she chose that evening had a small button on the back of the neck. The zip at the side of her hip was easily pulled up, but as the back of the dress was partly exposed, it only hung as it should once this button was fastened.

I moved closer. I touched the small of her back on instinct, lightly with my forefinger. Fair hairs blanketed her spine and appeared gold in the lamplight. She didn't move. I took a breath. I pressed the palm of my hand on the skin just above where the waistband of her underwear typically sat. Today she wore nothing. I hadn't noticed her skip this step. Without saying anything, she pushed the straps of the dress from her shoulders with her thumbs in a practised gesture and turned to face me.

Her mouth tasted of nothing. Her skin was so faintly scented with jasmine I only smelt it when my nose was pressed against her nape. She stepped backwards and lay back down on the divan with her legs parted. Her body was entirely hairless and odourless everywhere but her neck and her wrists. She was uniformly smooth in a way I'd only ever seen in manufactured things. It was like putting your mouth against an expensive piece of porcelain.

When I had held Elke's body in my mind, it had been hard and motionless. She would be the glass I would melt against. So I was surprised at the soft, searching way she kissed me. How she flinched and sighed at the slightest pressure on her breasts. The hunger of her tensed jaw, her eyes flitting beneath her eyelids. Her neck arched, small vibrations from her throat. I moved my hands over her stomach and thighs, slowly, lightly. I touched her like I might never have the chance to do so again. Curious, reverent, exhaustive. I slid my fingers inside her and it was like I had stared at her body for so long I knew instinctually what it wanted.

When it was over, Elke noticed the time on her watch and stood up abruptly. She moved with purpose as though remembering where she had put a mislaid object. Saying nothing to me, not even taking her clothes from the floor, she went into the bathroom. Her haste made me uneasy: I knew there was nowhere she needed to be. I attempted to calm down as I dressed. Was she ashamed, I thought, struggling to tidy my hair in the mirror, hardly recognizing the frightened face that stared back at me. I tried to imagine explaining what had happened to Maria in the light, ironic tone in which

she narrated her own exploits. But those phrases sounded wrong, and their self-evident wrongness made me panic. I could already see how I might suffer for my rash actions. The tension between us fed the work, and there was no way of knowing what extinguishing that ambiguity would do to the paintings I hadn't finished, or how it would change my relationship with Elke, which I relied upon to live.

I took a few hesitant steps towards where Elke had retreated, not knowing what I would say. I stopped to gather my thoughts. I was conscious of breathing loudly through my mouth. I heard the bath taps twist on, and water begin to rush into the tub. A hand splashing as it tested the temperature. 'I hope you don't feel—' I began.

'Hannah,' Elke interrupted loudly, neutrally. 'You sound tired. Why don't you treat your landlady to your company this evening, and I'll see you tomorrow? Around ten?'

I walked in circles around Elke's neighbourhood. I felt heavy and dangerous, desperately contrite and willing to do anything for forgiveness. I would go to the Sibyl Vane, I decided, to watch Charlotte perform her Wednesday evening slot, as I had done for many months before the commission began and would continue to do for years to come, I hoped. On the way there, I tried to concentrate on the nudes. They were a certainty. They were solid and real. They were a part of me that was powerful and discerning. They were an idea of Elke. They were Elke observed from a distance. They were Elke as she would never be to me again.

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I WAS RIGHT that things wouldn't be the same between us. Not now that I could dream about my mouth on Elke's breast, the satin transparency of her skin under my tongue. We would fall silent as I painted, and there was no way of knowing what entered Elke's mind in those hours. Afterwards, she would move into her bedroom with her robe in her hand and I would follow. She liked to be kissed deeply and touched immediately – it was always over very quickly. She never made any move to undress me. What she wanted was to lie very still on her back and to have the full length of her body pored over. She would murmur indistinct words, tremble, her eyes pressed shut, then she would reach some private limit and stop my hand, rise from the chair, pull on her robe and offer a vague farewell. I would listen to the bathroom door click shut, my nerves erect, tingling, and would be overcome by a feeling of unreality.

I would remind myself of what Saul had said, that the body wasn't a diagram, and would repeat this axiom whenever necessary. I was behaving like this because of the paintings, that was my defence, and the paintings would soon be finished. I thought about the coming summer almost calmly. Afterwards, ordinary life would resume. Afterwards, I might analyse why I had been so reckless.

When all six portraits were done, Elke had the maids line them up against the wall in the dining room with her own Venus, the original. The nudes looked back at us inquisitively.

What mattered most to Elke was her own body in each painting. Her

head on the left of the composition, the feet on the right, the same in every picture – she was adamant about that – as a flower is always placed stem down into a vase. No polish on the nails, though Elke's changed colour each week. No blemishes, bruises or birthmarks.

Obedience to this gave me freedom with the rest of the composition. I decided each painting would be set at its own time of day. This was noon, the sun strong and clear on the skin, and this was a candlelit evening in which emotions were heightened, shadow contouring the flesh. The nudes lay upon different coloured silk, the creases of drapery distinct as a fingerprint. A letter had been dropped at their side. Or a book was splayed open. A hand brushed the edge of a nightgown. A bureau with its flap lowered, expectant, a quill in a pot. A chair was knocked on its side. Stages set for their own dramas. Windows looked out onto the landscapes of Elke's summer hikes and winter retreats. Water, mountains and trees. I travelled across the country like this, standing at the easel. The women's faces were always the hardest part. In the photographs, the women shaded their eyes, protecting themselves against the gaze of a future stranger like me. I was tender with them. They needn't reveal themselves to me: not yet, not completely.

'They're magnificent,' Elke said quietly. 'Better than Lely. Like Titian were alive and well in Berlin.'

I wanted to ask, had I truly captured these women's likenesses? Only later did I wonder about the dates of the photographs. One night I was struck with a darker thought – are they all still alive?

'Do you like them?' Elke asked.

Like! I nearly laughed. Compulsion, that was what I felt. Any swell of pride I experienced once I'd finished a painting vanished once I began the next. There was no other way to keep going. At that pace, with that intensity. All that emotion hit me now. These Venuses were miraculous and they were mine.

'Will there be other commissions?' I asked.

'I'm not sure,' she said, not looking at me. 'The monthly assistance will continue. You can paint as you did before.' She reached for my hand. Her fingers were cold, and her wedding ring colder.

'When will I see you again?' I said.

Elke let go of me.

'I'm unlikely to find a better seamstress,' she said, like this ought to be

flattering.

‘I have something for you,’ I said, trying to ignore this comment. I took a postcard from my satchel.

‘Ah, yes,’ Elke said to the postcard, and turned it over to appraise what I’d written on its underside.

It was Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun’s portrait of Marie Antoinette, whose patronage transformed Le Brun’s life. The queen holds a rose that appears plain, even insipid, next to her face. She wears a loose muslin dress that conveyed the women’s intimacy and shocked the French court. No corset, bodice or layers of skirts, it was a dress that could be taken on and off with ease, without maids. It was the closest Le Brun came to painting a nude of the queen. Le Brun made around thirty portraits of Marie Antoinette before she was executed. Many more might otherwise have been painted. I wanted to end the note boldly. To tell Elke that we were just beginning.

When I got back to the apartment, Olga was asleep with her bedroom door open. She lay on top of the covers in her housecoat, ready for any emergency. I didn’t switch on the lights as I moved down the hallway to my room. I took off all my clothes and stood in front of the full-length mirror. My body looked small and acquiescent, little more than a bolt of cloth. I thought about Elke’s stomach, its flat symmetrical shape, the arc of her waist, how even her navel emitted light, like a silver teaspoon polished to a sheen. Her body shadowed my own. What was mine and what was hers was no longer clear. The first mark on the canvas was always Elke’s hip bone, a dark curve.

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I HEARD THE iron shutters being lifted on the shop down the street and shortly afterwards, a knock on my door. It was quiet, unsure about disturbing me. Birds called to each other from the window ledge. The knock resumed more forcefully. I sat up in bed.

‘Hannah,’ Olga said through the door, ‘there’s a man who wants to speak to you. He says it’s urgent. He won’t wait in the lounge or return later. I said that we don’t – well, you know the rules in this house. He’s very rude. I’ve asked him to leave. He’s refused.’

I could hear the panic in her voice. I turned the bedside lamp on to indicate I had heard.

‘It will only be my father or my brother,’ I called back.

Olga was quiet, audibly doubting this claim.

‘I’ll send him through, if you’re decent?’ she said, and her slippers shuffled down the corridor.

I got out of bed reluctantly, light weakly tinting a wall of cloud visible above the opposite building.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Saul, stepping into the room. ‘I know not to come here.’

‘What’s the matter?’ I said, already afraid of the answer.

His hands shook as he handed me a copy of the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, a tabloid I sometimes read while waiting for Charlotte’s performances to start. It was open on a page of reproductions, an announcement about paintings and sculptures on display in the Prussian Academy of Arts. Amongst them were two of my pictures, a nude of

Charlotte and the double portrait of Olga and Maria I had painted just after my arrangement with Elke began. My work was being exhibited, I thought, Elke had fulfilled her promise. I glanced up at Saul.

‘This is lovely,’ I said, ‘but couldn’t you have waited to show me?’

Saul shook his head and pointed to the captions. These were not *The Bather* and *Repose in the Rooming House*, the titles I had given the paintings, but *Spree Pastoral* and *A Mother’s Advice*. It took me a moment to realize that a pinafore had been painted over Maria’s nude body. I stared at the grainy images and the text underneath.

In small print underneath my paintings was the name Answald Dietrich.

I dressed hurriedly, trying not to speculate on what this meant. It was probably very simple, I said to myself: a mistake had been made. Once I had calmed down slightly, I repeated this to Saul.

‘You haven’t introduced me,’ Maria said brightly when we emerged from my bedroom. ‘I am Hannah’s dearest friend. She tells me everything.’ She was leaning against the wall in her nightgown, arms folded, her eyes trained on Saul.

‘Later, Maria,’ I whispered.

‘No breakfast?’ Olga asked, dismayed, as we walked past the kitchen. Faintly I heard her say with considerable bitterness to the door after we’d closed it, ‘Did I not expressly say no male visitors?’

We called by Charlotte’s apartment. She opened the door sleepily and initially didn’t seem like she would let us inside. ‘What time is it?’ she kept asking. We had to read the captions to her while standing in her building’s hallway. Charlotte agreed with me that it would be resolved in tomorrow’s edition, my name announced in a meek little erratum. But she didn’t sound convinced, and pulled a coat on over her pyjamas and ushered us out without washing her face or brushing her hair.

I was too distracted to prevent Charlotte and Saul arguing on the walk to the academy.

‘What does Hannah want to do?’ Charlotte said to him. ‘It doesn’t matter what you think.’

‘This won’t be Elke’s doing,’ I said. ‘Perhaps I should telephone her, she might not know about it either.’

Charlotte and Saul exchanged a look.

‘I suppose you aren’t exhibiting under your real name anyway,’ Charlotte said to me. ‘Perhaps you don’t mind?’

I bit my lip to suggest I was reflecting on this. But really all I could think about was Maria, the dress painted over her nakedness, like she was a child not yet old enough to understand the need for modesty.

‘That was her choice,’ Saul protested.

‘Yours, you mean,’ Charlotte replied.

‘Fine to use another pseudonym – though it would have been simpler to have told Hannah first. But it’s not just that, is it?’ Saul said. ‘The paintings have been tampered with and retitled.’ Saul turned to me. ‘I assume Elke never mentioned him to you before, this Answald Dietrich?’

There was a slight pause in which I considered lying – I was shocked, oblivious, like them.

‘No,’ I said. ‘But I knew about him.’

I told them about finding the Muschler picture in Elke’s bathroom, the card with Dietrich’s name. I hadn’t mentioned this because I hadn’t thought something so inscrutable could be relevant, I said. I hadn’t wanted to worry them. We had come to a stop by then. I tried to manoeuvre us into a spot of pavement where we weren’t blocking the stream of commuters.

‘I don’t understand,’ said Saul quietly.

‘She likes the paintings,’ Charlotte said. ‘But the artist isn’t suitable for her audience.’

We all fell silent again.

‘Well, there’s nothing we can do,’ Charlotte eventually said. ‘The bars will open soon. We could celebrate. Hannah’s paintings are being exhibited in the Prussian Academy of Arts!’

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ Saul muttered.

‘What do you suggest?’ Charlotte said curtly.

Saul raised his hands in surrender. They turned to look at me.

‘We aren’t far,’ I said. ‘Can’t we just see the pictures for ourselves?’

We walked the rest of the way in silence.

Inside the academy, my pictures were hung next to one another close to the gallery’s entrance. The alteration to Maria looked rushed, amateurish. One of her nipples was still visible and now resembled a misplaced button. Charlotte maintained that there was something different about the way she looked in *The Bather*. Was it possible to alter what was invisible in the nude, I wondered, what lay beneath the surface, outside the painting’s reach or interest, the thoughts and feelings housed in a sitter’s head? Saul was

crouched by the corner of the painting and beckoned me down. *H.S.* had been erased, and over it were painted the initials *A.D.*

~

We left the gallery in a daze and went our separate ways. None of us wanted to discuss Answald Dietrich. I walked slowly back to the apartment. Clouds enveloped the tops of buildings as though air was slowly being let out of them and they dropped lower still until they were pressed against my head. I continued to agitate over the details. The paintings had forgotten me as I had tried to forget my family: they had asserted their new parentage, glibly, ungratefully. Perhaps my own small, necessary deceptions, the new names I'd assumed in the apartment and as an artist, had naturally and inevitably led me here, burdened with a name I hadn't chosen and didn't understand.

Olga was standing in the hallway with her arms crossed when I arrived back.

'You can't have men here,' she announced.

'He's my brother,' I said automatically. 'His wife left him. I'll tell you about it at dinner.'

Olga began one of her speeches about modern women's morals, softly and with her hand on my shoulder, like she was communicating something of great comfort to me. I managed to shake her off as I entered my room. I sat at my desk and tried to remain calm as I wrote.

> Dear Elke,
> I was alarmed to see my pictures displayed under a name unfamiliar to me at the Prussian Academy of Arts. Who is Answald Dietrich? I know of no artist by this name. Am I to believe his output is identical to my own? Or am I no longer being credited as the artist in my own work? Nor do I remember giving permission for alterations to be made. I would be grateful for some clarification.
> Regards,
> Hannah

I continued to hope that I had missed something obvious that would absolve Elke. I questioned why renaming the artist was considered a more dramatic alteration than putting a painting into a new frame. Both, I thought, might

be questions of taste. But these justifications failed to reassure me. Unhappily, I approached the truth. This had been Elke's doing. And Charlotte was probably right about the reason behind it.

The next day, I went to the museum to see Saul. As we walked through the galleries together, I thought about the changes I would make to the paintings if permission was unnecessary. I would paint over the cross and free Christ from his own death, I said to Saul. I would let him float amongst his disciples, arms outstretched in flight. All I needed was a brush loaded with white paint, and I could set to it as neutrally as the men up ladders washed the museum's windows. I needn't stop there. It wouldn't take long to ruin an entire century of painting. I was aware of Saul bristling as I said this. I added that iconoclasm was considered an effective form of resistance in antiquity. He gave me the rest of his cigarettes and told me to go back to the apartment.

A week passed before a letter arrived.

Dear Hannah,

I apologize for the misunderstanding. I was quite sure I had already mentioned this to you.

I am surprised you cannot see the advantages of my choice. In the current market, a German man is far more appealing an investment than a woman. If painting rather than fame is your focus, then I fail to see how exhibiting under another name poses a problem.

I have a young artist who assists me with the occasional alteration. He is top of his class at the academy and mentored by my husband, so you need not worry about damage to your work. Again, this is to ensure they have the broadest possible appeal.

You will be pleased to know that there has been a great deal of interest in Dietrich's work. Enclosed is an additional payment, by way of an apology. I hope you are working hard on your next picture. I look forward to seeing it.

As for your question about Answald Dietrich: he is nobody. A character, you might say, in a story all of our own, which makes me feel rather tender towards him.

Yours,

Elke

I realized I had hoped for another kind of letter altogether. This wasn't some intense, opaque fragment, the kind we'd exchanged on postcards. Dietrich might then have simply become part of the fantasy world that had flourished between us like a common weed. An intermediary between the rooms in which we had worked and talked and embraced and what lay beyond them. I wanted to cross out everything in the letter but the word tender. That seemed apt. The rest I refused to understand.

I put the letter aside and inspected the cheque. A year's rent, at least. Elke had never been so generous. It was an admission of transgression, but it wasn't a promise to heed my concerns. Money might alter my mood or encourage acceptance, but there was no option to say no.

I brought the letter to the club to show Charlotte. She glanced over it while she was applying her make-up and shrugged.

'A simple enough explanation,' she said, addressing the mirror.

'I don't believe her. We spoke about everything. She wouldn't have just forgotten to tell me.'

'She might be lying, she might not, what does it matter?'

We looked at each other. The dressing room had emptied out for the night's first performance. Its air of dereliction intensified as each woman abandoned her station. Their laughter was unusually shrill. Charlotte was twisting the tie of her kimono around her wrists. Pulling it tight, unravelling it.

'Two of them have stopped talking to me,' Charlotte said, gesturing at the mirrors around her. 'They won't be bossed around by a Jew, so they say. You should see their attempts to dance without my help.'

'Bad?'

'The women in the apartments upstairs could do better, and they're probably a hundred years old.' She let out a long breath as she pressed a row of false eyelashes onto her eyelids.

'I'm sorry,' I said. Elke's scheming no longer seemed so important.

'Stop responding to her letters.' She pulled a brush through her hair and we both watched blonde strands separate from her head and float to the ground. 'You'll find other work.'

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I DIDN'T STAY at the Sibyl Vane to watch Charlotte perform. I was restless and the wine I drank immediately gave me a headache. Near the apartment, I saw Maria at a kiosk buying a newspaper. I caught up with her and took her by the elbow. It was still light, one of those boundless evenings of pink air and bare skin at the height of summer.

'On your way home from work?' I knew the answer from her harried expression. It had been a long day – by her account, it always was.

'Typing until your nails bleed for a few marks. And it's deathly dull, naturally.' The newspaper was shoved into her bag. 'I need a drink.' At that she took my arm and charged across the road.

The bar she chose had just opened, and we were alone. The whole room smelt of cleaning fluid. We had seen very little of each other while I worked on Elke's commission, and I had only given her a basic idea of what it involved. I now told her about the nude portraits, and she was unfazed, as though she'd heard of identical arrangements being made all the time.

'She must have a fantastic physique,' Maria said, interrupting me. 'I would do the same in their position. In a hundred years nobody will know the difference. They do it all the time in talking pictures. One woman's singing voice becomes every woman's singing voice.'

I began to relax as Maria spoke. I enjoyed recounting this partial version of the story. Maria had asked a few perfunctory questions before launching into a description of how it felt for her to pose nude. Making scandalized

little exclamations at her own impropriety. I wasn't going to tell her about Answald Dietrich. Or what Elke really meant to me.

'I went to see Charlotte's show,' Maria said suddenly. 'Last week. I thought I'd see you there, but you were working, Charlotte said.'

'Did you like it?'

'It was certainly different.' Maria frowned, weighing up this judgement. 'She's tremendous fun. She took me to some extraordinary places afterwards. Full of characters.'

I nodded.

'Do you think you will marry that man? The one who came to the apartment. Charlotte says he's very sincere, whatever that means.'

'I don't know,' I said honestly. 'If I could still see Charlotte, maybe.'

'He doesn't mind about Charlotte?'

I shook my head.

'That's a funny arrangement,' she replied naughtily.

'That's not how it feels. I like them both. And they like each other most of the time.'

This was not the drama or subterfuge Maria wanted, and I sensed her lose interest. She nodded thoughtfully and took a long sip of her drink.

'I'm going to stop working at the clubs,' she announced, and sat back in her seat.

'Are you getting better money at the firm?'

'No.' She now had a glint in her eye. She wanted the details to be teased out of her. 'Hopefully I won't need to work there much longer either.'

'So, you've been offered another job?'

'I'm engaged to be married.' She watched me closely for a reaction. 'You're the first person I've told!'

I felt a twinge of sadness. How different the apartment would be without Maria.

'Congratulations,' I said bravely. 'I'll miss you, but probably not as much as Olga will.'

'Oh, don't worry – we aren't marrying tomorrow. There are all sorts of arrangements that need to be made.'

I liked seeing Maria relishing her good fortune. She took big, satisfied gulps from her glass of wine, ready to be pressed for more information.

'Who is he?' I asked.

'He was one of my regulars at the club. Known him for years. He's very

decent. He didn’t like my line of work. What a hypocrite, I’m sure you’re thinking. Well, it certainly won’t do once we’re married, he said.’ She smiled at the wall behind my head. ‘He has a beautiful house. I went round there last week. Even the servants have their own rooms. They’re bigger than ours in the apartment.’ She blushed, and her entire neck went red. ‘I can have you over for lunch at weekends. With Olga too.’

We finished our drinks and walked home arm in arm. Maria was dictating possible announcements of the engagement. I was correcting them, not always with serious suggestions. All around us couples shuffled along in unenviable silence.

Maria pinched my arm and gasped, remembering something.

‘I meant to ask, the woman who visited the apartment, that was Frau Grese, wasn’t it?’

I said it was, and Maria took this in quietly.

‘I know her,’ she said, ‘but I can’t place from where.’

~

As though nothing had happened, Elke wrote to me a few weeks later. She had drawn the silhouette of a nude on the seal of the envelope in red ink, which meant decapitating it when opening the letter. Her friends adored the pictures, she wrote, just as she knew they would, and they were interested to know more about the artist. I put the letter down. I thought about destroying it, even went to the lounge to light the fire. But, in spite of myself, their judgement pleased me. I read on, pretending that I might still throw the letter away at any moment. Her friends were surprised by Dietrich’s deep sympathy with his subjects, Elke wrote. How skilled to have gleaned so much from photographs they were frankly embarrassed to have parted with, and what an unusual man, when their own husbands rarely even noticed when they had dyed their hair. I skipped over a few lines that seemed to address me more personally. Was I well? Was I sad the summer was over? Had I thought of her? Was I working on new pictures? When I reached the end, I was trembling. Would I be willing to meet her for coffee and cake to discuss a small favour?

~

Saul said he probably wouldn't have noticed the small gallery exhibiting my work under Dietrich's name if it hadn't been his own nude on display in the window. A length of filmy silk had been inserted onto his chest and went all the way down to his knee. Over his cock, the material was the white of freshly starched undergarments, and it was opaquely painted, leaving nothing visible beneath. Around his eyes barely any of the white remained because of enlarged blue irises, his pupils the tiniest speck of onyx, done with the very end of the finest brush. Careful work, at least. After a moment, he noticed the skin all over his body was chalkier, powdered for a night under the stage lights. *White on white, like the American Whistler, a multitone of whites with the ghost of my flesh just visible beneath it*, he wrote to me that night. *Don't these changes alarm you?*

I didn't worry that the alterations made the paintings worse, though I knew that was what Saul meant. I could feel some other intelligence pulsing out of them and that was what disturbed me. I imagined telling Elke that she could rename and reattribute my work, but she couldn't repaint it. I already knew what her answer would be. I had spent years working on clothes that cost more than my parents made in a month, replacing one button for another, narrowing waistbands and shortening hems, removing stray threads. Elke had seen herself that such alterations didn't devalue those clothes to me. Quite the opposite. I was in service to those designers, their genius. Elke would assure me that I had finally triumphed over my circumstances. I was now the couturier rather than the mender.

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I SAW ELKE through the window gazing around her like the concept of a cafe was entirely novel to her. She hadn't removed her hat, a dainty straw boater with a red ribbon ill-suited to the arrival of autumnal weather. Café Dobrin wasn't the usual place for our meetings. Everyone around us was young and talking loudly. Elke startled when I tapped her on the shoulder, like she hadn't expected company. I was conscious of blushing at the sight of her face. There seemed little point trying to hide it. The sun had drawn out a single freckle like a dried seed between her upper lip and her nose. She looked beyond rather than at me and motioned at the empty seat opposite.

'It's lovely to see you,' I said.

I was embarrassed at how automatically I was placating her and how little she seemed to care. The comment vanished without any acknowledgement. Elke folded her arms, opened her mouth, and seemed to consider saying something. Instead, up went her hands to remove her hat. She pointed irrelevantly at a slice of cake on her plate. Cleared her throat.

'I hope you don't mind, but as I can't stay long, I thought I would put this to you right away. As I said in my letter, they're thrilled. They're desperate to meet Dietrich.'

On the walk there, I had rehearsed the charges I would mount against her. The contrition that would follow. I couldn't now remember how any of these phrases even began.

'I'm pleased for you,' I said. 'Though I'm disappointed for them that such a meeting won't be possible. Obviously.'

I smiled conspiratorially at Elke. She wasn't looking at me. She was dividing the cake unequally into two. Red lipstick had bled onto the skin around her mouth. I imagined licking it off like the residue of jam on a spoon.

'I've been able to show them photographs, but they're not content with that. They want the man himself.'

'Photographs,' I repeated. 'Of who?'

'Dietrich wasn't his family name,' she said. 'And he was Armin, not Answald. I thought about resurrecting him for this purpose, but I'm sure his parents would have made a fuss. I wouldn't expect them to understand. They were never fond of me.'

From her pocket she produced a photograph. She laid it carefully on the table between us, having brushed away a crumb and wiped the area with her finger. It had ragged edges, a dulled patina, like a devotional object, its surface worn away by repeated touch. It was the fiancé, dead for over a decade. Elke had shown him to me before. But not this image. His mouth was open in a toothy grin. Quickly – jealously – she took it back and returned it to her pocket.

Subdued laughter at the adjacent table between a young couple seemed to taunt Elke's offering.

'I don't understand what you're proposing,' I said.

I had only one thought in my head. Elke needed me. It didn't matter for what. My mind was leaping ahead to more sittings.

'I've told them Dietrich is in Paris until the end of the year.' She paused to put a morsel of cake into her mouth. 'Instead, he will offer them an audience with his wife. You would play her for the afternoon – and be paid for your time. I know it's rather eccentric. It won't require much of you. And I thought you might like to meet these women.'

She looked into my eyes for the first time that day. Hers were a watered-down blue, a weaker tint than I remembered.

'I would make sure you had a good time,' Elke continued. 'It would be like having lunch with your own girlfriends.'

I thought of Elke laughing as she wrote a postcard, ink smudged on her fingers. The sound of a cork being dislodged from a bottle: a short, hard exhalation of breath. How the drawn curtains meant the daytime hours were swallowed by night without either of us noticing. How Elke would say, 'Is that really the time? Well, another will do you no harm.' A glass filled to its

brim, a gramophone pausing as though for air. Lily pollen from a huge wilting bouquet trodden into the carpet. The way she gently kneaded my shoulder when she wanted me to drop my things and follow her to the divan. The quiver in her thighs, her fingers in my hair. There were several things I imagined saying in response. ‘Do you miss me?’ I pictured myself asking.

I leant forward onto my elbows and held my head between my hands. Hardly even thinking, wanting to appear as though I was. I wondered what would happen if I simply leant over and kissed her. Like it was my right, like it was nothing. I felt Elke watching me.

The truth was I didn’t even need to consider it.

‘I’ll do it,’ I said.

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26

CHARLOTTE WENT TO Vienna to visit her parents, as she always did for the High Holidays. Her father had been a violinist in the Vienna Philharmonic. Her mother was a flautist, who, though equal in talent to her father, Charlotte insisted, had never performed outside the drawing rooms of her family and friends. Her portrait had been painted by an important society artist, and Charlotte had once shown me a photograph of it hanging in the family home, which was even more splendid than I'd gathered from her descriptions. Her parents were the one subject Charlotte was always entirely earnest about. They were now elderly, though in good health, and she was their only child, a position Charlotte occupied with a solemn sense of duty, like she was the elected president of their small municipality.

When Charlotte returned, she wanted to meet in the daytime, unusually. She was pale, almost glowing with exhaustion and unhappiness. We sat on a bench in the park and watched people with placid expressions wandering in and out of the shade of trees. Charlotte was in the middle of a story about a dancer's courtship with a boy in the SS.

'I can't understand her. He sits there scowling through our performances. Oh, but he's awfully sweet when we're together, she says. It's only that he doesn't know much about dance. And as for the uniform, he just loves Germany.'

I had spoken a handful of times to this dancer. Her legs were still slightly bowed from having rickets as a child. She was never quite dancing in time

with Charlotte and the others. I had the sense that she was thinking of other things.

‘She knows she can’t dance forever,’ I said. ‘Then what will she do? Doesn’t she spend most of the week at a factory?’

‘I wouldn’t marry a pig like that just to have more free time.’

You wouldn’t need to, I thought.

‘I wouldn’t either,’ I said, trying to sound aloof. ‘But sometimes you can’t always act according to your principles. She’s probably thinking about basic things like food and rent.’

Charlotte looked unconvinced.

‘You would know, I suppose. Your work means you have dealings with all sorts of people. Who knows what views they hold.’ Charlotte gave me a pointed smile.

We looked at each other for a second in silence.

‘How are things with Frau Grese? Did you ever get to the bottom of that business with the name? Dietrich, was it? Presumably you’ve complained. Managed to break things off?’

Charlotte knew the answer and looked confident she would get it out of me.

‘Not yet,’ I said vaguely.

‘I didn’t think so.’ She looked away from me and when she looked back, she was frowning. ‘You’re very taken with her, aren’t you?’

I was grateful that a large dog bounded up to our bench at that moment. Charlotte fussed with its ears and it barked happily. I ran through the familiar defences in my head. Soon a squirrel interested the dog more than Charlotte. The mood soured again.

‘It isn’t about that,’ I said. ‘I need the money. There’s no work for seamstresses any more. I never have enough to pay the rent.’

Charlotte grimaced and looked at her hands. I watched her hold my evasions to the light.

‘I’m not a fool, Hannah. It can’t just be about money?’

I wasn’t going to tell Charlotte the truth. I let the inevitable, momentary temptation to confess pass through me.

‘Having a patron helps me to work.’

Charlotte sighed theatrically.

‘That’s it?’ she said.

I shrugged my shoulders. Another silence.

‘Anyway,’ I said, lowering my voice, ‘she has recently asked me to do something very unusual for her.’

Charlotte would like this, I thought. Deception with absurdist details. I told her what Elke had proposed, my starring role as Dietrich’s wife. I could see Charlotte fighting her interest in the story.

‘Alright, fine. That does sound amusing,’ she interjected. ‘What a farce. Heaven forbid they accept a woman might be capable of genius. Will you agree to it?’

I said I already had, and she laughed.

‘You don’t know much about Frau Grese, do you?’

‘I do,’ I said defensively – immediately regretting it.

‘You know what perfume she wears and how many inches her waist is. You aren’t familiar with the sorts of conversations women like that have over lunch.’

‘And you are?’

‘I have an idea,’ she said with another laugh. ‘Womanly matters. You must know the proverb pushed by our devoted Empress: children, kitchen, church.’ She continued to laugh. ‘Maybe I should come along and help. I could do a passable imitation of your chaperone. Maybe your maiden aunt?’

Hearing her laughter, I felt better than I had in weeks.

‘I know what Saul would think,’ I said. ‘He would tell me not to do it.’

I didn’t need her permission. I wasn’t even craving reassurance. I was saying this because I knew conspiracy was irresistible to Charlotte, and her acceptance of my choices would make my life easier.

‘We don’t need to tell him,’ she said, smiling.

~

Maria’s tweed skirt didn’t reach my knees, even when Charlotte pulled the waistband down so it sat on my hips. Sourcing a costume for the lunch was proving difficult. Maria and Charlotte stood behind the mirror studying me, neither appearing pleased with what they saw.

‘You’re built like a linden,’ Maria said, poking me in the back. ‘You’re enormous, impossible to dress.’

‘That seems the least of my problems,’ I said.

I told Maria I was meeting a man, personally chosen by Elke, who was interested in proposing marriage. Maria was delighted and showed virtually

no interest in the details, concentrating instead on begging me to accept. She assured me that love came afterwards, there wasn't a single woman she knew who would say otherwise. Besides, I had to be realistic. Given my age and circumstances, I was hardly being inundated with other offers. Charlotte gleefully corroborated the fiction, telling Maria that she had met the suitor herself, and thought he was unusually soulful for a dentist.

'We could have dinner at each other's houses,' Maria insisted. 'Our children could grow up together. And given Charlotte already knows him it wouldn't take much for her to marry one of his friends.' She grabbed my shoulders and twisted me around. Red lipstick was applied to my mouth. She frowned. 'He won't like lipstick,' she said to herself.

'Frau Grese wears it,' I said.

'You think he'll want something more natural?' Charlotte said to Maria.

'They like you to look athletic – healthy. Like you could throw a javelin,' Maria said cheerfully.

'Even at lunch?' Charlotte said.

Elke had taken weeks to find a date that worked for all her friends. A Friday in early November had been agreed on only to be cancelled at the last minute, and no alternative was proposed. By December, I had begun to wonder whether she'd decided against it altogether. As though intuiting my doubts, she'd telephoned the apartment to say that a car would collect me at eleven thirty on the tenth, and I mustn't be late. There had been nothing extraordinary in her tone, no mention of the deception she had planned. 'I'm looking forward to seeing you,' she'd said, and hung up.

Maria was removing the colour from my nails with a pungent cotton wool ball.

'Carl doesn't like varnish, says only whores wear it,' Maria said absent-mindedly.

As I pinned the last of my hair in the mirror, Charlotte appeared to remember something and headed into the lounge. Maria was recommending I tell this man that I wanted five children in as many years if I could manage it. The sound of Charlotte talking to Olga was faint beneath the gramophone. A few minutes later Charlotte came back into the room smiling.

'We could all do with a refill. For courage. Maria, would you?' Charlotte passed her our glasses. Once her footsteps reached the kitchen, Charlotte said, 'I would have given you mine, but I lost it a few months ago. Didn't

even pawn it as I'd intended. Fitting really. I told Olga I needed it for an audition – stave off a director's advances.'

I wiped the ring against a handkerchief and slid it onto my finger.

'I meant to say,' Maria said as she returned with more cognac, 'if he's terribly old that isn't a problem either. I hear they're much more appreciative.'

I leant backwards into her fur coat just as a car horn sounded outside.

'Say as little as possible,' Charlotte said. 'Only smile if he's smiling.' She hugged me tightly and whispered into my ear, 'Please don't react if they say anything shocking.'

'Charlotte is right,' Maria added. 'Men don't like to be laughed at.'

Their faces appeared at the window as I closed the door to the car. They were talking animatedly, happily, laughing about something, taking turns to glance out to see if I had left. From that distance, they looked identical, small and fair-haired and slender, figurines inside a glass-fronted cabinet.

An unfamiliar route was taken through Elke's house, led by a maid whose flaxen hair was lifted with pins, revealing the rusted clasp on a string of slim coral beads. Women's voices could be heard from the long corridor. Through doors I had never seen open, we arrived at another dining room, evidently the formal one in more regular use. Large windows with plush brocade curtains looked out onto a garden of birch trees like spotted ermines.

A long walnut dining table was only half filled, although the entire length of it had been dressed for guests. The women fell silent when I appeared in the doorway, then all began to talk at once. They were, as I had guessed, older than the photographs suggested, but only by a few years, and they still looked younger than Elke. Their faces were highly coloured in the manner of polychrome sculptures. Two were heavily pregnant. At a glance I could already see all the details I had gotten wrong. Faces were always more interesting than photographs suggested. I stopped staring when I noticed one woman gazing back at me with interest. After that, I wasn't sure where to look. I turned towards a gramophone that was playing a passage of Beethoven and tried to collect myself.

Elke sprang up and took my hand. She didn't directly acknowledge me, but her thumb pressed into my palm, a private greeting. I decided to look at her without any hope of a reciprocal gesture. I couldn't tell whether the pink of her cheeks was from rouge – applied carelessly, urgently, without a

mirror – or from blushing. She appeared unusually flustered. There was a tremor in her hand she tried to hide by squeezing mine tighter. The silk blouse was only partly tucked into her skirt. Wouldn't it be helpful, I thought, to take the hem and press it neatly underneath her waistband, only lightly grazing the skin of her stomach?

'Frau Dietrich is delighted to meet you all,' Elke said. 'I'm so pleased you were able to make it, Helga.' She turned towards me, making clear the terms of my reinvention.

I said nothing.

Elke pressed me into a chair. Her hand roved idly across my shoulder blades as she took her own seat. 'Beautiful plates,' someone said to Elke, and everyone enthusiastically agreed. A similar comment was made about the glassware. 'Very fine.' Elke received these remarks expressionlessly. There was something gravid in the atmosphere, like the women had been drinking for hours, although from the look of the tablecloth, they had only just arrived. A woman who I thought of privately as the Beech Venus began by thanking Herr Dietrich. (I instantly forgot their names, so it was easier to identify them like this, by the trees or bodies of water I had used in their paintings.)

'We are so delighted to have Herr Dietrich's lovely wife for the afternoon.' The Beech Venus said this slowly and loudly, as though my body was a costume, and Dietrich was listening underneath it, ready to reveal himself.

'Your husband will visit us when he returns to Berlin, won't he?' asked the Fir Venus.

I began to nod, wondering how many European capitals Dietrich would visit before the wives would develop any suspicions.

'Do you get jealous with your husband spending all day looking at undressed women? I'd be appalled if I found my husband in one of those clubs. You know the ones.' This was the Rhine Venus, who twisted in her seat and raised her glass to be refilled with wine.

I made a pained face of agreement.

'Don't be outrageous, Gerda, it isn't the same thing,' the Oak Venus replied. 'Do excuse her,' she said, turning to me. 'I'm quite sure all of our husbands are familiar with those venues.' Laughter confirmed their husbands' weaknesses.

I still hadn't said a word. I glanced at Elke, who rubbed at a smudge on

her glass with a napkin. Whatever anxiety she'd felt when I'd arrived had now dissipated: her charade was proving a success. She appeared attentive but at ease, a mother presiding over a brood of excitable girls. As the silence stretched on, Elke turned from her glass to give me an encouraging look.

'He takes his art very seriously,' I said. 'It would be the same if he were painting a mountain. Base desires don't come into it.'

The women murmured approval and nodded their heads at each other. This was enough engagement with me for the moment. I exhaled slowly and smiled at Elke, who fiddled absent-mindedly with the cutlery. Our eyes met. Hers were tired, empty. She made a final straightening nudge to the knife and moved her hand in the direction of mine. The tip of her little finger brushed my wrist. I watched her hands retreat under the table. There was a heated discussion about one Venus buying another home on the coast ('You don't need a third, surely?' 'We have enough furniture for five!'), followed by remarks about where in Europe they were all summering the following year. Conversation then drifted on to a dinner held in honour of another woman's husband the previous week.

'There's no belief in a spiritual life after death for them,' the Oak Venus said as she checked her teeth in a spoon. 'That was only explained to me the other night. Without that there's little point in behaving nicely or fairly. That's how Jews have seized so much power. They're fearless in the way animals are.'

I was determined not to react. I thought about a heavy object being dropped into the ocean, how it would sink until its shape had completely faded from view, how the water's surface would rearrange itself, appearing unchanged. I sipped my wine. Gave a small, curious nod.

'Who told you that?' This was either Fir or Beech. 'I don't remember that from Wednesday's speech.'

'What's his name, the small one with the shiny face?' the Oak Venus said. 'Werner had only left me alone for a few minutes. Obviously unmarried from the look of his socks. He said that the way I listened was very impressive for a woman.'

A silence followed in which each woman swallowed a large mouthful of wine.

'Did you work before your marriage?' the Beech Venus asked, turning to me.

‘I was a seamstress in my father’s shop,’ I said without thinking.

‘Your family work in the garment trade?’

I was staring at my glass, so I didn’t see who said this. But I caught its edge of vehemence, mistrust. I felt Elke stir in her seat.

‘Her father is a master tailor with twenty or so men working under him,’ Elke said. Her maternal look had returned: she alone could clear up this misunderstanding amongst her wards. ‘Her grandfather had the honour of supplying the court of the Kaiser. They work out of a beautiful private villa, close to the Tiergarten.’ Elke paused and put her hand delicately on my shoulder. ‘Helga is being modest. They’re a good family, I know them well. If any of you ever made it to St Mary’s on a Sunday, you might meet them.’

It all unravelled suddenly – a pin removed from a lattice of fabric. Given she spent over a year visiting my family’s shop in the Scheunenviertel, it was obvious that Elke knew I was Jewish. She had used my new surname without question, and I had naively accepted her compliance, assuming she’d forgotten Sherman. I hadn’t considered that Elke was aware of my reinvention, or that she knew why it was necessary. I tried to catch Elke’s eye. But she was still gazing at the women, who were satisfied with her clarification, who were already on to something else, another party, another perceived slight.

They proceeded to talk happily amongst themselves. Elke hardly spoke and held herself apart from them. Her cheeks were slightly flushed from wine, and she patted them with the heel of her hand.

The Gutach and Kinzig Venuses conferred with each other before addressing me.

‘Will you have children?’ the Gutach Venus asked, her hand on her rounded stomach, like a woman demonstrating how best to wear a bracelet at a jewellery counter.

‘Of course. With God’s grace, it will be soon,’ Elke answered.

‘Has he had many lovers?’ the Rhine Venus asked. A single wiry hair on the end of her chin convulsed, excited.

‘You can’t ask her that,’ the Fir Venus responded. ‘All artists do. They have greater appetites for women even than ordinary men.’ The excitement of having contributed faded quickly for this Venus. ‘That’s just what I’ve been told,’ she added anxiously.

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘I would never ask a man a question like that.’

Noises of agreement circulated around the table.

‘Unless they’re sexual deviants,’ the Kinzig Venus said reasonably. ‘Many of them are, apparently.’

There was a collective intake of breath. ‘Vile,’ I heard one woman mutter to another while I stared into my lap. A refrain of disapproval swelled amongst the Venuses. Only Elke didn’t react. When I glanced up at her, she didn’t appear to be listening to us. From the corridor behind us came the low reverberation of laughter. A squeal followed by chatter and shushing. I longed to be in that conversation instead. Elke readjusted the pins in her hair rather than turn around.

‘That will be the maids with the tea service,’ she said under her breath.

‘Are there many other women with portraits like ours?’ the Oak Venus asked. ‘My husband collects art and has never heard of any Dietrich in Berlin, which he thought was unusual.’

‘Our dealer assumed the name was a pseudonym,’ the Beech Venus said. Her tone was blandly factual, but I saw Elke stiffen. An accusation had been made.

This seemed to interest all of them. One after another they set their forks down and waited for my response. Elke didn’t reply immediately. But I saw her lips twitch.

‘It isn’t surprising that your husband, who is no expert, knows nothing about Dietrich,’ Elke said coldly. ‘And Margrit, I don’t know anything about your dealer. But they are an avaricious and competitive breed, and prone to envy. You know the sorts of people who get involved in the art trade. The corruption that goes on with so much money changing hands. How else do they keep their apartments on the Bleibtreustrasse?’ Above the collar of her blouse, her skin was red all the way up to the tips of her ears. Everyone around the table was quietly studying their plate.

I suddenly had an urge to speak.

‘My husband normally paints traditional society portraits,’ I said, as though Elke hadn’t spoken. ‘Women in fine gowns, family heirlooms in their ears. Men and their dogs. This was before we moved to Berlin. He paints to commission, so it’s rare for his works to go on the market. I say it’s because they’re too much loved. These are some of his first Venuses. The only other nude by his hand is of me. I sat for it the night we were married.’

The way these women looked at one another confirmed this was the right answer. Six separate wedding nights pruned of their customary

disappointments entered minds weakened by Riesling at the same moment. I lowered my head, turned slightly in Elke's direction. The heaviness and heat in her face had gone. I watched as she set her knife down, her grip noticeably relaxed, and smiled.

'Might we ask Herr Dietrich for more paintings?' the Beech Venus asked.

I didn't wait for Elke to answer.

'Of course,' I said. 'Anything you want.'

'We can't demand too much of Herr Dietrich,' Elke replied, glancing over at me, not disguising her surprise. 'He will be very busy with his family now as we approach Christmas. As we all will. We can write to him in the New Year.'

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27

CHARLOTTE CALLED TO say that she wouldn't be at the Sibyl Vane that night. She wasn't leaving her apartment, and I shouldn't either. 'Awful,' she kept repeating in a whisper, 'it's awful.' 'Yes,' I agreed, 'yes.' I kept my tone light, neutral. I could hear Olga chopping vegetables non-committally in the kitchen, as though recreationally, humming happily. The radio was broadcasting the same announcement it had featured for hours: a new chancellor had been appointed. Suddenly Olga was behind me.

'You'll be in for dinner tonight, won't you?'

I kept the phone pressed to my ear. 'Yes,' I repeated into the receiver, and nodded at Olga.

'Good. It's a special day. We must mark it. We'll have the good schnapps – yellow plum, your favourite.' Olga's mouth spread open to a grin. The humming resumed as she waited for my answer.

I gritted my teeth in a way that I hoped conveyed enthusiasm.

There wasn't much more to say. Charlotte remained on the phone quietly for a few more minutes. Finally, she hung up. I put the receiver down with a sigh and heard Olga stop what she was doing. She said my name in a slow, questioning tone: the celebrations could begin. I grabbed my jacket and went straight out the door.

The sky was clear and so cold it stung my teeth and ears. Men pulled their coats tighter and clutched their hats and women hurried in their wake. They weren't going home. They stood in tightly packed rows along the streets. It was remarkable what had happened, someone said. Nods and

murmurs. ‘Not soon enough,’ a man replied. From underneath a hat came the question: would the procession come this way? It would, a voice answered, at least they had heard as much on the radio. They exchanged pleasantries about the weather and now they were craning their necks to conjure the procession from the darkness. They were happy to wait. The uniformed men would soon come. Black leather that shone in the street light. The glint of hundreds of belt buckles. The songs it thrilled Olga to hum. Everywhere the flutter of red and black flags.

I ran all the way back to the apartment. I didn’t look around me as I went. Nor did I think about what waited for me there. I simply persuaded myself that the procession might pass our building, but it wouldn’t troop up the staircase and down the corridor into my bedroom. Olga and Maria were talking in the kitchen and called to me as I entered, continuing to call my name as I took a few long strides to my door. I got into bed without eating or washing or undressing.

I was woken by the radio. It was still dark out. On he went, the new chancellor, accompanied by the roar of applause. I put my blanket over my head and waited for sleep. After an hour, Olga was still bellowing over the announcer. Did Maria want more schnapps? I decided that I would turn off the wireless, and I would lift Olga and Maria like throw pillows from the sofa, return them to their bedrooms and switch off the lights. We would all sleep that way.

I stood in the doorway to the lounge. Fear stirred in my chest. In many ways, it was an ordinary scene, almost indistinguishable from other nights. Olga had pulled her armchair up to the hearth and was poking at a fire that was already huge and hot. Maria was sat on the sofa with her hands in her lap. The main distinction was the volume of the radio, which I hadn’t known could be turned up so loud. A brooch pierced Olga’s bosom, a horse in chipped dark Bakelite that bared its teeth. On Maria’s lapel, a bird of prey spread its wings. Neither acknowledged my presence. The clock on the mantelpiece stated it was five minutes to midnight.

Maria reached for a bottle of brandy and lifted it to her mouth. We had sat in that room only a month ago and nervously exchanged gifts. Six metres of purple silk to make a dress; the same false eyelashes worn by Josephine Baker. I watched her throat quiver as she drank. I had seen Maria perform this very gesture – how many times? All those nights unspooled before me, with all their confidences, spoken and unspoken. But the flick of

her arm now appeared alien, her wet mouth full of ill portent. If this drink was much like any other, had I ever known what Maria was really thinking?

Mother and Father and my brothers were in bed, I assured myself. They were dreaming and in their dreams they were falling from a height, or they were conversing with the dead or they were holding a balloon with a colourful ribbon. They were somewhere else.

‘Isn’t it a little late for all this?’ I whispered. Coaxing them, my disobedient children. ‘Aren’t you both tired?’

Announcements continued to resound throughout the room. Our lives would be different now. Our pride would be restored. Our nation had been returned to itself. No more betrayals. We had reason to be confident. The people had taken notice.

~

The next morning, I couldn’t bear to look at the dish of stewed prunes Olga had left on the kitchen table for us. A note next to it read, unbelievably: *Have gone for a walk. Down to the Tiergarten if my knees manage it. What a fine, clear day to meet the new Germany! Olga.*

Charlotte didn’t answer the telephone when I rang. The air in the hallway was stale, the lounge in disarray from the night before. I needed to get out the apartment. I walked to the Sibyl Vane with my eyes trained on the ground, a hat pulled low on my head over my ears. I still caught gusts of excited speech and laughter. Around me, commuters moved lightly on their feet. I felt I was regarding their shoes from below rather than above. The bounce of a polished black brogue, a snakeskin pump, the wrinkled leather of an old steel-toe boot.

In Charlotte’s dressing room, vacant wig stands were arranged in conversation around her place at the table. Everything was gone, her costumes and make-up and photographs. Inside an empty tub of Vaseline inscribed with Charlotte’s initials were three white pills. I thought about swallowing each one, and Charlotte materializing before me. Young girls in sequins pushed past, and, acting like I wasn’t there, squabbled openly over a man in the audience. (‘He’s older than your father.’ ‘He’s not interested in virgins.’)

The bar was empty yet tense. The barwoman didn’t take her eyes off a pile of receipts. She didn’t acknowledge our familiarity with each other. I

was an enemy until proven otherwise, as we all were now to each other. Charlotte had asked for a break, she said. That was yesterday. No idea when she would be back. She didn't say.

I went back to the apartment and wrenched off my clothes. I lay in bed and thought about how nice it would be to sleep. I listened to the clock on my nightstand strike off the afternoon hours. Olga was talking loudly and happily on the phone. At five, I left again.

It was getting late, and the streets had filled with young men. They shouted and moved as though at war with the air around them – punching and kicking at streetlamps and bins. I felt lucky that I could spend the first evening after the chancellor took power with Saul, drinking unpleasant-tasting white wine. The rule was that we could only talk about art. I liked listening to myself read aloud from a book about Rembrandt, and this filled the hours after dinner. Dread rolled in anyway. When Saul went to draw a bath, he left his notebook open on a copy of Dürer's *Christ Among the Doctors*. I read the entry beside it.

> It's said fifty thousand Brownshirts marched through the Brandenburg Gate that night. From what I saw, that isn't even an exaggeration. They sang like their voices alone were enough to destroy the nation's undesirables. I took my camera, but each time I raised it to my face I felt I was using it as a shield, one which was utterly ineffectual in the circumstances. I never saw myself in the Jew that whispers deceit into Christ's ear, who Dürer evidently finds so repulsive. Now, however, I am less sure. Those two vampiric little teeth, the gruesome underbite, the cadaverous tinge to his skin. That's how they perceive us, certainly. It hardly matters any more whether we agree. For the first time, I am truly fearful. Like a descent into hell is upon us.

Only drawing helped. Lines that moved towards a consoling form, a place of safety – a woman undressed in a room.

When I went back to the apartment to get a change of clothes, I told Olga I was keeping away because I was sick. I had a chest complaint, I said, and I didn't want to infect her or Maria. Olga received this news brightly. Stood permanently upright like a patient recently released from a back-brace, Olga had never looked better. When I bumped into Maria, we talked as usual

about her fiancé. How many boars he shot on a hunt, how much each weighed, how awful the meat was to eat – he gave it to the servants, they seemed to enjoy it. But what I had seen that night made me question whether our cordiality masked real questions we couldn't ask one another. Are you happy or are you afraid?

I received a letter from Charlotte that weekend. The first sheet was just listings at the local cinema copied out by hand. The real letter was written on a smaller sheet folded tightly into a square.

> In case Olga reaches the envelope before you do. Let her think seeing *The Blue Light* is our only concern. I took a train to see my parents. Neither are well. I spent the week making them lunch and watching them fuss over dinner and putting them to bed the moment it was feasible that they might sleep. They're afraid. Their friends have begun to leave Germany. One couple packed up and left their house in Westend the next day. I've told them they must follow my aunt to America. Perhaps this is something we might consider? I will telephone the apartment when I'm back. I suggest we take greater care with our letters from now on.

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‘ARSON,’ I HEARD Olga bark into the receiver, ‘but he won’t stand for it. He’s had it with the Communists. There’ll be no more of that nonsense.’

Charlotte and I were in my bedroom. We were pretending to be occupied with something other than the effort of ignoring Olga.

At the back of my sketchbook, I drew the outline of the Reichstag building faintly. I thought about the young man found at the scene of the crime, dressed only in a pair of trousers, like a sword in its sheath. I tore the paper from the spine, lit a match and set it alight. I heard Charlotte sigh as I put the charred remains out the window.

‘I’m going out,’ Charlotte said, and stubbed her cigarette out against the desk. She put on her coat and stood at the door. A scarf wrapped around her head couldn’t conceal that she’d been crying. ‘I’ll be at my apartment. I can’t stand it here any more.’

I could see why. Olga crashed around the house at all hours accompanied by the blaring of the radio, which could follow her everywhere since she’d purchased one for her bedroom. In the mornings she sang as she scrubbed floors still spotless from the previous day’s work. Saul suggested lacing her tea with tranquillizers, and I seriously considered it. Olga was possessed by an energy that was hard to watch, and, as weeks passed, to share the apartment with, even with the door to my bedroom closed. In a mahogany-panelled office on the Wilhelmstrasse, I imagined a man in a foreman’s uniform turning a crank or pressing a button, and Olga springing into action. Even Maria kept out of the common areas in the daytime.

There was a gentle tapping on my door. Maria said my name quietly. Usually, she would just burst right in.

I lifted myself out of the chair and opened the door. Maria was stood on the threshold like she had pressed herself against the door to listen for signs of life. She looked me up and down and folded her arms, drumming her fingers against her elbows.

‘Are you alright?’ she asked. ‘Charlotte was in a foul mood.’ Her eyes went over my head into my bedroom and sceptically back to my face.

‘Oh, yes. I’m fine.’

‘Olga says you aren’t feeling well.’

‘It’s just a chill. All I need is some rest.’

Maria frowned. We weren’t accustomed to lying to each other.

‘Will you be joining us for dinner? I would like it if you did.’ She leant towards me and lowered her voice. ‘I’m telling Olga about the wedding. It’s not long now. I ought to give her enough time to find another girl.’

I had planned to lie in bed all evening. Tomorrow I would try to paint. Maybe just my own body reclining on the bed. Anything to keep in the habit of it. Elke had written in the middle of January to say she was pleased with how well the lunch with her friends had gone, and to expect a call from her soon. There would be a further commission, the letter insisted, that wasn’t just idle talk from women who’d had too much wine. I hadn’t got round to writing back by the time the chancellor was appointed, and after that it no longer felt important. A week ago, she’d called to say she hadn’t forgotten about the requests for Dietrich’s new paintings, but her question was, had I? I didn’t say that I hadn’t picked up a paintbrush in weeks. Or that the mere thought of it exhausted me. Painting meant long hours alone with my mind, and that had become a frightening place. Phrases from the radio and newspaper headlines and the swollen light of hundreds of torches held aloft.

‘Please, Hannah?’ Maria touched my shoulder.

~

Olga stuffed boiled potato into her mouth, her eyes filled with tears, as Maria listed the rooms in her future husband’s house. When she got to the kitchenette of the guest suite, Olga had sufficiently gathered herself.

‘His family are German-born?’ Olga pushed a chunk of pork to the side

of her plate.

‘They’re all buried in the same cemetery in Munich,’ Maria said. ‘For hundreds of years. He’s very proud of it. They’ll need to extend their plot at this rate. His cousins are fertile as sows.’

Maria asked me that night to paint a portrait to mark her engagement. Her fiancé would pay me, she insisted, but I wanted it to be a wedding gift. The next morning, I watched Maria struggle into a chequered dirndl with her yellow hair scraped underneath a white bonnet. Laced too tight, she was red-faced and unusually quiet. I thought about portraits used for marital exchange hundreds of years ago in the courts of Europe, celebrations of men’s wealth and women’s virtue. I wondered if a marriage portrait could instead embody a wife’s fallibility. Or her mystery. Maria positioned herself primly on a chair in the lounge.

‘It will be lonely without you,’ I said.

I had privately assumed that this engagement would prove a passing whim. It seemed like a relevant detail that we hadn’t yet met Maria’s fiancé. But the date was now set: September.

‘Olga will find someone else,’ Maria said.

The only thing worse than being left alone with Olga was the prospect of Maria passing on her room to some young Brownshirt fanatic. I ought to have left Olga just as I did Mother, without apology or equivocation. Only irrational hope held me back. I carried on believing that disaster could be forestalled by maintaining a fantasy of normality, by refusing to confront how frightening life had become.

‘Aren’t you interested in meeting him, my fiancé?’ Maria said. She was trying to sound light, jovial. But I knew her too well not to notice the tinge of annoyance.

‘Of course I am,’ I said. ‘I was waiting for you to introduce him.’

Maria appeared to consider this. ‘You’ll get married too, won’t you?’

‘Probably.’

Maria rubbed her eyes and let out a long sigh. I knew she was waiting for me to say more. We listened to birds interrupt one another over the sound of traffic.

‘Are you looking forward to it?’ I said instead. ‘Your husband’s house sounds nice.’

‘Houses,’ Maria corrected. ‘We’ll only use the house in the city when he wants to go to the opera, or I need to go shopping. Our home will be in

Lübbenau. You can walk to the canals. And the forests are nearby too. You wouldn't believe how quiet it is there, it's so peaceful.'

'But nowhere to get a cocktail after midnight.'

Maria didn't laugh. She turned the ring on her finger. Light hit the diamonds and threw shining fragments all over the skirt of her dress.

'I was born in Berlin, you know,' she said. 'Skalitzer Strasse. I sometimes walk over there and look at the girls playing outside the buildings. They all look like I did. Hungry and needing a bath.' She was smiling in a way I didn't recognize – a resigned smile, the smile of an anaesthetic setting to work.

It was the first painting in a long time I had to destroy. I added layers of clothing to Maria's body, believing I had painted her too small. When it was finished, she was so swaddled in fabric she no longer looked human. She was a single rounded shape, a spindle. Painting over it didn't seem like enough. When Olga and Maria were asleep one night, I watched from the hearth as the canvas was licked by flames that ate it greedily from all sides. Maria only asked after it once. When I told her the painting hadn't worked, she accepted it like this outcome was to be expected.

'Oh,' was all she said. 'What a shame.'

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WHEN OLGA PASSED me the receiver Elke was already in the middle of a sentence.

‘I was very impressed with your performance at lunch. Thinking on your feet.’ The receiver crackled in the silence that followed, the sound of Elke thinking. ‘You might be wondering about some of the things I said that afternoon,’ she said quietly. ‘I was being rather judgemental, you might say. Generalizing.’

‘Maybe,’ I said. I strained to remember December. Her remarks had seemed tame compared to what her friends had said, and none of it rivalled what I’d heard on the radio lately.

‘I don’t always mean what I say around them. You see, they tell their husbands everything.’

‘Right,’ I said.

‘I actually rather like everyone I’ve met in the art trade. Very interesting characters, that’s my opinion. You see, I’m able to be honest with you. Never with them. Do you understand?’

It pleased me to think that ours was the only deep and authentic intimacy. It was the first comment she had made that might be interpreted as acknowledgement of our being lovers. I hesitated. I thought that this part of our relationship would end with the completion of the commission. But what if I was wrong?

‘You don’t talk freely to your landlady,’ she continued.

‘I suppose,’ I said, returning to the conversation. ‘So, you were acting –

like I was?’

‘That’s an intelligent way of putting it, yes.’

‘Okay. Well, it’s nice of you to call and tell me that.’

I knew this wasn’t all Elke had to say. I leant back against the wall, twisting the cord of the telephone across my chest, and waited. Elke cleared her throat.

‘My friends liked you very much.’

‘I’m glad.’

‘It only made them more eager to meet Dietrich. I agreed to a sitting with him next week. With Margrit. She was at the end of the table in blue.’

It was her tone of nonchalance that took me aback most.

‘I don’t understand,’ I said. I kept my voice low, conscious of Olga in the neighbouring room.

‘Margrit would like to be painted again by Dietrich. Nude, but she would like to model herself this time.’

‘Dietrich doesn’t exist,’ I said. I glanced over my shoulder. Olga was in the lounge with the door wide open. She had turned the wireless off and had been compressing the same pillow for several minutes, like it was a body in need of reviving.

‘Yes, he does, I’m speaking to him. You will paint Margrit. We only need to dress you up as Dietrich.’

Her blitheness, its adamance – it was so misplaced I wanted to laugh.

‘You can’t be serious. That would never work.’

‘With a few precautions it will,’ Elke said. ‘Dietrich is an eccentric, as many artists are. We’ll say he’s shy and easily distracted. He won’t engage in idle chatter, and he paints behind a screen. We could switch the lights off. Margrit will be on the other side of the room. It seems rather simple to me.’

‘She’s that gullible?’

‘She has no reason to suspect you’re Dietrich. You don’t understand these women like I do. They’re all ignorant enough that they’d believe any nonsense we offered them about the whims of artists. She would be no more surprised if I told her Dietrich insisted on painting in the nude himself.’

‘It’s a ridiculous suggestion,’ I said.

‘You don’t think it might be rather fun? Like putting on a play?’

I recognized her tone, its mischievousness. I saw her teeth, her lips moving over them, as clearly as though she was in the room with me.

‘I’ll put on trousers, but I refuse to impersonate a man’s voice.’

‘I’ll tell her that conversation is out of the question. She will have met men like that before. The silent, irascible type. Her husband isn’t too dissimilar.’ She paused. ‘I’ll be there too to ensure she doesn’t bother you.’

This appealed, and it was obvious from the throwaway manner in which Elke presented it to me that she knew it would. I thought about what I would do otherwise. Another week struggling to find diversions, unable to even look at my paintbrushes.

‘You said next week?’ I said eventually.

Elke went quiet, considering the question.

‘Wednesday. She wants to be in her own house. You’ll enjoy it there. She has excellent taste. I’ll send you the address later today.’

I imagined a house that was merely a replica of Elke’s, indistinguishable down to the maids, and Margrit undressing to reveal a body that had been identical to Elke’s all along.

‘We can have a drink afterwards?’

‘Why not,’ she replied. ‘You’ll have certainly earned it.’ After a pause her tone was softer. ‘Thank you for agreeing to this. I hoped you might.’

When I put down the receiver moments later, I had already begun to question whether the proposal was even about Margrit. I doubted any of these women required another nude. Really, it was Elke who needed a reason to keep seeing me.

But I also had the feeling of being tested. Elke wanted to gauge my trust and devotion, how far I would go to please and spend time with her without any clear reward. I seemed to be intent upon proving to her that no distance was great enough. I would go further and further still, and no matter how far I went, the horizon would continue to recede.

~

Saul cracked open the door to his room. There was a small cut under his cheekbone from shaving he hadn’t bothered to cover. He beckoned me inside, brandishing an empty bottle of schnapps. Stray feathers from an old eiderdown drifted another inch across the floorboards as I entered, marshalled by the draught. The photographic reproductions had been taken from the walls. I was determined to ignore the strange atmosphere, and found myself strolling around with a determined cheerfulness, like I was visiting a patient in a sanatorium.

‘Are you redecorating?’ I said. ‘I like to do that every so often. But Olga won’t let us paint the walls.’

This was met with silence. Saul carried on like I wasn’t there. He reached into a cupboard for another bottle of spirits. He set a glass on the table he didn’t bother rinsing from the sink, and began to pour with a shaking hand. He took a step backwards to assess the amount and decided more was needed. It was eleven in the morning. He had been uncharacteristically terse on the phone. He needed to see me, he’d said. I’d walked to his apartment terrified he had found out about my continued involvement with Elke. I will stop, it will never happen again, I saw myself saying, like a husband caught with his mistress.

‘Would you like any?’ Saul asked. He was pouring himself another. ‘I could mix it with something to make it more palatable. You like ginger ale, don’t you?’

‘It’s probably too early for me.’

I noticed a self-portrait I’d painted with Saul covered by a stained dress shirt. I lifted the sleeve and saw us as we had been a few years ago in that room. Saul was nude and I wore rose-coloured jodhpurs and a pale silk shirt that clung to my ribcage. I had the air of the cosmetics counter, like I was an especially elegant brush used to apply iridescent face powder.

‘I spent too much time looking at that Christian Schad self-portrait,’ I said.

‘We look young, don’t you think?’ Saul said sadly. ‘I liked your hair like that.’

Full of love and light and simplicity, that was how we looked. I could hardly remember how that felt now.

‘Has something happened?’ I asked.

Saul placed his glass down with emphasis and turned to face me.

‘They’ve dismissed me from the museum. Effective immediately.’

‘Who has? Why?’

‘New legislation has been passed. To restore balance, it’s said. Sounds very reasonable that way, doesn’t it? Jews control the professions, our chancellor claims, so no wonder thousands of German men can’t find work. What a clever idea it is to manage that by dismissing us all at once.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘But maybe—’

‘Maybe it’s not permanent?’ he interrupted. ‘Isn’t that what you’re always saying?’

I saw this was the wrong approach. I sat down and left a long silence. Saul continued to move seemingly at random around the room.

‘What will you do?’ I said eventually.

‘Caravaggio fled Rome after he was sentenced to death. Continued to produce remarkable work in Naples. In Malta, later in Sicily. With the little time he had left.’ He was slurring his words, not looking at me.

‘You’ll leave Berlin?’ I tried to keep the panic out my voice.

‘Joe says New York is wonderfully exciting. I could learn English. Why not?’

‘What about your mother?’

‘She’s making the arrangements to emigrate. She has family in Holland.’

‘You would leave me to Olga and Maria?’

‘You have Charlotte.’

‘For now.’

‘Meaning?’

‘She probably has her own plans. With someone we’ve never met.’

We smiled at each other. Charlotte enjoyed this joke even more than we did, making wild predictions for her future, and it had become a favourite pastime when all three of us needed cheering up.

‘The lucky girl will be a former lover of Garbo – a dancer too, but a disciple of Duncan, not Wigman,’ Saul said. ‘They’ll drive each other mad. They won’t own a radio or ever buy the newspaper. They’ll live off jarred asparagus. In a room at the top of the Borsig Tower. Charlotte will hunt wood pigeons from the window. Something like that.’ He chuckled and went away to refill his drink. When he returned, he looked different. ‘Of course, you would have to come with me,’ he said.

We agreed that we would follow our friends that had already gone to Paris and Amsterdam and New York. We were willing to do what it took to learn another language or another trade and forget what remained of our lives in Berlin. I threw myself into these fantasies, and not just because I wanted to please Saul. I had to believe another life was possible. But in some other part of my mind, I saw my family engaged in their own version of this conversation, agreeing to hold their ground, to keep sewing and mending for people they’d known their whole lives, and I knew I didn’t mean what I was saying.

I thought about Caravaggio, who would celebrate the completion of a painting with a night of drunken violence, replenishing some store of

intensity that was necessary to begin the next painting. Years after he was forced to flee, on the way back to Rome with the pardon he longed for, he died in the throes of a fever. Brutality, exile, itinerancy, they were somehow necessary to Caravaggio's genius, and I could see why this now appealed to Saul. But he wasn't built that way, and neither was I. Berlin was all I had ever known. I pictured my mind falling away from my body like tender meat from the bone the moment I crossed the border.

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AT JUST AFTER seven, Elke was waiting in a car outside my apartment building. It was a dull morning, but she was still luminous, as though generating her own light, more three-dimensional than anything in her surroundings. Her blouse was the same colour as her hair, and looked as though it would feel the same between my fingers. I stood awkwardly on the kerb in the hope that Elke would exit the car to embrace me, putting her hand on the small of my back to manoeuvre me inside. Instead, I watched her gesticulate at the driver, who sprang out from his seat and onto the pavement. He opened the car door and beckoned me over. The interior smelt strongly of cigarette smoke.

‘Good morning,’ she said, addressing the back of the passenger seat.

‘Will this do?’ I said, gesturing vaguely at my appearance.

Elke had instructed me to wear a shirt and trousers. No make-up of any kind. Hair plastered back with pomade. She swivelled in her seat to look at me. She frowned.

‘You can undo the top button,’ she said. Not waiting for a response, she reached over and did it herself. The blunt ends of her fingernails brushed my neck. She sat back in her seat and assessed the results.

‘Better?’ I asked.

Elke narrowed her eyes, then appeared to remember something. She reached into her bag and produced a large black velvet cap. She asked me to wear it low over my forehead. ‘Like this,’ she said, and tipped the cap

forward. Once I had it on, she pulled it down further until I could hardly see.

I had tried to remain light-hearted as I dressed. I now lost all hope that this plan wasn't totally farcical.

'Perfect,' she muttered. 'And these, put them on when we're outside.'

A pair of large leather driving gloves. A scarf that Elke demonstrated how to wear – wrapping it round the lower half of my face.

'I thought there would be no need for a disguise,' I said.

'Your hands are a giveaway,' she said tightly. 'And your mouth.'

'I hope Margrit won't be looking so closely. But I suppose I don't know what you have planned.'

Elke sighed and when she replied it was with a tone of forbearance I'd heard her use with the maids.

'When we arrive at the house, the staff will greet us. Margrit will be ready for the sitting in the drawing room. I've told her she can say hello to you but not to expect a response.'

'And when it's time to paint?'

Another sigh. Her fingers flew to her furrowed brow.

'That won't be a problem. The room is dark. You'll paint as you always do.'

'But I've never painted like that, I need light,' I said.

This time, her sigh was accompanied by a glance of consternation. I was embarrassed to already be pleading with her.

'You'll manage,' she replied, and patted my hand.

The drive was a short distance that we could easily have walked. Elke was telling a convoluted story I couldn't follow that involved Margrit and the maids, but I sensed her mind working over something else as she spoke. Her anxiousness surprised me. Her assurances, their veneer of competence, meant I hadn't actually anticipated the sitting going badly. I could suddenly imagine how simply my assumed identity might unravel. What then, I wondered. Would I be handed over to husbands rattled by the deception, wanting revenge for their foolish wives? As I sought desperately for a way out of the day ahead, the car pulled into the driveway of a villa on the Tiergartenstrasse. The lawn was clipped to the length of a man's stubble. Flower beds were filled with raked soil and nothing else, like dug graves. Dozens of large windows drank in the morning light. Under the miniature portico at the entrance, I saw Elke rehearse a face of greeting.

‘Don’t mope, you’ll draw attention to yourself,’ Elke said to me as she rang the bell.

Maids moved down the hallway in old-fashioned black and white uniforms. They were beautiful, and young, as if Margrit and Elke hired these women from the same professional school. Elke shrugged off her coat into the waiting arms of the tallest amongst them, and I shook my head when she went to take mine. Elke elbowed me in the side when I followed this with what I hoped was a gallant nod. The maid blushed, then began to lead us through the house.

Every room we walked through appeared larger than the last. I stared at the plush weave of Turkish rugs underfoot, the single large picture centred on every wall, the hanging tapestries that brushed against the floor that made rooms feel insulated against any incursion. I regretted ever having agreed to this and found it harder as we got deeper into the house not to succumb to panic. The spectre of Margrit’s husband floated behind every door we passed. It seemed unlikely that he would be as easily deceived as his wife.

‘Here we are, Herr Dietrich,’ Elke announced. The light noticeably dimmed as we crossed a threshold. I was light-headed, like some essential part of myself was being drawn from my body out of my head, and there was no telling what would replace it.

I mumbled agreement. Elke closed the door behind us. I looked around tentatively. Thick velvet curtains were drawn across a long row of windows and let in no light from outside. A faint desk lamp illuminated an easel behind a folding screen. On the other side of the room, another lamp lit a divan. Even when I strained my eyes, little else about the space could be discerned. Margrit was somewhere in the room but out of sight. All I could make out of Elke was her long silhouette. The darkness functioned as an opiate, numbing sensation. I began to feel calm. Perhaps Dietrich was here beside me, and this was his arm around my waist, waiting to be introduced.

‘Might I shake Herr Dietrich’s hand?’ I heard a woman’s voice ask.

To my surprise, Elke said yes.

Elke grabbed my arm and yanked it forward. A rustle of silk announced Margrit’s approach. Margrit avoided my face and took my glove, pressing her fingers against the leather. I recognized her from the lunch as the Beech Venus, the woman who was closer to Elke’s age with the long forehead, its length accentuated by a high hairline and eyebrows so fair they were almost

invisible. Satisfied with the exchange, Elke stepped away from me. Margrit's other hand moved past the glove underneath the loose cuff of my shirt, and having found my wrist, damp from perspiration, held it firmly as though searching for a pulse. Alarmed, I withdrew my arm and put it behind my back.

'It's such a pleasure to finally meet you,' she said, not seeming to notice. 'To have you in my home. I know how busy you must be. I cannot thank you enough.'

'We should make a start,' Elke announced. 'Dietrich cannot stay late. He must go home to his lovely wife.'

There were Elke's hands again, tugging at my elbow, asserting jurisdiction.

'I explained your preference for these working conditions,' she said to me while still facing Margrit. 'Low-lit was your phrase, wasn't it? Our model's husband was very amused by these demands. He seemed to think something salacious must be going on.' Elke produced laughter to insist the opposite. 'It instils your paintings with an almost – I don't know, how would you describe it?'

I was terrified this was addressed to me, but Margrit answered.

'A quality of silence,' she said.

Elke sat down. She motioned me towards the easel. The canvas had been primed, the oil paints mixed on a palette. There was a stout little glass filled with turpentine, a palette knife, a few fresh rags and the brushes arranged in descending order of size. Everything was organized precisely as it had been when I had made these arrangements myself in Elke's home. I knew Elke had done this herself that morning as she'd mentioned it in the car, wanting, I'd thought, to be praised for her initiative. For a moment, my fear abated. I was touched that she had paid such close attention to my habits.

I watched Margrit through the rectangular slit in the screen. She stepped through the lamp's dim emanations of light slowly and carefully until she reached the divan. She was fully illuminated in a pink silk robe. She glanced with apparent embarrassment in my direction as she slipped it off. With an awkward twist of her body, she threw her ankles to the end of the divan and slumped onto her shoulder. I had forgotten what it was like to paint a nude from life who wasn't Elke. Margrit's breasts hung over the small paunch of her stomach, creased like raw silk. She was soft and full everywhere that Elke was sinewy and hard, and it made Margrit look

younger undressed than she had appeared moments before. A tight gold bangle shone on her wrist, and drew attention to her hands, the absence of a wedding ring. Dark hair had been plucked around her crotch into a triangle. ‘The girls use compact mirrors, they’re at it backstage before shows,’ I remembered Charlotte telling me, laughing.

I let Margrit make more small adjustments to her hair and posture. I picked up the brush and tried to forget my surroundings, as I had done years ago in the shop with the sketchbook in my lap.

Over the next week as I painted Margrit, I was chaperoned wherever I went. Elke even accompanied me to the bathroom, fearing a transgression I hadn’t the ingenuity to conceive. Margrit became visibly more at ease in her nakedness each day and would remain seated, swapping polite remarks with Elke, her robe still on the floor, as we gathered our things to leave. Occasionally I would receive a direct question from Margrit that Elke would quickly answer. One night, Margrit wriggled into her robe as we pushed open the door and asked if Herr Dietrich would oblige her with a parting embrace. Elke had said no before Margrit had finished speaking and made an excuse about his wife as she hurried me into the hallway.

The circumstances were impractical, every aspect of the painting took longer, and time did little to accustom me to the strangeness of working in the dark. But when Elke guided me out of the house at just after five o’clock, when she whispered praise and directed the driver to the Troika, I would reflect on the day’s work and feel proud of my achievements. I was certain I was getting better. A kneecap no longer resembled a balled fist. The bones of an ankle were not as delicate as those of a nose. I discovered how to keep the limbs warm and moving when I could only ever paint them still. The way the veins tinted the flesh almost imperceptibly with colour – that I hadn’t quite mastered. But I would keep trying.

Occasionally I turned to Elke hours into a sitting and she would be looking at me. Not with boredom or anxiety. Proudly. With real warmth, smiling. Standing as though to get a better view of Margrit, she would place a hand on my back. And as she took her seat again, her finger would briefly touch my neck, my shoulder. When it was time to leave, I would follow Elke to wherever she wanted to drink a glass of champagne, always somewhere noisy and busy. We were never alone together. I didn’t mind, even when it became clear that we would only talk about the sitting and the pleasure her friends took in my other pictures. Circular conversations,

unfeeling as dialogue read from a script. But it was enough. We had to sit very close and talk loudly into each other's ears to be heard. A driver would collect us just as the crowd began to thin in the bar. We would take a long route back to my apartment, and Elke would let me fall asleep on her shoulder, dreamless sleep she would wake me from gently as the car came to a stop.

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Saul was so preoccupied with his dismissal he didn't seem to notice the odd hours I kept. He was too miserable to do much but listen to the gramophone, smoking and emptying bottles of wine into glasses he didn't clean from night to night. There was no need to repeat the lie about doing laundry. He didn't ask where I had been.

'The Fräulein called the house,' Olga shouted to me one morning as I was pulling on my jacket to leave. 'Maria took a message.'

'Apparently, you've disappeared,' Maria said, leaning through the doorway of the kitchen.

This was unusual enough that I called Charlotte back from a telephone box at a restaurant on the way to see Margrit.

'You're awfully busy lately,' Charlotte said without saying hello. 'Is it something for her?'

'It's a commission for someone else,' I said. This wasn't a lie, I thought.

'You might want to tell Saul. He's worried. I had to convince him that you weren't filling Frau Grese's house with more and more pictures of herself.'

Two weeks later the painting was nearly finished. When I arrived outside the villa Elke was pacing the gravel pathway. Gnats drifted from the garden in kaleidoscopic patterns that flecked the air. I watched Elke swat her arm. As I got closer, I sensed an edge to the gesture. Her hand moved too quickly and forcefully, her skin red from the impact. An air of derangement hung about her, like the maids had forgotten to wake her at the usual hour. I had never seen her hair look as it did, unwashed, with strings of it hanging limply at her shoulders. The night before, at the Troika, she had insisted on staying after I left. She just needed one more drink, she said.

'Good morning,' I said. 'The gardener could set traps for the gnats, no?'

'You've had enough time with her,' Elke snapped. 'This is the last sitting.

I can’t spend all my time on this, unlike you two.’ She flicked a cigarette to the ground and stamped heavily on it with the heel of her shoe.

‘Are you alright?’ I said.

Elke rubbed her eyes, which were pink. The skin on her face looked thin, almost transparent, without the usual layer of powder.

‘You can finish it today?’

‘I can try.’

Elke nodded. She folded her arms and gazed off towards the house. She was shaking her head as she turned back to me, responding to something imagined, something she’d proposed to herself.

‘The painting is good, don’t you think?’ I said.

‘It’s beautiful,’ she replied.

We stood staring at each other. I sensed something going unsaid. Elke took a deep breath. I cleared my throat and smiled at her. She slapped her elbow, then inspected her palm: she had caught nothing. I watched the gnats continue to hover by her head.

‘I’m not feeling entirely myself, I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I have a lot on my mind.’ She attempted to smile back. ‘Come, we don’t have long.’

Unusually, Elke didn’t put her hands on me as we entered. She groped for a handkerchief and covered her mouth. I went to touch her shoulder, and she recoiled.

‘Are you sick?’ I whispered. ‘Was it the champagne last night?’

She ignored me. The maid and I exchanged a glance. Elke moved awkwardly towards the drawing room, not looking behind her to check if I had followed.

As I entered the room, I heard Elke explain to Margrit that this would be the last sitting. I watched Elke take Margrit by the arm and steer her through a far door. Whatever it was that I mustn’t hear, it didn’t take long to communicate. After a few minutes they returned, and Elke was paler than ever.

Margrit undressed and, with her newly acquired poise, placed herself across the divan with the same care she’d used to fold her robe.

‘I’ll miss this,’ Margrit said. ‘Isn’t it strange how silence can feel more enriching than conversation? It’s like we’ve never stopped talking. In my ordinary life, the opposite is true.’

I looked at Elke, hoping she would respond. She was twisted in her seat with her head against the wall.

The hours passed quickly as I assessed what could be done in the remaining time. The classical landscape Margrit wanted as a backdrop, which she had illustrated to me with foxed eighteenth-century prints in their frames, would have to wait. When Margrit was called out by a maid to answer the telephone, I asked Elke whether the Italian details needed to be substituted with something more local, as Dürer did when he put German oaks in his Venetian *Madonna and Child*. I thought the question might interest her – it was similar to what we chatted about over drinks – but she panicked.

‘It’s essential. Haven’t I stressed this point already? It must be German. Use my photographs if necessary. He’ll study even the rocks. Do you understand? Everything, to the tiniest speck of dirt.’

Overexerted by this interaction, Elke soon fell asleep. She startled awake when a maid arrived with a tray of food at midday.

‘Could I possibly?’ Elke pointed at my tinned meat sandwich. She had already swallowed her own in two bites. I pushed the plate towards her. She ate each quarter faster than the last. Not long afterwards, she stood up.

‘I need to lie down,’ she whispered to me. She was pale as bone and shivering. ‘You have a lot to do, just concentrate on that. I trust you won’t do anything rash.’ She put her hand to her temple and winced. I helped her open the door and watched her stagger down the corridor towards another wing of the house.

As in a bar, where the atmosphere can shift with the departure of a single person, the room felt instantly different in Elke’s absence. Margrit let out a sigh and massaged her head with the tips of her fingers. It hadn’t occurred to me that she might have felt observed too.

‘I know you’re a woman,’ Margrit said.

I wasn’t surprised enough to feel fear. From the beginning I had wondered whether Margrit and I were both performing for Elke’s benefit. My unnatural silence in ill-fitting men’s clothes, Margrit’s bland acceptance of the eccentric setup.

‘I knew when I saw those nudes,’ she continued. ‘A man wouldn’t paint a woman like that, not even a homosexual.’ She sat up, rearranged her hair. ‘Elke imagines she’s a good liar, but she isn’t. She forgets how well I know her. I wouldn’t worry about the others. I doubt they have guessed. They are extremely foolish.’

I remembered her touching my wrist under my shirtsleeve, inquisitive,

firm, and her other hand obediently shaking mine.

I moved under the light of the lamp.

‘Elke can’t know,’ I said.

‘It’s you,’ she said, aghast. ‘The wife.’

I thought about this quickly. ‘Yes,’ I said.

‘You’re the painter?’

‘We must continue to attribute these works to my husband.’

‘You’re very good. It’s a shame to let your husband take the credit.’

‘I don’t mind.’

‘I hope he’s grateful. Mine would certainly find a way not to be. Men are like that, aren’t they? Oblivious to the good that’s right in front of them.’

I gave a non-committal shrug.

‘Are you happily married?’ she said.

‘Yes,’ I said quickly. ‘Can you promise this will remain between us?’ I didn’t like where the conversation was going. Every creak radiating from the rooms and passageways around us threatened Elke’s return.

‘Of course. I’ve enough secrets that another makes no difference.’ She stood up, undid the catch of her watch and placed it face down on a lacquered side table. I had never questioned her keeping this on while she sat for me. I liked the impresssion it gave that she wasn’t ever fully undressed. ‘Could I come closer, and see you properly?’

I didn’t have a chance to say no, she was already walking towards me. The panic I thought I had quashed in the first sitting flooded back. Margrit walked past the chair where her robe was folded. I watched this happen with confused resignation. She pushed her chest out, aware of being watched. That was when I understood.

‘Elke will be back soon,’ I said.

‘I doubt that,’ Margrit replied. ‘I expect she’ll need to sleep it off.’

Perfumed flesh, perfumed breath. Her hand was steady and cold when she stroked my cheek. Coarse blonde hairs coiled upwards and away from her head. From a high window, I heard swallows move from branch to branch of a large tree deep inside the garden, calling out to one another, continuing a performance they had begun as I entered the house that morning. How cumbersome my own body was by comparison, how unfree. Margrit placed my hand on her breast. She raised her mouth up towards mine. I let her kiss me.

I was grateful to feel nothing. I ceased to exist for the ten minutes that

followed. I thought only about leaving and never coming back.

Margrit's cheeks were still flushed when she pulled on her robe and hurried through a door in the corner of the room. A clarity of purpose knocked me back into myself: I needed to get out. My fingers felt numb, prosthetic, less sensate even than horsehair and wood. I packed everything away with exaggerated carefulness. I didn't look at the canvas; I would have to balance it on my knees, wet, in the taxi back to the apartment. I pressed a damp cloth I thought I hadn't used against my face. Later I saw it had coloured my cheeks a rusty brown.

When Elke finally returned, she looked considerably worse.

'I've had the maid call a doctor,' she said. 'You can make your own way home.'

I went to touch her arm, and Elke staggered backwards, as though losing her balance. She must have seen my expression, as she appeared to remember herself, and took a step back towards me.

'It should be obvious to you that I'm sick,' she said curtly. 'I wouldn't want you catching anything. Now, did you finish the picture?'

~

After that, my letters to Elke went unanswered. They weren't urgent, just questions about the picture, which a maid collected a few days after the sitting. Was she satisfied? Was Margrit? I waited for the post desperately, and still nothing came. I became paranoid that Elke ignoring me was punishment for what had happened with Margrit. But as more time passed, I began to wonder whether she knew something would happen and had designed the sittings around that certainty.

One evening I was sketching in my bedroom, trying not to think about any of this, when I heard the telephone ring. I remembered with a twinge of unease that I hadn't added Margrit's wedding ring to the painting, though Elke had reminded me twice. When Olga knocked on my door, I assumed the call would be from Elke. Excuses ran through my head. I would return to Margrit's house and add that lick of paint, and it wouldn't take more than an hour. Olga scowled, which I knew meant it was Saul. This should have been a relief, but my heart sank.

'I'm sorry to ring this late. Something awful is happening on the Opernplatz. It's students. Worse than anything imagined by Breughel.' (It

was this comment, delivered seemingly to one side of the receiver so it was softer and less urgent than his other remarks, that suggested Saul had been drinking.) ‘Tell me you won’t leave your room this evening? And that you’ll come to my apartment tomorrow?’

I could hear Olga and Maria moving around their bedrooms. No music, just the familiar sounds of the chancellor issuing from their radios. I got into bed and closed my eyes. I would forget what Saul had told me and the effort of this might drown out the voices on the radio too.

I hadn’t slept when Charlotte returned from the club. Close to dawn, she pushed through the door to my bedroom, falling with her entire weight into the dressing table. This hadn’t been my intention when I’d given Charlotte a key – insurance against me ever losing mine. Mumbling to herself, she removed her shoes and crashed against a low stool and side table. Her speech was jumbled but only getting louder and louder.

I switched on the lamp. ‘Charlotte, please, everyone is asleep. What’s wrong?’

Charlotte had arrived at the Sibyl Vane at the usual time, she said, only to find it completely empty save for two young boys huddled in the corner, weeping. The dancers had been backstage talking animatedly. It was remarkable how quickly a wheelbarrow overflowing with paper turned to dust, they’d said. As though anything weighty and unwanted in life could be destroyed with ease: your lover’s wife, your childhood, bad audiences. The girls had ignored Charlotte when she tried to ask questions. But they had let slip that what they were describing was happening nearby. Fine, Charlotte had decided, she would go looking for it herself.

The next part Charlotte found harder to relay. Brandy was required. I watched her swallow a glass and wait passively for me to pour her another.

There had been so many people ahead of her it had taken a while for her to see what was happening at the rally, she eventually said. Books were being thrown onto a fire before a baying crowd, condemnation screamed into a microphone. The noise had surged once a bust of Hirschfeld was added to the pyre like the maimed head of an enemy. It was this sight that had driven Charlotte back to the Sibyl Vane. She had drunk whatever spirits she could find in the cupboards until the barwoman had locked up the building. She hadn’t wanted to be alone. Charlotte was talking calmly now. Literature was idolatry and marriage was the only salvation from degeneracy, that was what they meant by this pageantry. Saul was right, she

said. They would destroy everything dear to us and they would do it without compunction.

I nodded like this story was normal, an expected outcome of a night's performance. There seemed to be no other way to respond than to get back into bed. But Charlotte wouldn't even remove her coat. It was getting light out when she went into the lounge to switch off the wireless. She slammed about, intending to wake the others. Eventually we slept. Only a few hours later, the same tinny, aggrieved voices were coming from the wireless, which had been turned back on, although it seemed neither Olga nor Maria were awake. I lay staring at the ceiling, paralysed by misery and fear. I began to shake Charlotte, gently as I would when dislodging dust from a garment.

'What?' she winced.

'Saul wants to see us,' I whispered.

'A reprieve from the wireless?'

I nodded.

Saul was leaning against the wall outside his apartment smoking when we arrived. Saul and Charlotte hugged, and she began to cry. Saul put his cigarette into her mouth. His suit smelt of rain and smoke.

'I wore it last night. Slept in it too,' he said. 'I was afraid. Even getting undressed seemed like a show of vulnerability.'

In Saul's room the photographic reproductions were back on the walls in different arrangements. Madonnas formed a chorus line under the cornicing. The crucifixions were grouped together above the sink, spattered with water and toothpaste. He saw me looking and put his arm around my waist.

'No use exalting suffering any more,' he said. 'Besides, we must be quite sure now that God is dead.'

'You changed your mind?' I said. 'You'll stay?'

'I wasn't really serious about it.' He reached up to press a peeling corner of Palma Vecchio's *Rachel and Jacob* against the wall.

'Even after last night? You were right, it's only getting worse.'

'Have you considered that it might not be permanent?'

I laughed weakly at this, and he smiled, pleased. He tilted his head towards the wall of pictures. He scratched his head, withdrew a pencil from his inside pocket. I watched it motion through the air, checking symmetries, lines of sight.

'Some friends have decided to stay,' he said. 'There's talk of staging

plays and concerts. Exhibitions too. Could be interesting.'

'Just for Jews?' Charlotte asked quietly, from the other side of the room.

'They'll need tailors, for the stage productions,' Saul said to me.

I knew this wasn't incentive enough for Saul to stay. I smiled at him in a way that I hoped expressed gratitude, rather than the shame I was beginning to feel. All those hours spent with Elke, a part of my life he knew nothing about. Lying about it was easy because he trusted me and because I had convinced myself the omission was a way to make money and paint while keeping everybody happy. I would tell him, I decided – not today when our nerves were frayed – maybe tomorrow. Soon, I would explain everything.

Saul put a record on the gramophone, Stravinsky's *Firebird*. I wanted to tell him how clearly I remembered first hearing that melody four years ago in this room, watching him trim a reproduction with a small pair of scissors on a night so warm he worked in a vest alone. I tried to imagine moving backwards into that moment, the past inching closer like it was a physical place no less accessible to me than a tram stop.

Charlotte mixed all three of us a drink. A tremor in her hands had worsened since we arrived, and she was struggling to hold her glass steady. She said something inaudible to herself and cleared her throat.

'How did you leave things with Elke?' Charlotte said as she poured herself another measure into a larger glass, taking care to look at the bottle in her hand rather than at me.

I felt myself go cold. I swallowed the denial that rose in my throat.

'Weren't those pictures the extent of it?' Saul said.

'I thought I saw a letter addressed to her in your room,' Charlotte said. 'It didn't seem to be about painting.' She was slurring her words, but now looked at me steadily.

'I ended things like you told me to,' I replied, gesturing at Saul. 'You were both right, it was a bad idea.'

Charlotte could have exposed me to Saul in that moment, and I was resignedly waiting for it to happen. But she pursed her lips and gave me a hard, unhappy look I understood as an agreement to secrecy.

'That wasn't her letter then?' Charlotte asked.

'No,' I said.

In the silence that followed, I sensed them both waiting for me to elaborate. I knew that even the simplest lie would appease and reassure them. But my mind was blank. I looked at Saul, who had been drumming

his fingers against his temples, his head in his hands. He slowly raised himself up.

‘Whatever has happened in the past,’ he said carefully, ‘it seems likely now that we can’t trust Frau Grese. From your stories she seems rather carefree, so we might guess where her allegiances lie. Do you understand?’

I nodded, solemnly meeting both their eyes. But in the back of my mind, I was composing another letter to Elke, finding the right words to reawaken her interest.

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I HAD STILL heard nothing from Elke a week later. I was working on a small canvas, roughly the length of my forearm. I would present her with a gift, an ex-voto of sorts. A portrait of her left hand, unadorned by any jewellery, shown just above the wrist. I wanted to reproduce a gesture of blessing in the manner of a holy icon, but found I could only paint her hand as it appeared to me in our sittings. Her fingers outstretched, their tips curled upwards. It only took me a few days. I decided against writing to her again. When I called her six times over as many hours, nobody answered, not even a maid.

I walked there scarcely aware of what I was doing. On the street outside her house, I noticed through a crack in the curtains that the light in Elke's bedroom was on. Vines carpeted the facade, overgrown around the windows of the lower quarters where I imagined the maids were stored. The canvas was so light in my bag I periodically forgot it was there. For a while it seemed nobody would answer the door either, but I had nowhere else to be. I was sitting on the step when it finally opened. I had scratched a few lines into the paving stone with my latchkey as I waited. As I stood up, I saw they formed the letters H and S. A maid with a long neck and big grey eyes studied me blankly from the doorway.

'She isn't expecting me,' I said. 'Tell her it's Answald Dietrich.'

Without acknowledging the comment, the maid disappeared down the corridor. As I stepped over the threshold, the noise of the city drew away

and was replaced with a subtle metallic clicking. A hand drumming against a surface, impatient.

Kurt stood at the foot of the stairs. In a dark brown suit that looked ironed into a geometric shape, he resembled the large grandfather clock to his right, with its broad, blank opalescent face.

‘Oh, hello,’ I said. ‘I’m sorry to disturb you.’

‘I’m afraid my wife isn’t well,’ he said, addressing my shoulder rather than my face. ‘I wouldn’t want to wake her, not even for,’ he swallowed, ‘Dietrich. I should have written. She mentioned you might require her for something.’

‘It isn’t anything serious, is it?’

‘It’s just nerves,’ he replied. ‘She has a nervous disposition,’ he added.

I pictured Elke on the floor above under a heavy quilt, perfectly well but sweating and pale, refusing food, radiant as a saint.

‘I have something for her,’ I said.

I reached into my bag and Kurt flinched as I handed the painting over. I was glad to have wrapped it in tissue paper. He immediately put this package on the table behind him. Discreetly he rubbed his hands against his trouser leg.

‘I will make sure she receives it,’ he said tersely. I thought he would usher me out, but he didn’t move. Ignoring the awkwardness between us had become another way he might assert dominance. ‘Are you keeping well?’

No: that was the real answer. Only that morning I had watched Olga in a silk dressing gown tearing pages from a novel. Her light body moving arbitrarily and tirelessly around the apartment like an insect. A pile of books in the lounge, pages torn from their binding, the blackened grate choked with paper.

‘Your wife says you’re happy with my work,’ I said.

‘Very much so.’ He lit a cigarette and flicked the match onto the floor. Smoke enveloped his head.

‘It was clever of her to create Answald Dietrich.’

‘It serves a purpose,’ he said, sounding bored. ‘An unusual hobby for a woman. The other wives play bridge.’

A maid advanced slowly through the door with a pile of kitchenware in her arms, and Kurt barked at her to get out. In a voice that barely penetrated her surroundings, she apologized.

Kurt turned back to me with a smirk spread across his face.

‘The name she gave him is amusing,’ he said.

‘After Marlene, the film star?’ I replied.

Kurt blinked, a realization seeming to dawn on him. His smile grew huge and terrifying.

‘Did my wife tell you that?’ he said. His tone made clear he knew she hadn’t.

I shook my head. He began to nod and when he spoke it was in the tone of someone sanely explaining the ways of the world to an innocent.

‘Women have such fun together, it’s in their nature to like their own kind. I know that as much as the next man. My wife is especially fond of female company.’ No longer addressing my ear, he looked suddenly into my eyes. ‘But they don’t talk about everything, do they? For that they have husbands.’

I was blushing so fiercely the tips of my fingers had gone pink.

‘But if it isn’t Marlene Dietrich?’

‘You must know Dietrich Eckart. A playwright primarily, though he turned his hand to many things. He ran the newspaper for a time.’

Eckart, prolific propagandist, former mentor to the Führer. Imprisoned after the putsch, he died on his release from Landsberg a decade ago. But he was impossible to avoid nowadays. His words were put to music and sung; his poetry reprinted; his ideas quoted in tabloids.

Shock gave way to shame. How humiliating to have considered the name our secret. Given Marlene had presided over our first touch, Elke’s hand on mine in the cinema. It had been an illusion. There was my Answald Dietrich, and there was Elke’s, as distinct from one another as we were, and only hers had any life or reality.

‘My wife must have told you about my work for the chancellor. The Culture Ministry has contrived a higher purpose for this Dietrich character. Thanks to my wife’s shrewdness, it’s going rather well. These are the kinds of paintings we want for the new Germany. Dietrich might find himself with many followers. The students have had enough of the filth peddled by Jews.’

I listened to Kurt, numb with horror. I had thought Elke wanted to convince me that she didn’t agree with her friends because she knew that I was Jewish and my humanity was at stake. Together, we would defend the lie about who I was because she enjoyed our collaboration as much as I did

and because she wanted to protect me. But I saw now that she only needed to give the impression of my life mattering to her while I painted as Dietrich. I would help her husband ascend in the government and his triumph would be shared with Elke, its engineer. She wouldn't allow my blood to interfere with that ambition. We were both pretending. But not, I realized, for the same reasons.

Kurt listed sideways towards the door. He seemed to have lost interest in the conversation.

'If that's all, then I'm afraid I have more letters to dictate than minutes in the day. My wife will write when she's well.'

Kurt was already deep inside another room, calling the name of his secretary. A maid closed the door behind me, and as I adjusted to the light outside, she loudly locked and bolted it, like I might attempt to force my way back in. I took a few hesitant steps before I threw up in a rose bush in their neighbour's front garden.

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THE NEXT MORNING, Maria's engagement ring glinted as she moved past me down the corridor. At the kitchen table, she drank her coffee without milk or sugar, scalding hot from the pot, her eyelids heavy and quivering. Her hair was brushed into a chignon solid with hair lacquer, her make-up light and immaculate. As the wedding approached, Maria and Olga had fallen under a spell of adolescent disinhibition. They had been drinking the night before; I'd heard them knock over a bottle around midnight. It was becoming normal to wake up around the time they were finally going to bed. The floor was streaked with red wine, and Olga was crawling along it with a rag. I had already removed a shard of broken glass from my slipper.

'There's something I want to talk to you about,' said Maria quietly to me.

I had never heard her lower her voice like that.

'Don't worry, I sleep through it,' I said, just as quietly.

Maria looked at me pleasantly, ignoring this. Olga stepped out of the room, the floor sopping wet. Maria watched her leave and appeared to listen to determine her new location – the tap went on in the bathroom – while she continued to blankly smile.

'That painting of me,' she was almost whispering now. 'The first one you made, I mean. I saw it in the house of my fiancé's friend. With a different title. Apparently with a different model.'

It wasn't clear to me whether Maria knowing about the deception was dangerous or meaningless. I was mentally rehearsing excuses as she poured

more coffee into my cup, not looking at me. We might simply laugh about it, the foibles of the rich. I rearranged my face into a relaxed expression.

‘You’re in a similar circle to my patron,’ I said, my tone light.

‘They told me all about the artist who painted it,’ Maria said. ‘Dietrich, is it? We agreed the model bore a strong resemblance to me, an extraordinary coincidence given I’ve never met the man. I thought it best to play along.’

This was said lightly, like she was already a conspirator in whatever plot she’d happened upon. But she looked concerned.

‘There’s nothing unusual about it,’ I said. ‘People would prefer to buy work by a man. Not everyone is open-minded about women. It doesn’t bother me. I just do as my patron advises.’

‘That isn’t all, is it?’ Maria produced another cigarette from the pocket of her bed jacket, forgetting the one tucked behind her ear.

I thought, Maria knows. How Elke had once spoken to me in private, her voice altered, a dressing gown loosely tied at her waist, smelling of my skin as well as her own. Always in another room to the canvas and paints, fearing their witness.

‘They wouldn’t want to buy work off a Jew,’ Maria said, hardly more than mouthing the last word. Olga was on the other side of the wall, on her hands and knees, her nose centimetres from the floor, scrubbing. Maria pulled at a stray thread on the sleeve of her jacket.

I looked down at my feet wedged into their slippers, the threadbare nightdress that once belonged to Charlotte, darned several times over, searching for whatever it was that had made this fact manifest. I couldn’t remember who had once said to me in that very room, ‘You can tell just by looking at them often enough.’

I was disgusted with Maria and Olga, with the affection I couldn’t help but feel for them, our sorry little simulacrum of a family. I thought about Elke calling by the apartment, eager to integrate, casting about for her own role in this system. All of us caught in a play of illusions.

‘I won’t tell anyone,’ Maria said. ‘I’m saying this because I’m worried. You need to be careful. Those men don’t like to look foolish. The wives are no better as far as I can tell. I’ve learnt that much already.’

I could hear Olga whistling in the corridor outside. How happy she sounded, repeating those two notes. I imagined all the landladies in the dark arteries of the building responding to the call of another in their pack.

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Eventually I accepted that Elke wasn't going to write back to me. I hadn't painted anything since the portrait of her hand. The monthly cheque came in the post as usual in June and July with the amount agreed upon before the commissions. I assumed this was to guarantee my continued discretion rather than to encourage me to work. I regarded the money as a relic from the past, belonging to two other women altogether, whose simple relationship I envied.

Saul was more than usually distracted when I arrived at his apartment. I hadn't seen much of him recently. He had been helping a friend who had lost his job in an orchestra to organize a concert, but it had meant taking orders from government officials, and Saul had been incensed by the mere fact of their involvement and quickly fallen out with everyone. He hadn't worked for a few months and wouldn't take money off his mother. She would need everything she had, he repeated, whenever I raised it. But I knew this wasn't all that was troubling him. I had called him from a telephone box at a restaurant the night before and told him about my conversation with Kurt. 'They've made you into an Aryan artist?' Saul had stammered. Then he had apologized and hung up.

I noticed a bottle of veronal tablets had been upended on his kitchen table. I counted out three and put them into my pocket. Conscious Saul was hardly aware of me, I waited a minute and took five more. He had been talking since I arrived. Something about Dürer, the body being divisible into six equal units. The body was just lines and areas, a set of proportions, he said, so it followed that if you aspired towards an ideal example, a prototype, a nude should be a composite figure. One woman's head grafted onto another woman's torso with another woman's feet.

'Are you or Dürer offering me advice on my work?' I said, trying to sound jovial.

He sat down and put his head in his hands.

'I've thought about it and though I expect you'll think I've gone mad, I've realized something. We must retaliate. We can't let them use your work like this, as propaganda for their noxious beliefs.'

The hopelessness of this ambition only made me sadder.

'The paintings belong to her, so she can do what she wants with them,' I said.

‘Would you say that about a Rembrandt?’

‘Well, no, obviously.’

Saul spread his arms in a gesture that said, there you are, that’s my point.

‘Dürer played tricks on patrons who underpaid him for his work,’ he continued. ‘He once inserted himself into an altarpiece wearing contemporary dress like he had stumbled upon a revival of a mystery play. His self-portrait held a sign that read, *I PAINTED THIS*. What he meant was that he would not be disrespected. He had the power to make the world he’d painted farcical. As do we.’

‘What would we gain from doing something like that?’

‘Oh, I don’t know, Hannah – our pride? To feel as though they can’t take absolutely everything from us?’

‘Seems ambitious for a painting,’ I said.

‘It would just involve painting more nudes,’ he went on, disregarding my comment. ‘But I want them to look different. You could easily make Dietrich into a modern artist. Paint Frau Grese and her friends in a brothel. Put them anywhere ordinary. Your room or mine. They aren’t goddesses, they’re women. Forget about their egos. They’ve received enough flattery. These would be about sensation, emotion, the psyche.’

‘I don’t know how to paint like that.’

‘Remember what you said to me about Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*? How brash and provocative it was, and yet you couldn’t look away.’ He was excited, talking faster. ‘What Picasso aspires to is truth, and wouldn’t truth be dangerous to Frau Grese? Those women aren’t the ornaments she had you paint. They’re nasty and selfish and cowardly. Picasso draws this out, the animal, and he’s indiscriminate – it’s the same when he paints women he loves.’

‘I’m not sure,’ I said.

‘Why not?’

I grimaced. I was trying to think carefully about what I said next.

‘I won’t paint out of revenge,’ I said.

‘You wouldn’t be the first. Think about Artemisia.’

‘I’m not in the mood for one of your lessons.’

‘Won’t you just consider it?’

I told Saul I would, thinking I wouldn’t relent. But on the walk back to the apartment, I found myself possessed by a desire for exactly what I’d claimed I’d disavowed. I knew that Elke and Kurt would disapprove of any

deviation from Dietrich's neoclassical style. He would prove a disappointment, lured into aesthetic degeneracy by the avant-garde; worse, he would become an embarrassment. And angering Elke at least meant being in her thoughts.

I took everything I needed to paint to Saul's apartment the next day. I went back to the sketchbooks filled with Elke. I hadn't planned on spending time with her body again. I painted automatically, hardly needing the sketches, summoning details from a region of my mind I believed I'd barricaded myself against. Time moved over me like water from a tap. I rarely left the building and did little else but paint and sleep. Charlotte occasionally visited in the evenings. She never asked about the pictures, and didn't stay long enough to remove her outdoor coat. I knew she had other things on her mind. The Sibyl Vane had been raided, arrests made on spurious charges, and the manager had fled, possibly to Paris.

'I didn't plan to retire at this age,' she said. 'I suppose I could teach wealthy schoolgirls ballet.'

'Or get married,' Saul said.

'Find me an industrialist!' Charlotte replied, laughing.

When I telephoned Olga to tell her I had gone to the countryside to work, she couldn't get me off the line fast enough. They were waiting for a call from Maria's fiancé.

'You'll write to us, won't you?' she asked, then rang off to the sound of another voice raised in the background, not waiting for an answer.

Three paintings connected like segments of a dream. Female figures in lurid yellow, turquoise and maroon. They stood together in a jagged line. They were arranged around a room on stools, with others leant against the wall, and a few sat on the floor. They floated in a void of blue like a constellation of stars, draped with lacy veils. A fetid mood, a suggestion of intimacy. A woman's finger trailed along another woman's shoulder. A woman with the clasped hand of her companion against her bare thigh. A woman crouched, revealing her distended stomach and pubic hair. They were a messy conflagration of limbs. Crude black outlines filled with hurried brushstrokes of colour. Their bodies had been taken apart and reassembled and that wrongness was self-evident. Their legs and arms were lines and their heads were triangles. They were flesh over bone. They were daubs of paint. I still tried to make the women recognizable to themselves. There were Margrit's breasts, and there were now three of them to convey a

body in motion, and they were closer to her navel than her shoulders as she writhed on a chair. The women I met who were pregnant had enormous bellies that could have held a fully grown child. There was Elke's prominent ribcage in a cascade of spikes as she lifted her arms behind her head. Only now could I see Elke for what she was. I painted her face blank as a marionette.

By the time we began to discuss where they would be shown, Saul writing letters to gallerists late into the night, it was too late to really consider what I had done.

~

The night Saul showed the paintings to an acquaintance at the Galerie van der Heyde, he bought a revolver on the black market.

'He wanted to know if Frau Grese knew about the paintings,' Saul said. 'I told him she didn't. He received this news with – I don't know how to describe it – a sort of manic glee. He was slapping me on the back, offering me more to drink.'

'He'll exhibit them?' I asked.

'He was practically shooing me out. He would have the paintings framed, he could have them on the walls by Thursday. He said he would write to me with the details.'

'And this?' I pointed to the gun.

Saul shrugged his shoulders.

'I don't know. His questions unsettled me. Had Dietrich fought in the war? How long had he been married? What was the real nature of his relationship with Frau Grese – of course, he was insinuating something there. As you know, I'm a terrible liar. I began to wonder whether we'd made a mistake. If we'd let all this send us mad.'

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SAUL DECIDED IT wasn't safe for us to attend the exhibition opening. We were discussing how we might see the works in the gallery without arousing any suspicion when Charlotte offered to attend in our place.

'Are you sure?' I said, surprised. Charlotte had come round after I telephoned her that afternoon, but had expressed little interest in what she referred to as our 'revenge tragedy'.

She put down the magazine she'd been reading and shrugged.

'Why not?' she said. 'It's all you two can talk about. I'll at least have something to say in these conversations.'

'Ask anyone you can what they make of the pictures,' Saul said excitedly to Charlotte. 'You could pretend to know Dietrich. Say this is what his work has really been like all along.'

Stood before the mirror removing her lipstick, Charlotte nodded in a way I knew meant she wasn't listening. She periodically checked herself against my photographs of the wives. Ran a comb through her hair and set it with a cloud of lacquer. Scrubbed more colour from her face. Fastened another button on the neck of her blouse.

'I know how to make conversation,' she replied.

Charlotte left in a disguise that was unnervingly convincing. I said goodbye distractedly. Saul and I looked at each other in the silence that ensued. I knew we hadn't anticipated the slowness of the hours to come. On my third drink, I realized how frightened I really was. There was no coming back from this. I would never again sit in Elke's drawing room with

anticipatory pleasure coursing through me. I wouldn't listen to her elderly driver breathe through his mouth as we glided across the city. No fragrant envelopes, no hot baths after midnight. Without entirely being conscious of it, I had declared war.

The door to the apartment opened and closed. Heeled shoes on the wooden floor. Fast, anguished breath. Dozing on the sofa, the sounds came to me softly, incongruously, through the beginnings of a dream.

'So?' I heard Saul say.

I could hear Charlotte addressing me.

'What were you thinking?' she said. 'Painting those women as whores. The men certainly enjoyed them. Laughing until they were bright red in the face.'

I wasn't fully awake and couldn't make sense of what Charlotte was saying. I looked to Saul for help.

'It isn't our fault they're ignorant about modern art,' Saul replied. 'And if they knew anything they'd understand we aren't casting aspersions on them, we're referencing a tradition. Nobody laughs at Manet's *Olympia*, not since—'

'Do you ever stop?' Charlotte interrupted. 'I couldn't care less about your precious French artists. It's totally irrelevant.'

'They're meant to be shocking,' I said, finding my voice, sitting up. 'And they're only as crude as any painting by Grosz or Dix.'

'You've decided that you don't like who Frau Grese married, so all her money and attention is intolerable to you now, is that it?' Charlotte said. 'And this is how you tell her that, embarrassing her and some other women you hardly know?'

'What's your suggestion? Follow your lead and do nothing at all?' Saul said.

'Those poor women,' Charlotte said. 'You don't know what their husbands are like. They released men from the asylums to join their government office, if that gives you a clue.' She turned to Saul. 'You don't care about that, do you? Perhaps it amuses you to imagine them suffering.'

'It's their choice who they marry,' Saul said.

'Do women disgust you that much?'

'Those women do.'

'You're shaming them to what end exactly?'

'Retribution,' Saul said, louder now.

‘How noble of you. What fun you’ll have boasting about this to your friends in the KPD.’ Charlotte turned to me. ‘What is it exactly that you feel so hard done by? You’re paid generously to paint. You receive acclaim in the newspapers – it’s just not in your name. All this fuss being made of you but your admirers happen to work for the government. How awful!’

‘You’re a fool if you think it’s just about that,’ Saul said. ‘Look around you, Charlotte. Our livelihoods are gone. They want us out of Germany. Better yet, they want us dead. This isn’t some fantasy of persecution – I’m quoting the chancellor. If you ever picked up a newspaper you might learn something about his intentions. I think his disciples can handle a little embarrassment.’

‘And this is your idea of resistance? You’re quite willing to exploit Hannah. You always have been.’ She was shouting back, her voice almost unrecognizable. ‘They all know it’s her painting. You don’t think they’ll punish her?’

‘I wanted to paint those pictures,’ I said quietly.

‘You’ve debased yourselves,’ Charlotte said. ‘I want nothing to do with it.’ She spun on her heel and banged through the door.

~

When I returned to my apartment early the next morning, a dress Charlotte had left in my room weeks before was gone. Her hair rollers and torn stockings were still there, and a half-empty packet of cigarettes. It wasn’t the dramatic ransacking I might have expected from Charlotte, but a retreat that sought no retaliation, and seemed more final and serious as a result.

‘There’s a letter for you,’ Olga said, peering into my room.

It was from Elke. The paper was covered in inky fingerprints, many of them too large to be her own. The envelope was unsealed, already opened. Olga no longer bothered to conceal her prying.

> Dear Hannah,
> I am very disappointed to see work under the name of Answald Dietrich displayed in a gallery without prior notice. This might have been forgivable if it weren’t for the style of these pictures, not to mention their tawdry, defamatory content. I have the greatest respect for Dietrich’s work. Our support of him had me believe that he felt

gratitude to his patrons. It saddens us both that he would insult our honour with this degenerate work.

In the circumstances, you have given us no choice but to terminate our professional relationship. You will receive no further financial assistance. You will not write to myself or my husband again, nor will you call at the house. You will forget about Answald Dietrich. It is a great shame to have so foolishly spoilt an arrangement that was advantageous to both parties.

E.G.

We received what we had intended: fury and repudiation. I couldn't understand why I didn't feel satisfied. Maybe a part of me had hoped that Elke would secretly enjoy this rare unsettling of our dynamic. Retaliation with an undertow of flirtation. Weren't we engaged in an act of illusion, and wasn't this just an unanticipated move in the games we'd played in service to it in the past? But I had miscalculated. Only Elke was permitted to breathe life into Dietrich. I was just his body – she was his mind.

I read the letter again more calmly. There was something about its tone that made me wonder whether Elke was relieved to have found an excuse to forswear me completely.

~

I burnt most of Elke's letters that night. It felt freeing to toss them into the fire, getting so close I scorched the tips of my fingers. I had the powerful sense that they had come from somewhere else altogether, written by a stranger and received by one too. Maria sat at my side in the lounge, consoling me about Charlotte. I didn't bother to correct the assumption that these letters were hers. Maria insisted she had regarded Charlotte as conceited all along. 'And far older than she claims,' she repeated.

I woke up the next morning wanting to paint again, as natural as thirst. An idea was already there when I paused to think. Nude self-portraits, small canvases I could hide under the bed. Painting myself for long stretches in front of the mirror, I saw I had aged, and not, it seemed, at an ordinary rate. The lines around my eyes had deepened, as though carved with a burin. I looked small and breakable, but my body was all I had, and it would have to suffice. I painted myself standing up. Holding a weapon or a single plate of

armour. I needed that promise of violence. A sword like a long silk scarf from my neck to my ankles. Interested, in motion, arms raised, eyes wide open. Heavy brows and a dark smear of a mouth. I was strengthening with each reiteration of myself, because all these women now lived inside me. Six canvases in as many weeks. I signed them with my own name.

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WALKING DOWN THE street, it took me a moment to realize that the name being called was intended for me: Helga. Rain made it difficult to determine where the woman's voice, high and urgent, came from. I thought I would run, letting myself be swallowed by the anonymity of the wet, darkening streets. But instead I stopped, a jacket cradled over my head. A hand on my shoulder confirmed it was meant for me, and when I looked around, breathing steadily to impersonate calm, it was Margrit.

'The wife, I thought so,' she said. Around us, people shrank from the sky under mackintoshes and umbrellas. But she stood upright, entirely composed. 'I've been thinking about you recently.'

'You've been well?' I asked.

'Let's not do that, for goodness' sake.' She grabbed my arm with small cold hands and pulled me underneath the eaves of a shop. She took my jacket and shook the water from it. 'There, that's better.' She handed it back to me.

'You're still happy with the picture?' I tried.

She laughed mirthlessly.

'Very much so,' she said. 'In fact, I recently purchased another. From the Galerie van der Heyde. I would have bought all three, but competition was fierce.'

All this was said in a measured way, but her face was pink.

'It was interesting to see my likeness,' she continued. 'With her legs

spread akimbo in a squalid little room. Not very flattering. I thought I would remember posing for something like that.'

'I wasn't intending to be crude,' I said. 'They're just modern paintings, no different from what's being exhibited and celebrated in Paris, and in Berlin too until—'

'You wanted her attention,' Margrit interrupted. 'Well, you got what you wanted. She's furious. Her husband even more so. He could hardly speak when I saw him last.'

'Is your husband angry?' I asked.

'I don't know,' she said. 'I shouldn't think so. We have had separate lives for some time. He has a mistress, other children.'

'I'm sorry,' I said.

'It's practically being encouraged these days,' she said. 'Presumably you have a similar arrangement with your husband. He's never at his openings.' She picked up my hand and raised it between us so it was visible to us both. Having worn a wedding ring during our lunch, its nakedness now confirmed the lie more absolutely than anything I might have let slip. She dropped my hand. 'Are you on such bad terms with your husband? How sad. Or is he another fantasy?'

I considered denying it. But there no longer seemed much point.

'It wasn't my idea,' I said. 'I just did as I was told.'

The thoughtless obedience of a dog, I thought, and blushed. But Margrit looked unsurprised.

'Sounds familiar,' Margrit said. 'Elke can be very persuasive.'

The rain had intensified, and we stopped to watch it for a moment. I could see now that Margrit was soaked through in clothing inappropriate to the weather, like she'd run unexpectedly out of the house. A child went crashing through a waterlogged gutter and its mother cried out, 'Stop that, you'll be sorry!'

'You needn't tell me who you really are,' Margrit said. 'But I expect they chose you because they assumed you were weak. Dispensable. Not just because of your sex.'

I could have only avoided this same conclusion for so long. It wasn't about my talent. What a foolish dream that had been. I was useful to Elke because of all the ways I was pitiable to her.

'I have my own house in Dalhem,' Margrit said. 'You might come to live with me. My husband has the villa in Berlin. The children are at university

– they're hardly ever there. You'd have to forget about all this.' She moved her arm around vaguely. 'It would be hard work as a maid. But you would be safe.'

I wondered what exactly it was Margrit insisted I must disavow, her gesture marking out the accepted boundaries of an ordinary life, or of freedom.

'There's a lot to do in a house of that size, even when I'm there alone,' she added.

I imagined Margrit laid out on a chaise longue with four young, uniformed girls hovering at her side. Blotting paper. A filled tea kettle. Motionless air in every room. Expensive chocolates melting in their casing. Wet mouths. Hours sliding off into the night. Anger blazed up in me.

'I'm an artist,' I said. 'I'm not a maid.'

Margrit didn't react. She squeezed a drop of water from the hem of her blouse. When she began to speak her voice had changed.

'I understand. I merely wanted to help. Write to me if you change your mind.'

~

When Maria left the apartment unannounced, I wasn't just sad, but uneasy. I thought about animals that retreated under hedges to die, not wishing to draw attention to themselves. At dawn I heard her lightly banging around her room, and the sound of something heavy being scraped over the wooden floors. The door to the apartment was unbolted, then clicked shut. As I turned over in bed, I noticed an envelope had been pushed inside my room. I got up and watched from my window as Maria struggled to manoeuvre her two bags around the street corner. I nearly banged on the window to say goodbye. But I let her disappear. I remained there until workers began to awaken and rush out of the surrounding buildings. I somehow knew that would be the last time I ever saw Maria.

I had an idea what would be in the envelope before I opened it. Drawings of Maria I had given her over the years had been fixed together with a large metal bulldog clip. There were dozens, many more than I remembered, with a letter in her own handwriting. I had never seen Maria write anything longer than single-line notes. (*Drink later? Club at 11! Wake up!!*) It had

been written in pencil first and gone over in ink. An attempt at carefulness, formality. I hadn't read a word, and my eyes were already filled with tears.

Dear Hannah,
You might make better use of these than I ever could. I didn't recognize myself in any of them, but hadn't the heart to say so. This is not a reflection on their skill or their charm, which are great, especially those that came later. How remarkable to see you improve. I couldn't have been prouder if you were my own daughter. No, it wasn't that. I suspect the problem resides within me. There is another way I might put this. It seems appropriate that the painting I modelled for is now understood to depict another woman, identical in all outward aspects to me, but not me in some deeper, mysterious sense. I never felt much connection to my appearance – it never described what lay beneath. If you peel back the patterned paper in Olga's apartment, the wall is black with mould. That is not something an artist can easily depict.

We had such fun at the beginning, didn't we? I'll always remember those nights. Perhaps I did not stress to you enough how much more interesting I found you than the previous lodgers. I had seen enough of them by then. I had been in my room for longer than Olga's stories would have you believe. Over a decade, indeed the anniversary – a gift of crystal, if it had been a marriage – would have been this winter.

Do you remember how we once promised we would live with Olga until her death, and afterwards, together, just the two of us? That would have been fun. More fun, perhaps, than what lies ahead of us both. I once dreamt about us having our own little girls. Pushing them in perambulators, watching them play in the park. I hadn't known my father and neither would they. Perhaps they would become fast friends as they grew up, just like us. The idea brought me so much happiness. That no longer seems possible either.

Though I hope we will meet again, in the circumstances it is unlikely. No doubt it would be safer for us both if I were to forget you.

Yours, Maria

~

The wedding appeared in the broadsheets. I managed to read the notices

before Olga began sealing them in a shoebox marked with the dates Maria had lived there, as though it was a headstone. A photograph showed Maria expressionlessly gripping a bunch of lilies with large, avian heads, a big unsmiling man holding her arm above the elbow, like she was his bouquet. ‘The marriage of a senior officer of the Schutzstaffel,’ the notice read, ‘and his childhood sweetheart.’

I had one letter that morning. By decree of a chamber official, Saul wrote, the galleries of the Kronprinzenpalais had been painted silver, to give the impression of the divine. It was like being inside a samovar, slowly being boiled to death.

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MONTHS PASSED WITHOUT me hearing anything from Charlotte. I had no idea whether I would see her again or how I might gain her forgiveness. The last thing I expected was for her to come back to the apartment.

It was early enough that I was still in my nightgown, deciding what to do with the day. I heard Olga cry out from the hallway and Charlotte murmuring a response. Relief quickly turned into unease. Her voice was toneless, with a barbiturate slowness. I stood up and went to the door.

Charlotte looked older, as though she had been gone for years not months, but that wasn't the only difference. There was a newly hygienic gleam to her appearance, a look of being regularly bathed, brushed and polished, installed in a life in which no dirt could adhere to her. I didn't recognize the brown skirt suit, a light tweed like a hawk's plumage, or the pale leather gloves. Her make-up was understated, shades of taupe, a gauze of respectability. She had stopped bleaching her hair, and the colour underneath was somehow more colourless than when it was almost white. Grown to her shoulders, it was long enough to be coiled with pins at her nape.

'Hello,' I said. 'You look different.'

Olga said, 'I'll leave you girls.' She remained where she was, eyeing us eagerly.

I beckoned Charlotte to my room, but she shook her head.

'I won't be long,' she replied coldly. 'I wanted to tell you before you found out yourself.'

I could imagine it, though it hurt me. He came into view, the man Charlotte would marry to make her life easier.

‘Congratulations,’ I said. ‘You can exchange housekeeping tips with Maria.’

‘Nothing like that,’ she snapped. ‘I’m dancing again.’ She gently patted her hair with the palms of her hands. The gesture was alien, recently acquired. ‘Taking it seriously, finally. I would like you to attend a performance.’

She gave me a poster with clean, manicured hands. A studio photograph of Charlotte showed her in a semi-transparent shift with her legs set apart in a squat. One arm was raised high, the other snaked around her throat. Her vacant, ecstatic expression achieved what I never imagined possible with Charlotte’s face: it made her ugly. She was performing the following week at a famous venue in the centre of the city. Her name was in small print.

‘Don’t make a fuss about this,’ Charlotte said. Her tone gave the impression of calm, but when I looked up at her face it was pale and trembling.

She was using Elke’s surname.

~

Saul and I watched a crowd form from a cafe opposite the theatre. The sky was dark, threatening a downpour. I had been anxious to be there, but now wasn’t sure if I would make it inside. I still had the poster folded in my pocket. Charlotte Grese, I repeated to myself: it was no more real to me than it had been in the apartment. Saul insisted that we wouldn’t understand what had happened to Charlotte unless we watched her dance. I wasn’t sure if he was right. I had a feeling that more confusion and conjecture awaited us. My anxiety grew as I swallowed my coffee and Saul stood up to button his coat. I didn’t want to know why Charlotte had made these choices, I realized. Ignorance was preferable to more disappointment. We waited as men underneath the awning shuffled forward through the doors of the theatre.

At the very last moment, when the house lights had been turned off, we slipped into seats in the back row. The room was full and hot, the air tangy with sweat. A few minutes passed before Charlotte emerged. The stage was low to the ground and illuminated by a single lantern overlaid with a red-

coloured gel, a light it was impossible not to see as coming from hell. Charlotte had always been thin, but her stomach and thighs now looked hollowed out with a spoon. Oily heads turned to each other and whispered a final remark.

Charlotte's frail arms lifted in an opening gesture. The audience fell silent. I opened a programme that had been left on the seat.

Dance is Germany's oldest art, the programme announced. *For as long as we have had bodies, we have sought to perfect them, and to celebrate that through movement. Dance has shown this nation the healthy body's beauty and its ripeness for self-expression.*

Saul leant over my shoulder and read along. 'An advertisement for Wigman?' he whispered.

I shook my head. I put the programme on the floor.

Reedy music started up. I hoped I would recognize Charlotte then. I could still remember the opening salvo of so many of her dances. How supple she was to transformation. How open her body was to surprise and humour and intensity. How buoyed she was by a good audience. When she moved, she took us wherever she felt we must go. I let these memories move through me as I watched Charlotte make warming up gestures. Her feet flexing – her hands covering her face.

The routine was nothing like anything I had ever seen Charlotte perform at the Sibyl Vane. A narrative was being acted out. She held herself to indicate cold and clawed at her stomach to indicate hunger. She was crouched in a deep pocket of shadow, then she leapt as the music swelled. Such choreography was beneath her – I'd heard her complain about overly literal routines before – and there was something in the way she danced that appeared to acknowledge that. Her tread was slow and heavy. She was not quite committing to steps, or she was allowing herself to be tugged and thrown by gravity. She nearly fell while attempting a pirouette. The violins were louder now, and their sound filled my body. I strained to see Charlotte's face. I kept hoping she would give a sign, discernible only to me, that this was a farce. But she continued to dance in an effortful, pained way that was hard to watch. I wanted to walk through the crowd and guide her off the stage.

I couldn't say how much time passed. For all I knew we had endured hours of it when Saul finally relaxed next to me, and I understood it was over. The lights went up, and we rose from our seats as from a deep sleep.

In the front row, turning around to scan the room as she manoeuvred into a fur coat, was Elke. A young, uniformed man with an NSDAP armband and a flat, quizzical face held her handbag primly before him, his neck bent in supplication. She looked unsurprised to see us there. Without thinking, I mouthed hello. She gave me a tight smile and walked slowly out, her hand clasped to the young man's side. I felt nothing but contempt for myself as I craned my neck to watch her leave.

'What was that?' I said in a whisper to Saul.

'Art on their terms, I suppose,' he replied, shaking his head. 'Do you want to stay and talk to her? I can't say that I do.'

Charlotte had disappeared for a few minutes and returned in a demure skirt and blouse. She stood near the exit and presented her hand or her cheek for those who wanted to kiss her as they left. When nobody else was there but the three of us she walked back towards the seating and hesitated before she sat down.

'You came,' she said, not looking up at us.

'That can't have been your choreography?' I said.

Charlotte turned to face the stage, as though regarding herself from the vantage of the audience.

'The routine is mine. It's just different.' She looked up and her face was wet with tears.

'Different?' Saul repeated back to her. 'Ha!' He threw up his arms. 'I'm going back to my apartment,' he said to me. 'Charlotte, Hannah is protecting your vanity. Frankly, we all know that was awful.'

Charlotte and I watched Saul march out, the doors banging behind him.

'Would you join us for a drink?' I said to Charlotte.

Outside it still hadn't rained. The air was heavy and close, the streets deserted save for a few commuters weighed down by the day and slow-moving drunks. Saul had set off in the direction of his apartment, and we followed. Charlotte looked small and frightened, ready to change her mind and forget us again at any moment. Eventually I took her hand.

'Were you really unmoved by it?' she said.

'I'm not sure I understood it,' I replied, wanting to remain calm. 'It must have been interesting performing to an audience like that.' This came out more with more aggression than irony, and Charlotte recoiled.

'It shouldn't matter who it's for,' she said, letting go of my hand. 'I didn't write the programme. I gave them what they wanted.' She fell silent, as

though remembering. ‘Nothing intellectual or philosophical. Just beauty and light.’

Saul was already in the apartment, drinking from a bottle of cognac. He groaned when he saw Charlotte behind me.

‘Presumably it wasn’t your idea to dance as a form of propaganda?’ he began, pouring a glass for me, but not for Charlotte.

Charlotte didn’t respond, but I saw her flinch. She pointed at the nude self-portraits stacked against the wall. I had recently transported them to Saul’s, convinced that Olga was now searching my room when I was out.

‘They’re new,’ she said. ‘I like them.’

‘They aren’t for sale,’ I said.

She coughed. ‘I like them,’ she repeated quietly.

‘Alright, I can put it another way,’ Saul said. ‘Why are you doing this?’

Charlotte looked almost relieved to be asked. She told us she had bumped into Elke at the Adlon (drunk with the dancers, about to go home) and was surprised to be greeted warmly by her like they were old friends. Would Charlotte like another drink? Elke was buying a bottle of champagne, and she couldn’t finish it alone. The night was still young, Elke’s driver would drop her home, and she had friends Charlotte must meet. Charlotte let herself be led to a table of women in expensive silk sheaths, blowing smoke into each other faces. Elke handed Charlotte a glass and said she’d been sorry when she heard the news about the Sibyl Vane. She suspected Charlotte hadn’t had much luck with auditions lately. (It was true, she hadn’t. Everywhere she went the new legislation was being enforced. Don’t bother if you’re a Jew, she was told – roles are for girls of pure German ancestry only.) Elke knew Charlotte’s predicament and wanted to help.

‘She said I had to be practical. The choice was either never dance again or find a way around the rules. I obviously couldn’t use my name any more.’

‘Not entirely true,’ Saul interrupted.

‘I’m not inclined to trust your recommendation of the Kulturbund,’ Charlotte snapped. ‘How long did you last trying to organize that concert?’

Saul shrugged and sloshed more cognac into his glass.

‘You hear rumours about how to get around the legislation. Sleeping with the right man in the ministry. Suddenly they’ve stamped a correction next to your name on some file, and you’re fit to dance. I’d thought about it.’

Charlotte grimaced. ‘But Elke had another idea. I could just use her name. There’s a great market in forgeries nowadays. You’d think it would be difficult to get another birth certificate. But she arranged it practically overnight. We’re saying I’m her father-in-law’s illegitimate child.’

I didn’t want to feel jealous. Failing that, I might at least try to conceal it from Charlotte. I took a deep, steadying breath.

‘Why would she help you?’ I said.

‘Because I’m an artist,’ Charlotte said. ‘Wasn’t that why she was so interested in you?’

Charlotte tossed her head towards me. Her jaw was clenched. She wasn’t quite looking me in the eye.

‘I was wrong about you,’ Saul said. ‘I thought you acted according to some basic moral code. Common sense, even.’

‘You wouldn’t understand. I don’t expect you to,’ Charlotte replied. ‘You’ll end up married soon. Babies in perambulators, a house together in Charlottenburg, and then what? You imagine I’ll take your place in Olga’s apartment?’

‘If you want to side with the enemy, fine. But don’t behave as though it’s our fault,’ said Saul.

‘We can leave Berlin together,’ I said. ‘The three of us.’

‘All this just to dance?’ Saul asked. ‘To audiences of government cronies?’

Charlotte shrugged. ‘She’s arranged for me to meet Laban. I might have a role in his dance festival. Perhaps in the German Dance Theatre too.’

She looked at me, her eyes widened, ready to receive praise. I hadn’t noticed that her stage make-up was still immaculate. Her blackened eyebrows were arched. Red lipstick enlarged her mouth almost down to her chin. I had only seen such harsh colouring in daylight on the mannequins at KaDeWe.

I thought about pointing out to Charlotte what she had once said to me about Elke. How she couldn’t be trusted, how there would always be other ways to find work. Money wasn’t even a consideration for her. This should have made me angry, but I did not struggle against it, there was no point. Clearly an agreement had been reached that Charlotte had no obligation to honour the concerns of her past self. Everything was contingent now.

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AFTER DINNER, OLGA didn’t laugh along with the radio programme she normally enjoyed. She ate two bags of sweets with a nasty look on her face, as if some exterior force was holding her mouth wide open. That week all her small pleasures had elicited the same dissatisfied response. I assumed this was partly because she had recently renounced cigarettes. They were unladylike, she had announced one evening, and I shouldn’t be smoking them either if I wanted to get married. Ever since, she had worn a pained, faraway expression as often as her apron, her mouth tightly knotted, hand clenched in longing.

‘Switch it off,’ she said without looking at me.

‘Nothing else you would enjoy?’ I replied.

She shook her head. The silence expanded between us until it pressed against my ribcage and held me in place in the armchair. Olga was bent over piles of notes that were spread out near the hearth. I had noticed her burning the contents of a large folder earlier that day. She now fed the fire another sheaf of papers.

As I left the room, out of the corner of my eye I saw her nose wrinkle as though inhaling something foul.

I had only been asleep for a few hours when I heard a knocking at my door that could only have been Olga. Her face had the look of a substance that hadn’t been left long enough in the refrigerator to set. Despite the hour, she was still in her day clothes. They were crumpled, the buttons done up wrong; taken off and put on again in haste.

‘Are you alright?’ I asked.

‘You have to leave,’ she whispered. ‘You know why. I’ll give you a week.’

~

The suitcase was light, lighter than it had felt when I’d arrived. The sewing machine was the only item of value. I left all the clothes given to me by Charlotte and Maria, and many of my own. I imagined Olga parading around the apartment in our outfits, playing all the parts of her departed tenants.

Olga was sat in her armchair, and didn’t move as I entered the lounge. Not even the faint prick of recognition she would give an insect.

‘It must be nice to finally have the apartment to yourself,’ I said.

The effort of being pleasant was acting upon me like a sickness, and each passing moment brought me closer to some terminal point of falseness, as though these banalities might eventually reach my spine and prevent me from walking again.

Olga gave a derisive snort. She still hadn’t looked in my direction.

‘I hadn’t known,’ she muttered. ‘Telling me lies. Well, they’re all liars. Schmidt, she said to me. Schmidt!’

Later, I would try to work out how Olga had uncovered my deception after years of it escaping her notice. I had eaten pork when it was served for dinner and had closed my eyes when Olga said grace. Perhaps it had just been a hunch. I had never been good at hiding my fear. Alone together at dinner, I would retreat into myself when the chancellor began to speak. I would nod agreeably at whatever he or Olga said, having closed my ears as soon as I entered the room. I had let my soup go cold more than once, had poured entire bowls down the sink. I hadn’t thought Olga noticed.

It took me a few weeks to arrive at a more persuasive explanation. I remembered the devotional manner Olga adopted with Elke, who waited on the end of the line as Olga shovelled irrelevant confidences into the receiver. It would have only taken a call.

‘Well, goodbye then,’ I said. ‘I’m very sorry to be leaving.’

Olga lifted a sheet of paper from a pile on the side table. She inspected it and tossed it to the floor. The windowpane shuddered and the wind moaned

behind it, attempting to push its way through. This was the extent of her farewell.

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I CARRIED MY suitcase through a fine rain that reached under my clothes and chilled my bones. I finally had to admit the naivety of imagining myself safe and loved in that room. I was tired of being wrong and even more tired of all the falseness my life demanded.

Saul was waiting for me outside his building and took me in his arms. I wanted to cry with relief at the warmth of his body and its sweet, familiar scent. Inside, all the photographic reproductions had been taken down. In their place were my recent nude self-portraits, framed, with my name on a small gilt plate in the centre. Hannah Sherman: I almost didn't recognize it. Saul had bought new bedsheets in a deep plum damask with a frilled valance that looked and felt like a relative's formal clothes. He got embarrassed when I asked why.

'Aren't we, I don't know, doing things properly? I can't have you sleeping in my musty old blankets. What would my mother say?'

Not long after I moved, I walked past a gallery and saw one of my portraits of Maria displayed in the window. I watched passers-by pause and study her, pressing their noses against the glass.

'I don't think our paintings made any difference to them,' I said to Saul when I arrived back at the apartment.

Saul looked up at me from his book. He kept his hand on the page. He went on thinking things that might have been about the bookkeeper hero of his novel or about me. After a moment, he closed it.

'Perhaps not. But maybe that was just the wrong strategy.'

‘You’ve thought of a better one?’ I intended the question rhetorically, but Saul sat up in his chair.

‘Dietrich paints very well,’ he said, ‘but he has remained curiously silent about his ideas and methods. Wouldn’t it be interesting to read his own account of his ambitions? Perhaps in a manifesto. I know how we could print it cheaply and I have a friend, Edith, from the KPD, who could help circulate it.’

Part of me had had enough of risk. I thought about the peace that would come from never thinking about Elke or Kurt again. But my anger was stronger.

‘Dietrich treasures the republic and distrusts the current government, something like that?’ I said.

‘Exactly. Why not really irk them and make him out to be an eccentric sensualist?’

I turned the pages of the newspaper. A small article about a city gallery was illustrated by a nude of Charlotte, one of my own. I remembered her running down the corridor with nothing on after Olga fell asleep. We had switched on all the lamps, drunk sherry directly from the glass decanter. ‘A respectable house no more,’ Charlotte had joked, repeating the phrase until we were both laughing hysterically.

‘They’ll know we wrote it,’ I said finally.

‘They might,’ he replied.

‘But they would really hate it, wouldn’t they?’

Saul nodded, seeming to understand. I let myself drift into a daydream. My name served with dinner, Elke and Kurt unable to eat or drink. As the night went on, my name screamed in an argument. We might yet have our revenge, however small.

Saul went to the study and returned with a pad of paper. A fountain pen. He smiled at me and sat down.

‘Dietrich herself must write it,’ he said.

1 March 1934, written on the steps of the Kaiser Friedrich Museum

My name is Answald Dietrich, German artist. I am thrilled, after many years painting outside the notice of our nation’s tastemakers, to have suddenly found fame. However, I would like to make clear that I am no artist-puppet of the so-called Third Reich. I have a studio in Paris,

where I spend most of my time. I am moved by the artists I have met there. Even more so by what I have had the privilege to see in the city's galleries and studios. Picasso's women carved from sandstone. The wild, visionary thinking of Van Gogh. The sumptuous colours of Matisse. How I admire the Cubists! What I wouldn't give to equal their ingenuity with form! I am an apostle to the rebel spirits of Europe, and I long to join their ranks across borders and time. Who dismisses these geniuses as degenerate, who accuses them of defective eyes or maladaptive minds, has no business commenting on art. Should we really look to civil servants – who can no more paint or see the real business of painting than I can lead the chancellery – for wisdom on these matters?

When I am asked why I paint the wives of Berlin's fine society as Venuses, my answer is simple. Desire. The paintbrush touches their bodies as a tongue is drawn over their skin . . .

It is not just the city's Venuses I crave, but their lovers, those roughly hewn Adonises. I lay these men down on silk and velvet. Where, you might wonder, are these lusty fellows hidden? For I have painted dozens! Let these pictures beguile the public on the Tiergartenstrasse!

I skulk through the streets that surround the Eldorado. I wait for night to fall.

In the city's cabarets, the most astonishing models persist. Dainty gigolos with slender dancers' arms! Starlets with painted mouths and oily eyelids, their knowing smiles! On the streets at dawn in ragged furs they congregate. Grosz and Dix are right to see its decadence and filth, but what fun and pleasure too! This tension is what I hope to paint.

My aversions are simple. I deplore war and violence, street fights and vile propaganda. Put down your weapons and embrace your fellow man! I refuse to paint battlefields or military generals – even politicians. With hunger for power, with hate, with death waiting in the wings, with division amongst our nation's men and women, there is no beauty.

What else? Stroll through our great city's art galleries, and you will discover that outmoded motifs and sentimentality abound. A ruddy-cheeked milkmaid. Peasants built like oxen toil in the fields. Water,

grass, mud. Can’t they see that one field is much like another? Is this what Herr Schultze-Naumburg regards as a healthy German art?

Most of all, I wish to reject the belief that art has any relation to race. Worse, that our blood can be arranged hierarchically, like vegetables entered into prizes at a country show, and that our art should be judged by this metric. It is said that the Jew can produce no art worthy of note. What of Max Liebermann? Jankel Adler? Ludwig Meidner?

Do I paint for what our leader calls the Volk? The hale, hearty masses? The pure of blood? No! I paint for the Jews, the 175ers, the degenerates, the whores, the inverts, the diseased, the desecrators of culture, the racial polluters, the foreigners, the blasphemers, the bastards, the cripples, the miscreants, the hereditarily unfit, the crowd outside the cabaret late at night.

Not a small clique, all told.

Answald Dietrich

~

The sting of paper cuts, our fingers blackened with ink. In our excitement, we grew careless. We spoiled a few sheets and started again. I grew accustomed to working the mimeograph, and enjoyed its rhythm and speed so much I almost began to have fun. Our mouths were dry from sealing envelopes, and we drank anything but water to get us through the night. It wasn’t clear when we had last slept when we posted the first batch of leaflets. To friends, acquaintances, and every name Saul judged significant in his address book.

We sat hardly moving or speaking in the house the day after. Tense, waiting.

The next morning, two letters.

Edith wrote, *I’ve seen the leaflet all over the city. People are certainly reading it. I’ve had several conversations about him already. I’m rather enamoured with your phantom. I dare say many are.*

I presume you have read the rebuttal everyone is talking about. What an embarrassment, a gallerist wrote to Saul. *A crack in the Grese facade. Good for Dietrich, I suppose. Takes courage to stand up for yourself these days. For the ministry, it rather disqualifies living artists as an easy tool for*

propaganda. Those that treat them as such, thinking them as mute a substance as the paint they apply to a canvas, will live to regret their assumptions.

Another day passed in which the rest of the city woke and worked and fell into a restive stillness. We waited for the next morning's post.

Edith wrote, *The ministry is raiding known Red printing presses.*

Eating what we could, drinking more, undressing each other, sleeping a little. Standing at the window like we would know what to do if police arrived at the apartment.

Edith wrote, *I can make more copies.*

Saul's mother wrote, *Do you know this man? Has he no sense?*

We made more copies.

I left the house once to buy three loaves of bread. A cut of meat neither of us could eat. Two days became four.

Edith wrote, *We need more copies.*

Charlotte wrote, *They know it's you, be careful.*

I rode around the city on my bicycle. Leaflets went into the doorways of shops and nightclubs, onto park benches, in stairwells and underpasses. I was as careful and quick as a pickpocket and always went home after a couple of hours. I could even sometimes forget the risks of what I was doing. I would notice how the sun shone as it set on the curtained windows, how it dried the wet roads as I accelerated along them, and I would feel as happy and purposeful as I did when I was painting.

Soon the manifesto was everywhere. I watched men read a copy on the U-Bahn as I sat between the Zoological Garden and Alexanderplatz stations. A woman passed it to a server behind a bar and leant forward to whisper in her ear. A name, had I ever been so sensitive to the sound of a name, two syllables suspended in the air? The tabloids published the manifesto the following week, and after that there seemed to be nobody in the city who hadn't read it, who wasn't talking about Dietrich.

On the wall of the women's toilets of the Kakadu nightclub, someone had written *THE DIETRICH VENUS*. Doodles surrounded it. Scrawled breasts. A few featureless oval faces. Legs in high-heeled shoes. A dozen nudes in fragments. Lipstick imprints and initials scrawled in kohl gave it the appearance of a shrine. A comment had been crossed out about Dietrich's wife. *An unforgettable fuck*, one tribute read. Another, unfinished, *They say his hands are like* – and a suggestion in a different coloured ink – *kidskin*. A

request for his telephone number. A wrong address. Dozens of women's names, endorsements. As I stared a woman emerged from a stall and leant across me to add her name.

'You too?' she asked and handed me a pen.

Underneath I added, *The Artist, H.S.*

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I THOUGHT HE was an apparition arisen from exhaustion when I first saw him from the window. I crept down the stairs, out of the building and onto the street, too frightened to consider whether it was wise.

Kurt was on the corner looking directly at me. He was briefly obscured by three elderly women, who edged slowly past him. He began to walk towards me. He was wet from rain as though he had been standing there all morning. There was no point running from him if he already knew where we lived. I buttoned up my raincoat and waited. He was panting hard when he reached my side.

‘You’ve moved up in the world, living here,’ he said and whistled from the corner of his mouth. ‘Made an advantageous match with your lover.’

I fought the urge to be contrite.

‘Were you not able just to write to me?’ I said weakly.

‘My wife thought talking to you directly would avoid any further misunderstandings,’ he said. ‘The truth is that those paintings you had exhibited without our permission were rather good. Not to our taste, of course. Not what we had in mind. They showed insubordination and ingratitude on your part. But they were clear evidence of your talent.’ He sucked air through his teeth. ‘My wife assured me that you were simply misbehaving as an adolescent might with her parents. Rules are there to be broken for the young. We mustn’t be cruel.’ He now pursed his lips. ‘I even understood your position. You felt you were denied acclaim that was rightfully yours.’

‘It wasn’t just that,’ I said with anger.

‘Well, no, it seems it wasn’t. We know you weren’t alone in producing that manifesto. Masterminded, no doubt, by the Communist Jew whose company you’ve kept these last few years, already a known figure to the ministry.’ He fished grit out his eye with his forefinger. ‘We have enough on him to make an arrest. We know where he lives.’ He lifted his walking stick and pointed at the window of Saul’s apartment. ‘Where we would send him, he wouldn’t last long. Not exactly cut out for hard labour, is he? But we’re willing to extend a final generosity to you. For reasons of sentimentality – my wife’s, not my own. Evidence will come to light that proves the manifesto was a hoax organized by the Bolshevik underground. We’ll arrest someone else for it. You won’t object.’

‘No,’ I agreed, no longer feeling brave. I tried not to think about who would suffer for what we had done.

‘It’s amusing, really,’ he said. ‘My wife thought a young woman would be the more manageable option. But a lad from the academy would have been far easier.’ He squinted up at the sky. ‘I hope we understand each other?’

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PART 4

1935

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I RETURNED TO mending. It wasn't all bad. Garments filled my life again as happily as departed friends. I piled all my painting equipment into a corner of the room. The easel became useful for hanging wet underclothes. Almost a year passed before I dismantled it altogether. It was perverse, wanting to feel despair. But wasn't that the proper response, because hadn't painting meant everything to me? As it was, I struggled to feel anything but shame. That winter I resisted the temptation to use the easel as wood for fuel.

Kurt appeared outside our apartment again. Stood against a streetlamp, feigning absorption in a newspaper. It was everything that was implied by his presence – the ease with which they might take us. We had no choice. We moved west to Wilmersdorf.

I noticed a propaganda poster on a row of houses nearby almost as soon as we arrived in the new apartment. From afar it looked familiar: a woman reclining in a landscape. I ought not to be paranoid, I thought, stalling on the other side of the road. It was just a figure in repose, a motif so common there were no doubt hundreds of its kind tacked up all over the city in that week alone. To sell scent and stockings and lipstick; to advertise theatre and music and sex.

I passed another copy of the poster not long afterwards on a wall outside the grocer's and assured myself there was no harm in taking a closer look. Dully, I saw that I had been right. It was *The Bather*, the painting of Charlotte by the lake in Bad Saarow, altered almost beyond recognition. (Altered again, I would later correct myself, remembering how it had

looked in the Prussian Academy.) A red summer's dress covered Charlotte's body and behind her a large Teutonic man in shorts loomed. His thighs were roughly the size of Charlotte's head. A picnic basket was laid on the ground, a small sailboat set on the water behind. In the background other youths congregated. I had instinctually avoided taking it all in and now forced myself to examine the lower half of the image. I went cold with horror. Next to a swastika, emblazoned across the bottom of the poster were the words: *HIKE WITH STRENGTH THROUGH JOY*.

Saul and I married not long after that. The ceremony was small, just the two of us and the few of our friends who hadn't left in borrowed formal garments. Drunk on wine that stained our teeth almost black, I held Saul's hand and, despite it all, felt happy. I wore his mother's ankle-length cream lace dress with a big silk sash around its waist, and yet I'd never felt more like myself. Afterwards, a meal in a restaurant I hardly remembered later except for the colour of the viscous beetroot soup, bright enough to have painted with. We sent an invitation to Charlotte, a short note illustrated with a print of Rembrandt's *Jewish Bride*. I didn't want to explain myself again or to punish her, all I wanted was for her to be there. *Isn't it ironic that collectors once believed the painting to show a father and daughter, given Isaac and Rebecca tried and failed to hide their love from the authorities by pretending to be siblings?* Charlotte never responded.

The day Saul met my parents, the streets around the Scheunenviertel were tensely quiet, like an enormous open palm had swooped in to cover its mouth. Father had shrunk, as wool did in hot water. But Mother was no different, standing in the doorway with her arms crossed, talking at us from the moment we were within her sight. Were we hungry? Should she boil water for coffee? Was that my only winter coat? Did my husband (Mother repeated this title with relish) wear that watch when he rode the U-Bahn? In the house, larger pieces of furniture were noticeably absent, like missing teeth. But one of my earliest drawings of my brothers remained on the wall. So much was plainly wrong given my rudimentary knowledge of anatomy. And yet the figures were alive in a way that I now envied. I missed the children my brothers had been – I would never know their adult selves so intimately. It was clear at a glance that they weren't living in the house any more. Their marriages had been mentioned in letters only six months apart, and I pictured them in neighbouring houses with wives as similar to each

other in appearance as they were. I heard Saul laugh from another room as I studied the drawing.

As we were leaving, Mother took the collar of my coat and tugged me back over the threshold.

‘What were you doing with that much money?’ she said. ‘Ben had no idea. Your father was worried. You couldn’t have earned that honestly.’

‘Ben knows where it came from. I’m an artist. I had the support of a wealthy woman.’

‘Well, yes, he told us you said that,’ she went on dismissively. ‘But I thought he was making it up, or maybe you were.’

I laughed.

‘You were paid for those paintings?’ Mother persisted, not hiding her disbelief.

‘Only for a short time.’

A sudden shower of rain had us both fall silent. Saul pulled his jacket over his head and ran under an awning.

‘He’s a good man,’ Mother said, and nodded through the window at Saul. ‘Handsome too.’ She tutted to convey this was more of an insult. ‘And a very cheerful disposition. That’s rather unusual. But you’ll need it, I expect, with everything that’s going on.’

‘People like us are leaving,’ I said.

She rolled her eyes. ‘You might think you know better, but your father—’ She turned around to look at him, slumped over asleep in a chair. ‘The frontline soldier would rather stay where we are. The stress of it wouldn’t be good for his health.’

I nodded. ‘Thank you for this,’ I said awkwardly.

‘You’ll come back,’ she said. ‘With him. Won’t leave it as long?’

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IN THE YEARS since we had seen Charlotte perform under the name Grese, we had only heard from her once, in the days after the manifesto was circulated, and that letter hadn't been more than a line. I continued to write, hoping my persistence alone might bring about reconciliation, until I finally gave up on that too. She danced in a troupe choreographed by Wigman at the opening ceremony to the Olympic Games. I avoided the newspapers: I didn't want to know. But it was all our friends could talk about. She danced badly, they said. Out of sync with the other girls, missing steps, visibly fatigued. Refusing to rehearse, tantrums backstage after the show. Questions, even, about her schooling. Had she trained with Wigman under another name? Because there was no record of her in Dresden in 1920.

Nobody in the clubs had seen her for months. 'Isn't she married now?' a doorman said when I asked after her. A regular at the Sibyl Vane heard she had wed a businessman with great power in the new government. Rumour amongst her girls was that she had taken up with an older woman, and I was inclined to believe them. It made sense to me that Elke had sought a replacement. One girl had seen Charlotte in a hotel bar with a woman I assumed was Elke from her description, giggling over cocktails, two apiece, a new fur slung over her shoulder. But she didn't look well, she said. Charlotte was sitting on a stool like the effort of holding herself upright required all her energy and concentration.

I had accepted I would never see her again and that, as somehow seemed typical of Charlotte, was when I chanced upon her. At the KadeKo cabaret

club, Saul and I whispered to each other over jokes about draft evaders, parodies of American music, a skit about Jews that received a huge idiotic laugh from the audience. Men at the adjacent table talked loudly throughout, silent only when chugging from flagons of beer. During a pause between acts in which Saul and I agreed we'd never go there again, a woman stepped delicately up onto the stage and adjusted the microphone. The spotlight found her face. Charlotte, her skin like polished metal, opened a mouth painted dark red to sing.

I gripped the side of the table. Heat, strangers' laughter, the smell of stale beer, cheap cologne and cigarettes threatened to overpower me. I had the sense that Charlotte was about to address us, whether or not she knew we were there. I went to stand, inhaling a mouthful of smoke from another table. But Saul held my waist, muttered something about the uniformed men at the back of the room, and forced me back into my seat.

Charlotte performed with her eyes focused intently on a table towards the back, seeming to hold a person's gaze. A folk song about summer, soldiers, flowers, the usual themes. In a soprano that might have been piped in from the wireless; it was noticeably trained. Hardly appearing to breathe, she reached for the highest notes effortlessly, no more challenging than depressing a key on a piano with her finger. Even the men at our side went still. She began to sway. I could finally see her clearly under the light. Red-rimmed eyes. Thinning hair held in place with pins. A yellow tinge to her neck where powder hadn't reached. She closed her mouth, and the music faded. The applause didn't seem to reach her. Charlotte bowed and walked straight towards the door, where a man took her by the elbow and steered her out.

There was a time when I would have forgiven Charlotte anything. Her fickleness was a trait as endearing to me as another person's kindness. She wanted to be known and admired more than she wanted to be happy or good, and I could only give her so much. But I had been renounced for a lie that Charlotte was too proud to confront: fame as a half-filled room with faint applause.

There was something else that bothered me as we walked home, watching shadows quiver along the pavement in the moonlight. I didn't know Charlotte sang. In fact, she expressly told me she couldn't. What a strange, unnecessary lie. I felt a latch unbolt, and stared into a bank of other possible falsehoods, none of which I would ever have the chance now to

uncover. Years ago, we had been tipsy on warm white wine in Saul's apartment, laughing as he mangled a half-remembered rendition of a music hall song.

'Can't hold a note,' he'd said. 'It's true, I'm not destined for greatness.'

'And you?' I'd asked Charlotte. 'Do you sing?'

She had smiled absently at the space between our shoulders.

'No,' she'd answered. 'Never learnt. I wouldn't know where to begin.'

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I DREAMT MY paintbrush got smaller and smaller until it was the size of a needle. It rolled around uselessly in my palm and pricked at my fingers when I attempted to take hold of it. The paintbrush entered the vein of my forearm, an insect's sting, a splinter of wood, and though I scratched at my skin, there was no wound, no evidence it had ever existed. The paintbrush had disappeared for good inside my body.

It had been over three years since my last cheque from Elke, and all the money I'd saved had steadily drained away. To my parents, my brothers and their wives, the new landlord, the grocer with the fresher produce, the butcher who still sold to Jews, the local bars that stayed open late, the kiosk round the corner where the man called me darling as he handed over cigarettes and a newspaper. I became reconciled to the depletion and finitude of our existence. Our last hundred marks were in a shoebox under the bed. At night I thought I heard the notes move, and, chastened by my attention, they would give a last rustle along the floorboards, then fall back asleep.

Alongside twenty other men in his class, Saul was retraining as a locksmith. In the meantime, I needed to earn for us both. I knocked on doors in the apartment building. I said that I was a mender. I could wash, iron and fold. I could make anything they desired. Copies from fashion plates, imitations of what mannequins wore in the department store windows. These statements came as naturally to me as saying my name. I lied about my abilities as a corsetière, my skills received second-hand from

a course that Mother had taken before the war. This was how I came to repair a corset, its boning completely bent out of place, for an elderly widow who paid through a crack in the door and moved out of the building the next day. The mezuzah she removed from her doorway exposed a small rectangle of unblemished white paint. I mended furs for the young women upstairs, their linings detached from the pelt, like animals that had shed their winter skin. Very little substantial work came of this. Mostly I took in laundry. When I returned children's clothes that had been submerged in food to a woman on the floor below, she was so pleased with the results she handed me her husband's SS uniform to be mended and washed. One button hung loose, a tear at the elbow. Three items, a small fee. Five boys went screaming by as she went looking for the shirt, the black wool suit growing heavier by the second in my arms.

'Is that' – Saul pointed at a large, dark stain on the shirt's sleeve – 'blood or soil?' We covered our mouths against the sour, adrenalized reek of its pits.

I was under no illusions about my options. I took great care in scrubbing his garments clean. Plunged in lukewarm water, salt and granulated soap, the fabric succumbed, grew soft. With an automatic touch, I kneaded and squeezed. I tried to think about other things while I cranked the uniform through the mangle as hard and fast as I could.

The wife shouted something after I knocked but didn't come to the door for several minutes.

'Ah, very good,' she said wearily. She touched her forehead and winced. I hadn't noticed the week before that she was pregnant.

I pointed at her stomach. 'Congratulations,' I said.

'Thirty marks a month for each one.' She put her hand on her stomach with a compulsory smile.

'And a medal, I've heard. How nice for you.'

'Right.' She didn't sound enthused. 'You have one of those Miele contraptions?' she asked, more interested.

'I mostly work by hand.'

She nodded, seeming disappointed. 'He's a good man.' She lifted the uniform to indicate her husband.

Two of the boys appeared and tugged at the woman's apron. She told them to leave her in peace, and they howled as they ran out of sight.

'If you're struggling to clothe them, given they're growing so fast,' I said

– this was safer conversational ground – ‘I could make shirts and trousers out of old bedclothes.’

‘How resourceful. That will please him.’ She wasn’t quite listening as she counted out the money. ‘Knock again next week.’ She touched my shoulder warmly. ‘It’s been hard since we got rid of the charwoman. Known the girl for years, and she’d hidden it the entire time. Broke things off with this man she said she’d marry and he was the one who told us. Her father’s a Jew. She’d been baptized, or so she said, and claimed ignorance of it. They’re all terrible liars. And as my husband says, a Jew’s a Jew, even a Mischling.’

I had learnt the correct expression for stories of this kind. I kept my eyes wide and my mouth grimly set.

‘Pillowcases, if you have any spare,’ I said, moving backwards away from the door.

There was nothing I could do but take in this uniform week after week. The dismissed charwoman was mentioned on every occasion we met. Little else preoccupied this woman. ‘Did I tell you about—?’ she would begin, recapitulating a story of a minor infraction I’d already heard about the week before. I listened only by imagining my head caught in the jaws of the mangle, the bones of my skull cracking. ‘They slit children’s throats, you know,’ she said unprompted in the middle of a story about the charwoman’s poor technique in cleaning the silver. Saul suggested we put a few Parisians in their pockets, to stop them breeding like rabbits.

I wrote to old clients, most of them Jews in a similar position to us. A young man’s dress shirt, the cuffs and collar ragged from use when he’d dropped it off, was finally in a fit state to be worn, but was collected by his mother, as he had swallowed cyanide a few days into the new year. He’d been reading *Der Stürmer*, his mother said, and driven himself mad. After an arrest for an unspecified crime and a spell in prison in which he was half beaten to death, a man required all his trousers to be taken in at the waist. Since he was unable to get out of bed, his wife offered her own diminished body as a substitute. Smaller than that, she said, and took the tape measure from my hands. Could floor-length velvet gowns once purchased from Wertheim, worn for special occasions, still smelling of brandy and perfume, be repurposed as bedsheets, given the frigid winter and the cost of fuel? They wouldn’t be needing these again, their mother remarked. I couldn’t get those girls out of my mind, mute in the doorway as I dismantled their dresses. Clothes were left in my arms with detailed instructions about

alterations and were never collected. The wardrobe steadily filled with these ghosts.

I clung to a belief in the usefulness of what I was doing. Weren't garments an armour, an expression of self in defiance of its erasure in public life, and couldn't they offer some solace or pleasure, if not protection? Saul was kind enough to agree with me. But I knew the truth.

~

Painting left my body like a disease, and I was revitalized by its departure. A spring spent largely indoors was followed by a summer of struggling to stay cool as I washed and ironed garments and a winter in which water froze in the pipes. I couldn't believe a year had passed when I noticed the city come into flower again. Bread smeared with lard for most meals, schnapps to lift our spirits in the evenings. Saul wasn't a natural with the hammer and file, but he could now cut an adequate key and remained optimistic about his prospects. A pocketbook filled with scored-through names and addresses recorded the clients of mine who had emigrated, died or disappeared. Eventually so many had gone it ceased to have any use.

Desperate, I continued to launder the clothes of the family on the floor below. Was it my imagination, or was the husband's uniform getting heavier each day like a freshly sated animal? I had fantasies of sewing incendiary material into its lining. Dietrich's manifesto, minutely folded. A drawing of myself, signed with my real name. Yet even the smallest transgressions weren't worth the risk. Saul saw the husband kneeling on an elderly man's neck after a row over a traffic infraction on the Kurfürstendamm. Bruises on the wife's face suggested indiscriminate violence. Slammed doors, weight thudding up the stairs, shouts and grunts and *Heil Hitler*s. The baby arrived, and screamed through the small hours like a bad dream that wouldn't permit the relief of waking. Nothing was more degrading than pressing the husband's shirts, not even washing shit from the infant's diapers. As she counted the few marks out in her palm, tales of the charwoman exhausted, the woman shared her theories on Jewish moneylenders and livestock traders, who, she was gratified to observe, were finally getting their comeuppance. I watched her little stained teeth as she spoke. The superintendent, she informed me, had already evicted the building's Jews, and you wouldn't believe the smell they left behind. She

announced this as she handed me clothes, her own and her husband's, finely tailored garments in new, expensive fabrics – Bemberg linings, hand-sewn seams – that all emitted the same curiously pungent scent, like they'd been steeped overnight in lilac oil.

Gathering information gave the impression of control, when it didn't just add to our despair. We read about family businesses dissolved, passports confiscated, arrests, deaths, how an affidavit might be secured, what you could expect from the welfare agencies. Saul would go through the newspapers with a pen, underlining things I would later be too anxious to read, his brow furrowed.

Sanity was etched underneath everyday items, if you knew where to find them: tea packets, gardening leaflets, recipe books, shampoo and face cream advertisements. Communist writings disguised as women's texts, assumed to be trivial, rarely worth an official's second or lingering glance. They moved around the city as our manifesto had, covertly, imperilling everyone who read them. You might receive something that spoke in two voices at once, or you might be unexpectedly confronted with silence. An envelope with Maria's handwriting addressed to me arrived in the post, but the letter had been removed, by her husband or the Gestapo, it wasn't clear.

Saul dissuaded me from writing to Charlotte when German troops marched into Austria. 'It wouldn't kill her to write to us,' he said, annoyed. I sent her a postcard reproduction of Frans Hals's *The Laughing Cavalier*, one of three in Saul's collection. I sent it to Elke's house, addressed to Charlotte. I didn't sign my name.

> The title was given to it afterwards. Hals hadn't intended to make an amusing picture. He painted black with such complexity that Van Gogh attempted to catalogue each shade, and arrived at 27 varieties. I've barely managed more than a handful myself. Onyx, ebony, charcoal. I thought I knew all the words that evoked the colour. Grief, for instance, and despair. Now I have so many other associations, the original ones feel redundant. The present, the future, hope and desire, all black. These intensities are lost in reproduction, as you can see, which might be for the best. The idea frightens me. Too much blackness for the eye to comprehend.

Café Dobrin was full of quiet, self-conscious conversation. Saul and I

shared a cup of coffee. Edith told us that she and her girlfriend had decided to leave Berlin for Shanghai. The ticket was eight hundred marks, not bad given a luxury liner shipped you out, and though you could only take ten marks and two pieces of luggage, you didn't need a visa. You could have an interesting life there, even attend synagogue if you wanted. They were waiting to get passage out for her parents, who intended to go west to Europe instead, but once their papers were sorted, they would be gone.

Edith clicked her fingers. 'Like that, faster even.'

'I'm just pleased it isn't Tel Aviv,' Saul said. He lowered his voice to a whisper and carried on angrily. 'I don't trust the British, they can't be thinking about our welfare, that should be obvious from our own government's enthusiasm for our resettlement in Palestine.'

His misgivings about emigration had failed to impress most of our friends. Many had gone to Palestine when the opportunity arose, and Saul had written them censorious parting letters, and still wouldn't read the updates they sent from the kibbutzim. I thought he might find it amusing to hear stories about Abe's struggle to learn Hebrew, or Ruth's new passion for agricultural science. But he met my efforts with dismay. Saul insisted this was someone else's homeland that the English had declared was ours. Besides, we couldn't all go to Palestine, and we shouldn't have to. We already had a homeland, he said, and we were already living in it.

'Where we are is our home,' Edith said to Saul, quoting the Bundist slogan she knew would appease him. 'I suppose we're really putting that phrase to the test.'

'But what will you do in Shanghai?' I said.

'I couldn't care less,' she whispered. 'As long as I'm not hauled off to some cell in the Alex. The slightest provocation these days, and they're knocking at your door. Off you go to God knows where, then your ashes are sent back to your family in the post.'

Saul winced. 'Ready for burial on the Schönhauser Allee. How courteous.'

'All of this won't be forever,' I said.

Edith shrugged. 'You and I hope. But not if you believe in the Thousand Year Reich.'

We embraced Edith on the street outside. Saul claimed he didn't want a melodramatic goodbye, and cried into Edith's shoulder anyway. I watched Edith rub Saul's back, and out the corner of my eye saw a woman drop a

swatch of red silk as she left the cafe. When I knelt to look closer, it was a monogrammed handkerchief soaked in blood, no white even at its edges, the silk still wet. Not stemming a nosebleed, more like a bandage for a wound. A warning, I thought, or an appeal. We went back to the apartment in silence. Walking always made me feel better. The city felt small, manageable, its parameters visible. I felt contained by it, reassured. Like a collar around a dog, a stay against some frightened animal instinct, an unravelling.

'We could still leave,' Saul said eventually.

'Follow Edith? I like the sound of where her friends are living. A neighbourhood full of German restaurants and bars, like you hadn't left if it wasn't for the all the signs in Chinese.' I was trying my best to sound cheerful.

'Or we could go to Amsterdam. Mother is there already. Cost her everything but she seems to think it was worth it. Your parents might be encouraged too.'

'We could tell them it was just for a short while. Pretend we're taking them away for the weekend. They wouldn't want to go to Tel Aviv either.'

We smiled at each other. These were comforting stories, but we knew they were just that, and I sensed we had both reached our limit for such conversations that day. We had even established a shorthand to communicate our exhaustion. I waited almost happily for him to use the formula again now. Saul would tell me not to worry, that we would think about it tomorrow. The phrase was an assurance that though we had no firm plans, and very little hope, we would at least be together.

~

We went to apply for documents at the Dutch consulate the following day. In small, dour offices the desperate congregated in their best clothes, hoping some external factor might verify their worth. Windows were steamed up with trapped breath, erasing the street outside as surely as if we were underwater. There was an air of disinhibition to these waiting rooms, as though a condition for emigration was not the surrender of assets but secrets. 'He went ahead,' a woman said to me unprompted of her husband, 'and he's already found a new lover.' Another woman feared she would be arrested after her brother was taken east by the Gestapo but she hadn't been

able to secure a visa to Argentina, as she'd planned. This was the third consulate from which she expected a rejection. Black-market visas, pregnancies, love affairs, abortions, debts, betrayals, so-called protective custodies that ended in death, petty crimes exacted against the state. All of this was relayed as casually as we might have once discussed the price of milk. Despondency was for afterwards: in here we would be firm and practical. What about papers, what about ports of transit, what about those left behind, what about language, what about border guards? What was rarely mentioned was our presumably shared condition as Jews. 'I'm German,' a woman who resembled me said, narrowing her eyes. 'Aren't you?'

We were summoned, and papers were being shuffled on a desk as we entered. There was a long pause in which air whistled through the bureaucrat's nostrils. Saul couldn't settle in his seat. His chair made pained noises against the floor as he shuffled his weight back and forth. I put my hand on his shoulder in an effort keep him still.

'Thank you for taking the time to see us,' I said. My voice came out very high, almost tearful, though I'd been determined not to get upset.

The man grimaced. Our application had been rejected, he said. I couldn't bear to listen after that. I let myself quietly cry as he said something about our assets, flight tax and foreign currency. And documents, there were a number of documents missing. Clearly, we hadn't studied the requirements at length. Our papers were returned to a wire basket. The clock behind us was consulted. Five minutes had passed.

'That's all, I'm afraid,' he said, and scraped his chair back.

The applicants in the waiting room stirred in their seats and studied us for signs of the outcome, an omen to analyse until their own names were called. I tried to smile but had no idea what my face was doing as I pushed open the door. The streets were a grisaille, colourless, the trees columns of stone with concrete-coloured birds, shadows rather than living things. Around us citizens of Germany conversed about their children's schooling, the best recipes for seasonal vegetables, the details of a minor scandal reported in the newspaper.

'We could try another consulate,' Saul said. 'But we might run into the same objections.' He paused to light a cigarette I had watched him steal from a man's pocket in the waiting room.

Neither of us had been able to acknowledge the truth of the situation. We

had left it too late. These consulates were unwilling to help. We were a nuisance to them and their demands were designed around a foregone refusal. This was without even considering the cost. The superintendent of the building had upped the rent, which we paid without complaint for fear of reprisal. We had been living off thinned-down milk soup for over a week. I hadn’t sent anything to my parents in months. Taking in laundry wasn’t enough. Our money had run out.

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I HAD NO choice. There was nobody else I knew with any power or influence. I was going over these justifications in a telephone box in a restaurant, just about believing them, when the maid picked up the phone. She sounded younger than the others, more like a child. She asked me who I was and when I said ‘Answald Dietrich’, she covered the mouthpiece and shouted into another room. I waited for Elke’s voice to announce itself on the line.

‘Yes?’ said Elke sharply.

‘Hello,’ I replied, my forehead against the glass window of the booth. ‘It’s Hannah.’

There was a pause in which I imagined Elke receiving this information on the worn upholstered chair in the hallway. Flushed, the receiver cradled against her cheek.

‘I’m surprised to hear from you. Of course, I knew you hadn’t left Berlin. We’ve kept an eye on your whereabouts. You’re now married.’

All this said lightly, just one old friend to another.

‘I would like to ask you something,’ I said.

‘I’ve thought about you,’ she said quietly, simultaneously.

‘Could we meet today?’ I said. ‘At Kranzler?’

‘What time?’ Elke said quickly.

It was easier not to think about what I was doing as I dressed and walked to Café Kranzler. I considered walking straight past the building as I

approached, turning around, forgetting all about it, carrying on with my day like this possibility hadn’t ever entered my head. Then I saw her.

Elke was waiting under the awning with her arms crossed. Her hair had grown long, almost down to the small of her back, and was worn in a plait with a black grosgrain ribbon. She no longer wore any make-up, and this made her features appear larger and less certain. She noticed me and nodded a greeting. As I got closer, she gave me an unselfconscious look of assessment. I knew I looked ill and couldn’t muster the energy to feel ashamed.

‘You probably think this fits me poorly,’ Elke said, clutching the sleeve of her dress.

After all this time apart, this was what she had to say to me. Its banality reached me as a horrible punchline, and I couldn’t stop myself from laughing.

‘It looks fine,’ I said.

She strode into the cafe, accelerating towards the back of the room once she was over the threshold.

‘You’ll have something to eat?’ she asked as I sat down. She was already twisting around to find a waiter, raising her hand to beckon them over.

‘That would be nice,’ I said. That I’d hardly eaten anything substantial in months made this hard to express with the right degree of nonchalance.

Elke frowned at me. ‘Good. It’s important to be healthy. Strong.’ Her frown intensified.

I covered my wrist, its visible bones, with my cardigan.

I ordered a pastry with a dark fruit filling and a large coffee with cream. The novelty of ordering these things and seeing them appear before me was such that I forgot momentarily why I was there. I concentrated on eating as slowly as possible. Elke ordered a cake she insisted I share. I suddenly saw her with Charlotte in another cafe, better lit with an elegant clientele, a dessert split with a single spoon. But that couldn’t be part of our conversation today.

On the way to the cafe, I had practised how I might phrase it. I addressed the birds. They sang encouraging notes as they flew from the trees.

‘My husband and I need assistance with emigration,’ I said.

Elke stirred sugar expressionlessly into her tea.

‘I see. In return for what exactly?’

‘Well, nothing, I suppose,’ I said.

‘Nothing,’ she repeated slowly. Nodding her head, she turned from me to the window.

‘Given all the work I did for you—’

‘The money wasn’t sufficient?’ Elke interrupted. ‘What a shame.’

‘It was more than generous,’ I said carefully. ‘Really, it was. But I thought you might consider this a favour between friends.’

‘Is that right?’

I flushed and lifted a forkful of cream up to my mouth. I still felt my emotions were visible to Elke, that they were objects as commonplace to her as ornaments in her home, even when we hadn’t spoken in years.

‘This will be the last thing I ever ask of you,’ I said.

Elke sat back in her seat and drummed her fingers against the table, considering this. She cleared her throat. The saucer was straightened, a napkin raised to dab at her dry forehead.

‘Alright,’ she said, leaning towards me and lowering her voice. ‘But I have a proposition for you. Something you might do for us.’

I placed my fork down deliberately and looked at Elke, whose pale eyes studied me, attempting to gauge my response.

‘More pictures?’ I asked.

‘Precisely,’ she said. ‘You’ve no doubt heard about the Great German Art Exhibition in Munich? Partly my husband’s initiative. We were able to resolve all the trouble caused by the prank your husband played. That ensured Dietrich’s work was accepted for display. Eight works in total. We had intended to keep your paintings, but interest was so great we were persuaded to sell all but one. The Führer himself purchased two.’ Elke paused for a moment to let this statement sink in. ‘Göring would now like one for his lodge. As you can imagine, Rosenberg was jealous that we had such a personal relationship with the artist. The frightful look on his face when we informed him Dietrich didn’t answer letters except through us.’ She gave me an indulgent smirk.

‘Which two did he purchase?’ I asked.

‘The second edition of the exhibition opens in July,’ she continued, ignoring my question. ‘More of Dietrich’s work has been requested. If you’re willing to paint for us again, my husband could arrange your departure. I’ve seen it happen before.’ She put a large wedge of apple cake into her mouth, and chewed for a while thoughtfully. ‘They would be nudes, like the others. Six, preferably. I would model for them.’

I thought about the painting of Olga and Maria inside the Führer's living room. Governmental reports strewn over an upholstered chair. Singing penetrating from the hallway. A soiled handkerchief next to a half-eaten sandwich on a goldrimmed plate. Air bitter from cigar smoke, cigar breath. I was there amongst it all. I had to put down my fork. When these men looked at the nudes, I would feel their touch on my skin.

'Well?' Elke theatrically checked her watch.

'I can't produce six paintings before July. Four might just be possible.'

'You're perfectly capable of fast work.' She sounded approving again, almost maternal.

'I was,' I said.

She narrowed her eyes. 'You haven't been painting these last few years?'

I shrugged. 'Not really.'

'How sad.' She looked at me neutrally. 'Write down what you need, and I'll see that it's purchased this afternoon.' She cleared her throat, and produced a small, bitter laugh. 'I trust you will be sensible this time. Otherwise, that husband of yours will be arrested in the time it takes to make a single telephone call. Understood?'

~

I knew Saul would require persuasion. I presented the idea to him like he had no say in the matter. I would begin tomorrow, I said. I was an artist again.

'No, Hannah,' he answered simply. 'I won't allow it.' He paused and exhaled slowly, trying to calm himself. 'I can only imagine what lies she has told you this time. She'll see us over the border herself? All she wants is to be lifted another inch in the estimation of the Führer.' He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. 'Please, don't do this. I'll think of another way to get us out.'

There was no use bargaining with him. We agreed I would write to Elke tomorrow, telling her I didn't need her help. Afterwards, we lay in bed listening to the noise from the street, our thoughts as plainly audible to each other as the drunk men and sparring cats, each of us alone in a pretence of sleep.

I wanted to do as Saul said. But the thought of more inertia frightened me. I waited until his breath grew shallow, his body heavy. I got up and laid

a sheet of baking paper out on the counter. With a blackened match I traced the line from a woman's neck to her waist. The subtle gradation of the ribs, the swell of her breasts, the dip of her hip bone. Forms that might secure our freedom.

I slipped out of the apartment in clothes chosen in the dark. From the window of the taxi, the clouds were zinc white, paint fresh from its tube. Elke met me on the steps to the house. Bougainvillea had been trained to crawl up the wall and surround the door frame. Bees moved through it, and gave the impression of sound, motion. Elke was shivering in a thin coat, tapping a gold cigarette case against her palm. She raised her hand awkwardly. Another version of Elke rushed to join this shadow of herself. Late afternoon, midsummer, years ago. In a short dress that showed the outline of her thighs. Covering her mouth as she laughed. Saying, 'There you are, at last. Always late, the great artist. Distracted by her admirers. The soup will be colder than the wine!'

'It's beautiful,' I said, back in the present, pointing at the bougainvillea.

'You must be quiet,' Elke said. 'My husband is still asleep.'

~

The first painting: a standing nude of Elke in a barren landscape, her arms raised, the sun beating down on her with an awful yellow heat. She could hardly pose for this for longer than a few minutes. She was pale, distracted, suffering as though she were where the painting depicted, not sat next to a fan in her dressing room. It took ten days of constant, joyless work to arrive at something adequate. Elke barely looked at the painting as she had it removed from the room by a man in a threadbare corduroy suit I had never met.

'Do you like it?' I said. Still the hunger for her approval.

'You're fortunate your talents aren't conditional on regular practice,' she said. She had only spoken to me coldly since I'd arrived. As though she resented me for having agreed to this.

'Who was that?' I pointed at the door where the man had disappeared with the painting.

'Nobody important. A student my husband has employed to make any necessary alterations. Pass it on to the committee. Where we hope it will be met with approval.' She had addressed this to the floor.

‘Disinfection, given its real origins,’ I said.

‘Something like that,’ she said, no trace of irony.

I could no longer talk to Elke. I was still keeping my whereabouts from Saul. There was nowhere I might put my thoughts but my sketchbook.

10 June

Elke in silk nightgowns that look like they are laundered at the end of each day and pressed at dawn, all of them different: peach, camel, oyster, edged with foamy lace like the spume of a wave. Saul must know where I spend the days, but says nothing about the paint under my nails, the turpentine stink on my clothes. A glut of locksmiths tussle over a few jobs. ‘I am of no use’, Saul says, ‘to anyone’. We have shame in common, but it fails to bring us closer.

More maids than ever, immaculate as fashion advertisements. Heels clicking down the corridor might be Charlotte, and I wait all day for those heels to pause by the door and, intuiting my presence, burst in. I wait in vain. I smoke a cigarette in the garden and notice a watering can tipped onto its side. An abandoned rake, opened shears flat on the ground. The laying down of arms, I think.

The second painting: Elke with her back to me against a lush green forest. Crawling with life, darkness congealed between the trees. Expectant, vulnerable, her body like a vase. A nymph with a length of pale pink silk held loosely between arms set at angles, waiting for a god to drop from the sky.

16 June

A shelf of specimens in Elke’s drawing room. ‘Wedding presents,’ she says. A spectacle of arrested life. A dried butterfly interred in a box, its abdomen turned to dust. I imagine Charlotte running her fingers along the glass cases, joking: ‘A metaphor for marriage?’ When I clean my face in the evenings, the towel shows blue and black, paint and dirty air. I expect flesh to rub off with it. To expose bone. To press harder. To continue until there’s nothing left of me.

The third painting: a room styled after the Virgin Mary’s bedchamber. Crimson fabric, stifling containment. Creased silk, creased pages of a book

left open at her side. I was tired, and it was showing in the work. Elke took this one away before I had finished.

'You need to hurry up,' she said. 'Aren't you aware it's almost July? The student will paint what's left.'

22 June
On the lower landing, believing themselves unobserved, one maid (no older than sixteen) reads aloud to another from Streicher's children's book. Screaming I instinctually associate with pain. I stop to listen closer. Laughter, all at the same high pitch. I open my mouth and feel a wave of nausea. I run to the bathroom and put my face under the cold tap.

The final painting: a version of Omphale as painted by Rubens, a favourite of the Führer. On top of a mountain, a suggestion of birds in a pale spring sky. Elke straight as the staff in her hand. A peasant's blouse cropped to reveal her naked stomach and thighs, topped by a fur stole with a lifeless muzzle. Hercules is incarcerated, the story goes, in Omphale's household by the gods as punishment for murder. Rubens shows Omphale taking pleasure in this great man's debasement, employing him amongst the court's craftswomen. His humiliation and entrapment were painfully familiar to me. As was his new vocation. A length of yarn slack between his hands, spinning wool.

Weeks passed in which I painted through the daylight hours, largely without emotion. I couldn't let anything encroach upon the urgency of my task. But when I paused for a moment – swallowing tea or pushing open the door to the bathroom – I felt all the shame and self-reproach it was necessary to suppress in the sittings. How wrong I had been about Elke. My delusions about her character – her sophistication, her secret store of feeling – and my belief in the reciprocity of our desires, were the most disastrous of these errors of judgement. Other lies I'd told myself were smaller, essentially inconsequential. Her good taste had just been wealth; her generosity an appetite for control; her intelligence merely regurgitations of things she'd read and heard. I welcomed the death of these fantasies. When I thought about the years I'd spent in her thrall, I finally saw the dull fact of how much I had been manipulated and exploited. Elke had simply done whatever was necessary to encourage my compliance and

conscientiousness. To make me a better artist, perhaps – certainly a more malleable one.

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ELKE WAS DISTANT when we said goodbye. It was a windy afternoon, and she braced herself against the front door, the little hairs around her crown blowing about crazily. She thanked me without letting her eyes rest on mine.

‘Remember, we would like to go to Amsterdam,’ I said. ‘But if that’s not possible, we would happily go to France. We aren’t fussy.’

‘I’ll arrange it all tomorrow.’ She looked over her shoulder. ‘I must go, I’m waiting for a telephone call.’

‘You’ll write when they’re ready?’

‘Yes,’ she answered, closing the door. ‘They should arrive on Monday. I’ll send them to your new address.’

~

I waited several days before telephoning Elke. I was proud of the measured way I accepted the delay, which I assured myself was inevitable. Elke had been optimistic, she probably didn’t know how hard visas were to come by, and she had overpromised. With mounting dread a week later, I wrote a letter requesting the payment we agreed upon. Then another. No more than a line or two, unsigned. After a fortnight, I was sending them twice a day. It was late July, too hot to remain in the apartment. I composed these letters on benches in parks, crying so I wouldn’t cry in front of Saul, crying until the bones in my face hurt, unafraid of drawing attention to myself.

I arrived at my apartment building one evening to find Elke hovering at its entrance. Her hair was gathered into a high bun almost as big as her head. She wore a pale moiré evening gown finished with a large bow at its neck, and elbow-length gloves the colour of soot. I was merely an errand on her way to somewhere more important. Regret and shame weren't even as powerful then as a new emotion, stirred up by those recent sittings: hatred. Elke was wringing her hands, and her lips moved, addressing the air. We met each other's gaze after a moment, and Elke startled.

'You need to stop sending those letters,' she said. Her voice was loud and unsteady. 'Isn't it clear we're done with you? There was no contract in place. We owe you nothing.'

'I don't understand,' I said.

'My husband will have you both arrested if you don't stop harassing us. It's that simple. You'd be separated, and given my husband's low opinion of your husband, I don't expect he'd survive whatever questioning they'd subject him to. I warned you of that already. Must I keep repeating myself?' She stopped to scratch her neck. Her skin was inflamed, and a speck of blood now glistened on her throat. 'My husband's opinion was that we never got our money's worth out of you,' she went on. 'Typical of your sort. Now we are even. It's a shame we couldn't trust you to give over the pictures freely, but you've made fools of us before. I never heard the end of it, the amount I paid for those portraits.'

'You're punishing me for your ignorance of the art market?'

'Are you not listening? I won't require your services again, and whether or not you think it's fair there will be no additional fee for the new paintings.'

'No exit visas?'

Elke inspected her nails.

'No,' she said quietly. 'My husband wouldn't – he wouldn't consider it. There's nothing I can do.'

I watched our future extinguish. Slowly, then all at once, a smouldering cigarette flung into the Spree. I was determined not to start crying again. I closed my eyes, and when I opened them, Elke had lifted the train of her dress and turned around. The engine of a parked car behind us came to life at her approach.

'I thought you cared about me.'

Elke glanced back towards me.

‘I do. That’s why I’m here.’

‘Where’s Charlotte?’

I had agreed to those final sittings partly because I’d expected Charlotte would be somewhere in the house. She would appear one evening as I left with her bag packed, black mascara running down her cheeks. She wouldn’t even need to apologize. I would forgive her the confusion and violence of her choices, and we would start again. After a few days, I had resigned myself to a pair of shoes, a ripped pair of stockings. Evidence, however small. I’d tried locked doors when the maids briefly drifted from my side. Put my ear to keyholes, hopeful. I’d even looked carefully into the faces of the maids, in case she was disguised amongst them. It had all been in vain. Charlotte wasn’t there.

Elke squinted at me. She shook her head.

‘She left. That was months ago now. I don’t know where she is either. Took nothing with her. Not even her purse. I expect she’s abroad. Paris, perhaps. A capricious creature, isn’t she?’

~

I still took in that woman’s laundry. I learnt to say ‘Heil Hitler’ without gritting my teeth. With such willingness and enthusiasm, it was as though I meant it. There was nothing I could do when she began to lower the agreed price. I continued to smile as she spoke of the savagery and nastiness of all the Jews she had ever known. Drinking children’s blood as we would our morning coffee and cream. Her purse wasn’t always easy to find. She would pay me later, she said. She never did, and by the following week it was forgotten. Cleaned clothes would be inspected as I waited on the threshold. If anything wasn’t entirely to her liking, she would scowl and close the door without any payment at all. I had a sense not merely of exploitation, but of being toyed with. There was something in her manner that suggested she was relishing the power she had over me. The children ran screeching around the apartment all day and the baby only grew louder as it got older. That summer whenever we switched on the gramophone, regardless of how quietly it played, a broom knocked a warning against the ceiling below. After a while the broom cautioned us even from walking around the apartment with too heavy a tread. They would let us live only as the dead did: in silence, immobile.

In offices turned squalid by the heat, we were told that the emigration quota had been reached for the year. Quite enough refugees had crossed the border already, an official with a sour expression explained to us, and we weren't to get any ideas, as we would be detained immediately if we entered the country illegally.

'Then what should we do?' I said to him carefully.

He looked somewhere to the side of my head. Another wave of desperation broke over me.

'That isn't my concern,' he replied.

On the upper deck of the bus, watching tense, unsmiling commuters manoeuvre around misshapen trees, I leant against Saul's shoulder and cried.

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44

ONE DAY FOLLOWED the next and we dutifully filled the hours. There was never enough to eat, and we hardly got a full night's sleep between us. I washed clothes we no longer wore just to have something to do. Saul spent the days writing what he claimed was an essay that disproved the idea that Rembrandt was unusually sympathetic to Jews. But when I glanced over his notes, it was more like a journal. He was even more without hope there than he was in conversation with me.

Saul went out for a walk one afternoon while I finished that day's laundry. I had just wrung out one of the woman's blouses, and was hanging it on the drying rack when I noticed a sheet of paper on his desk. I thought I would just glance over it.

THERE IS NO ARTIST NAMED ANSWALD DIETRICH

> Announcement for the Art World! Celebrated German painter Answald Dietrich is, and always has been, a young Communist Jew from the Scheunenviertel by the name of Hannah Gans-Meyer/Sherman.

[Above this, Saul had written: *Decide on name? Perhaps more embarrassing to be fooled by an unwed woman.*]

> Kurt and Elke Grese have deceived the government and the Volk for their own profit. Vanity and avarice were their sole motivations. Herr

> Grese's ascension in the Culture Ministry was secured on lies. Sherman's paintings were sold under the name of Dietrich. Some were doctored, others retitled. Most were nudes commissioned by Frau Grese herself.

[Saul had added: *Could suggest inversion/sexual degeneracy here or elsewhere?*]

> Nobody could say the execution of their conspiracy lacked skill. Indeed, Fräulein Sherman's paintings were unwittingly bought by the Führer himself. If the star of the Great German Art Exhibition is a Jew, then – contrary to the claims of our nation's great minds – blood is irrelevant to art. How do we reconcile such beauty from the hand of the so-called 'racially valueless' and 'sick'? Who amongst the Führer's favourite artists will next be revealed as a Jew?

I read it three times, my heart pounding. I didn't hear Saul come back into the apartment.

'I don't know what that is, really. I thought it might offer some relief, writing everything out.' He sat down next to me and was quiet for a moment. 'I imagined putting it under the floorboard, and someone finding it in a hundred years' time. Rather fanciful, I know.'

I couldn't continue to live like this, I realized.

'Why wait? We could print it now. Edith left her mimeograph with a friend of yours, didn't she?'

Saul laughed sadly.

'I hope you aren't serious,' he said. 'They know where we live. Frau Grese was here. They'll just arrest us.'

'All those people you know in the KPD – they would help us. We could disappear for a while. Edith has told us stories like that, remember?'

'They would tell us to split up.'

I looked at Saul. His brown eyes glittered as they studied me. When we first met, I had wondered if I would ever grow accustomed to his beauty. I couldn't say I had, not yet. It could still take my breath away.

'It would only be a few months at most,' I said. 'We could tell our children about it one day. And they'll be totally disbelieving because we'll be such bores by then.'

Saul ran his hands uneasily through his hair, considering it.

‘Don’t you long for life to be boring? I do.’ He pointed at the sheet of paper. ‘Anything you would change?’

‘Use my unmarried name,’ I said.

~

The two days that followed were filled with tense, furtive arrangements. I woke up on the morning we had resolved to leave the apartment and felt terrified, not of arrest or interrogation, but of separation. I drew Saul stretched out in a recline on the inside cover of a novel by Thomas Mann. Thin as a tine, he was serious, his muscles hard and unmoving, as he never was when he had modelled for me at the beginning. I was restless, and the paper seemed to move of its own volition under my hand. The length of Saul flickered from the book’s edge to its spine. When I made mistakes, I drew over them. His outline grew and multiplied until he was several versions of himself in motion. Still, it wasn’t enough. I knew it was all I would have to sustain me in his absence.

A few hours later, I had folded another blouse and skirt, and several pairs of clean underwear and stockings into my largest handbag. Saul had thrown a pile of books from his nightstand into his briefcase and nothing else. The nude self-portraits were still on the walls. Saul watched me begin to take one down and stopped my hand.

‘Leave them up,’ he said. ‘I like to think of them keeping watch.’

I was too tired to disagree. I leant back into his chest and let my eyes close.

‘Apparently the leaflets will be ready to distribute tonight,’ he continued, softly.

I had never felt more keenly the stubbornness and foolishness of what I had done. It might have just been another ordinary day in the apartment. Saul putting coffee into the pot, touching my neck and laughing. This was nobody’s fault but my own.

‘I should never have agreed to any of it,’ I said, turning to face him.

‘It hasn’t worked out well, but what has lately?’ Saul said. ‘My suggestions didn’t improve the situation either.’

‘I went back to her.’

Saul winced. ‘I know.’

‘When you told me not to.’

‘More a suggestion than a command. And I understand why you did it. We were hardly inundated with other options.’ He managed a weak smile. ‘She was lying about the visas?’

‘Of course.’

‘I can’t say I’m surprised.’

He put his arms around my waist and drew me into him.

‘I’m so sorry,’ I said, muffled by his body. ‘I feel so foolish.’

‘It wasn’t all bad,’ he replied. ‘You made some truly remarkable work. In my mind, it was worth it just for that.’ He pulled away from me and held my shoulders. ‘But there was something else, wasn’t there? I admit I was captivated by it myself. Few live their own life and someone else’s simultaneously. You were yourself, and you were also a man beloved of the Führer. I envied the freedom of that lie. We might all declare that we weren’t what we were said to be.’ He shook his head and shrugged. There were tears in his eyes.

‘You forgive me?’

‘Not a question of forgiveness.’ He sighed and ran his hands over his face. ‘We told Hans eleven, I think. We must go.’

Waiting for the tram that would take me to the other side of the city, we both grew shy under the pressure of saying goodbye. The men and women around us looked similarly preoccupied, engaged in their own private dramas. Saul stroked my hair in silence. The impression of something being removed from beneath my feet was so powerful I couldn’t stop glancing at the ground, the pavement sliding back and forth incrementally, about to give way to nothingness.

‘I’ll write in a few weeks when it’s safe to do so,’ Saul said quietly. ‘I’ll look into forged papers for us in the meantime. Don’t worry too much. I promise we’ll be out of Berlin by the end of the year.’

A woman I briefly feared was our downstairs neighbour, accompanied by a litter of children, pushed past us without a word of apology. She stopped and turned to face me. I saw that she was simply another unit of Volk breeding stock, her youthful face prematurely aged by broken veins tangled around her nose and cheeks. Saul took my arm and pulled me away from the other waiting passengers. He kissed me, deeply and unself-consciously in spite of everyone around us, holding my face between his cold hands.

Heavy rain made the afternoon appear more like the dead of night. A

darkness that burrowed into you, got behind your eyes. I stepped onto the tram unsteadily and turned to wave goodbye to Saul. But he had already disappeared down one of the nearby side streets.

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IN THE WEEKS that followed, I did not leave the apartment in Wedding. The couple who lived there, Hans and Ingrid, a factory worker and a domestic servant, were rarely in its two bare rooms. Exhaustion had whittled them down to their bones, but they reserved the last of their energy to be tender with one another. Ingrid forbade me from cooking or cleaning for them, but I helped where I could. As I peeled potatoes with a dulled knife, I thought about removing my own skin from my body like this, if I would be as pale and featureless underneath, if another life might then be possible. Each evening after we ate, once the dishes were washed and dried, I drew them side by side at the kitchen table. It was soothing, remembering who I was like this, when so much of the day was given over to forgetting. I began to tape these drawings up in their small apartment. I signed my married name at the bottom of each one, even those drawn on old betting slips and scraps of newspaper.

I slept through the afternoons on the cot Ingrid set up for me in the kitchen and read distractedly by candlelight with the curtains drawn at night. I became resigned to the rest of my life being like this: I would exist like a cat in the apartments of strangers. Without a radio, I relied on Ingrid or Hans for news. Amongst gossip about her employers, casual as the way she corrected my poor vegetable paring technique, Ingrid reported the attempt to assassinate the young diplomat in the embassy in Paris. The perpetrator was just a boy, she said. Walked straight inside the building and shot vom Rath while railing against injustices to Poles. That evening after

dinner, I couldn’t concentrate on Ingrid or Hans, and drew a gun with human features, a room with border guards at its doors and a man split in two. I heard about vom Rath’s death days later through conversation in the neighbouring apartment, our adjoining windows open to the unusually mild autumn air.

~

Ingrid shook me awake. It was dark, and I could hear the churning of raised voices and footsteps on the street below. Ingrid said that her mistress had let her out early that day, in case she or the other servants wished to participate. The woman had smiled at them as they descended the stone steps with the warmth of a young mother releasing her children to play. Ingrid ran. Past the smashed glass disgorged from the windows of shops, where women in modest hats and coats scrambled over one another as they picked through the rubble for spoils. Like when a bowl of offcuts is left out for a cat, Ingrid said, and in the morning the meat is covered in ants.

Hans arrived home an hour later. He told us his employer had attempted to enlist him in a riot. Promised a bit of fun, many had gone ahead. Hans had pulled his cap low over his head and walked off alone. The synagogues were on fire. On Oranienburger Strasse, where I had whiled away hours of my childhood? Yes, he’d seen it. On Prinzregentenstrasse? So he’d been told. On Fasanenstrasse? He’d heard none had been spared. Arrests were being made, he went on, and not of the vandals. Hans noticed my expression, and began to equivocate and stumble over his words. Ingrid told him we’d had enough of that for the night, and put her arms around me, like a physical barrier might prevent certain thoughts from entering my head. I knew we were all thinking about Saul. I shouldn’t call anyone, Hans said, or leave the apartment, added Ingrid, or turn on the radio, they chorused.

I lay awake in the dark in the kitchen. I held the drawing of Saul against my chest. I was careful to think about nothing. To close my imagination firmly like a door.

~

I passed the first few days after the pogrom as though they were one long night. I addressed the dark hoping Saul was somewhere within it. Crows

rattled their demands from the eaves at dawn, and only when the rest of the building loudly awoke – the thin walls made it feel like one enormous room – was I capable of sleep. I didn't feel anything when Ingrid brought me the leaflet Saul and I had made. It was dog-eared, marked with fingerprints. There was no doubt that it had been read.

I hated being alone, but the sound of the key in the lock meant more detail about that night. The name of someone thought trustworthy who'd been seen carousing with the enemy. The friend who had returned to their shop to find every single item in it broken, down to the pencil pots. How ash was now spread across the city like a variety of grass. A week later, in the middle of one of these accounts, I told Ingrid I couldn't wait any longer. I needed to talk to Saul. Ingrid reluctantly wrote down the address of another KPD member in a nearby building who had a telephone.

'You really can't wait?' she asked softly.

I shook my head.

The short walk took me past a shop hollowed to a husk, a statement of ownership just visible in the doorway. Across it, a smear of red paint read: *JEW*.

The man who opened the door to the run-down apartment building smiled broadly when I said Saul's name. I could see he was young, despite his heavily shadowed eyes. He reminded me of my brother. I thought about the letters I'd written to my parents on my last sheets of notepaper. *Please just come to Wedding, we will decide where to go from there.* Ingrid had insisted these weren't safe to post.

'Of course, come in,' he said. 'I'm Klaus. You're the artist? His wife. Hannah, is it?'

'I'm Answald Dietrich,' I said.

He laughed. 'They'll have trouble explaining that. If the Führer himself cannot discern the difference.'

I thanked him and studied the number he had written on a scrap of paper. Above it, a signature had been tested out in several different ways.

'For our forged papers,' said Klaus, noticing me looking. 'In case it's ever interrogated. It's a simple word, but I keep spelling it wrong. I don't know why.'

I called twice, and nobody answered. Klaus dialled the number himself a third time, in case I had made a mistake. We handed the receiver to one another lightly, like the silence was meaningless. Klaus feigned unconcern

and said we could try again the following day. I walked slowly back the way I came. I remained calm only by imagining I was Maria, on my way to see my powerful husband after a day of inputting sentences into a typewriter. Maybe I would write back to her tonight with my own empty envelope. I hadn't slept properly in weeks or eaten enough for months, and it was finally catching up with me. Were the exhaust pipes vibrating sonorously on every passing car, or were locusts descending from the trees? The eyes of every passing person bored into me, and they understood who I was and what I had done and were pleased I was finally being punished.

Back in the apartment, I lay on the cot and resumed thinking about nothing. Once Ingrid returned, I ignored her warnings against leaving until Hans got home, then went to see Klaus again. I forgot the scarf and coat and walked through the streets in Ingrid's only summer dress, not feeling the cold, not feeling anything at all. Uniformed men whistled as I walked by. This time it took several minutes for Klaus to open the door.

'I'm sorry,' he said. The way he gripped the door frame – I knew instantly. 'Come in, will you? I've only just been told myself. You'll need a drink.'

Klaus said that Saul and some friends were arrested the night of the riots. The rest had since been released. But Saul had been killed not long after they'd arrived at Sachsenhausen.

22 November

Manage a slice of bread without throwing it up immediately afterwards. Hans and Ingrid weeping, always weeping, weeping for hours and through the night in the other room. It isn't their custom to cover the mirrors, but they know it's mine, so use an old bedsheet. I don't tell them how cold I am, so cold I cannot eat or sleep or think. I want to write to Charlotte: he was killed, and it was my fault. They don't agree, Hans and Ingrid. But they know so little about what I've done. I need his things. Garments with his smell. Ingrid says I can't go, it isn't safe. But I'm already dead, there's nothing more to lose. I walk by Klaus's apartment. I think who I might telephone. Who I have left.

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I HAD ALMOST resolved to put the phone down when the maid picked up. I didn't bother with any pretence.

'Hannah Gans-Meyer for Frau Grese?'

'Why are you calling?' Elke said as soon as she got on the line. A difference in her tone made me more uneasy than if she had been furious. She sounded afraid.

'I need to get out of Berlin,' I said. 'As do my family. Don't tell me you can't help us.'

A silence. I was gripping the receiver so tightly my entire body ached.

'What makes you think I'm any more able to assist now than I was then?'

We had both instinctively sunk into a whisper.

'I don't think you tried very hard. I think you wanted to punish me.'

Another silence.

'I might have a way,' Elke said. 'But just for you, I'm afraid.'

'I won't accept that,' I replied desperately.

Silence again.

'Fine,' Elke murmured. 'I'll look into it.' She paused. 'But if you are interested in going ahead of them, which would only be sensible in my opinion, we could meet this afternoon to discuss it.'

It was pointless reflecting on all the empty promises of the past.

'Alright,' I said. 'Come to my apartment?'

'I take it you haven't been there recently?'

‘Not for weeks.’

I heard Klaus sob and turn on a tap in the kitchen.

‘It’s been raided,’ Elke said. ‘Be careful on your way there.’

I carried myself across the city with great effort. I pushed hair that didn’t feel like my own from a face I couldn’t bear to glance at in shop windows. Sensation had left me, and I had no thoughts. I was vacant, and because of that vacancy, fearless.

The entrance to the building was wide open. I climbed the stairs, and the doors on each landing cracked open and slid closed, my tread calibrated against that of the Gestapo. Our apartment was unlocked. Post was strewn in the hallway. Amongst it, I assumed, was the letter from the Oranienburg registry office, the death certificate Ingrid warned me was on its way. In the living room the nude self-portraits had been removed from the walls. Saul’s bureau and writing desk were tipped on their side, loose paper everywhere. His clothes hung in the wardrobe, but all mine were gone. My sewing machine had disappeared.

A faint knock, and footsteps in the doorway.

I turned to look at Elke. She was so grey she hardly appeared human any more. A tower of ashes in a cream tweed suit.

‘Where are my things?’

‘They weren’t very well hidden,’ said Elke, ‘your husband’s treasonous activities. The desk drawers weren’t even locked. A revolver under the floorboards. All very incriminating. Amateurish. I expected you would be more intelligent than that.’

Elke adjusted her skirt and stepped further into the apartment.

‘I knew your apartment would be raided once I read the leaflet. Luckily, I had your address. I took your belongings, then told my husband and the Gestapo that you had left Berlin. You were in Paris with Charlotte, you’d told me yourself. Only the husband should be pursued, I insisted.’

‘I wouldn’t have left without him,’ I said. ‘I’m not like you.’

‘I hadn’t seen those pictures you had on the wall,’ she went on, ignoring me. ‘Self-portraits. Quite charming. A Venus in action rather than repose.’ She put her hands into her pockets and smiled. ‘I thought I might keep them for myself. To see your name like that was astonishing. Remember that you never used Sherman even in the beginning.’

‘They weren’t yours to take,’ I said.

‘I thought it was a shame that I never got the chance to tell you how

much I liked your more modern paintings,' she said, still mostly talking to herself.

'I wanted to embarrass you,' I snapped.

Elke gave a long sigh.

'It wasn't always like that between us, was it?'

She didn't dare say this directly to me. It was murmured to the space where my self-portraits had hung, and I ignored it.

'Given what's happened it's only natural to feel as you do. You loved your husband very much, so Charlotte told me. Despite the risks, I didn't act as I did expecting your gratitude.'

'You imagined I would thank you?'

She flinched.

'The agreement was that you would be arrested.' Her voice wavered. 'You shamed the ministry and the Führer too. You can't know how much they loathe to lose face. You would have been killed, and I made sure you weren't. Here I am helping you still. I've spent the last few hours putting everything in place so you might leave.'

'And my parents too?'

'I'll try my best.'

Elke picked up the shards of a plate and handled them gingerly, interested, like they'd broken apart independent of human force. She placed them on the table in a semblance of tidying up.

'The lie about you leaving Berlin puts us both at risk. I can't have my husband seeing you in the street. I suspect he's gone looking for you already.' Elke stopped and pressed her fingertips against her eyelids. 'Dietrich is dead. It will be in the newspapers next week. I have documents for you. For Helga, Dietrich's wife. There's a train leaving for Paris tonight.'

~

I saw her one last time. And him. The following week, I noticed a German-language newspaper on the table in the hallway of my hotel on the rue des Rosiers. Emigrants in neighbouring rooms tried to stay abreast of news from home, but I wasn't usually amongst them. I was taken aback: the newspaper was open on a full black-and-white reproduction of the first nude of Elke. Rain hissed on the other side of the wall, and wet coats

hurried soundlessly past the windows of the communal lounge. A few lines established some biographical details about Answald Dietrich. The penury of his early career, the triumph of his mature successes, a true representative of the Volk. I scanned the article, avoiding momentarily what it was about. He was dead, the headline read, survived by his wife, about whom little was known. He was gone, he wouldn't be mourned, he was nothing to either of us any more. He was a signature on approximately seventeen oil paintings in private hands. He was an idea that couldn't be agreed upon. He was *a trompe-l'œil*. He was the line of *A* interlinked with the curves of *D*.

An exhibition in his memory was being hastily organized, the article went on, as tributes poured in from the Culture Ministry. The only surviving photograph of the famously reclusive artist, a smaller heading read in bold type. Below that, a shadowy photograph of a figure turned from the camera, his face hidden by a large hat. For a moment I saw myself. Young, hopeful, as I was when I met Elke. I blinked, and the resemblance disappeared. Who was this man? For a moment I feared it would be Saul. I brought the paper closer to my face. A form retreating into darkness. A play of shadow and light. It was nobody.

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PART 5

1942, on the Prinzregentenstrasse

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THE LIGHTER HAS run out of fluid. Elke Grese, who has already suffered enough that morning without this to contend with, shakes the small silver contraption. At first with feigned indifference, lightly. Noiseless, confirming its emptiness. Letting frustration get the better of her, she agitates it madly, nearly slamming her fist against the ceiling of the car. Mustn't be thinking straight this morning, she concludes. Ridiculous not to check (as she always does) before she left the room. There's too much on her mind, she'd said as much to the hotel receptionist the evening before. A very pretty girl – she must remember to telephone the manager to ask for her again.

She does not care for Munich. Never has. But she must be here for the Great German Art Exhibition, her husband's pride and joy. The programme in her lap states that the museum houses more than twelve hundred artworks. Only the best, which in this case means only those that closely accord with the ministry's criteria. The Dietrich paintings from her collection are still exhibited. Her own nude remains a favourite, she's told. But she's tired of the pageantry. Saying hello, how are you, to the ministers' wives and mistresses. Finding complimentary remarks for all the dreary paintings born out of her husband's patronage. Worse, she must listen as the men talk. Nod. Goebbels will speak. She has an idea of his theme. What does art mean to the nation in a time of war? At this rate, she hopes he has already spoken.

She tries to remain calm. She blows air out of her nostrils. She begins to rattle the lighter again. The metal is no longer cool and produces the same

unpromising lightness. There's nothing in there. The futility of the gesture aggravates her intensely. She lets it fall from her hand. Kicks the back of the empty seat in front. The driver twitches, clears his throat, reminding her she's not alone, but keeps his gaze fixed ahead. She could apologize, gather herself (she's needed inside, her husband is waiting and has been for some time now), but is overcome with the injustice of her circumstances. All she wants is a cigarette. She groans. She must tolerate it, at least until she's outside, where she might accost a passer-by. Walk a lit cigarette round the outer edges of the Englischer Garten. The sun is shining, the breeze light. This possibility soothes her.

She puts her hand into her bag and feels the edge of her compact mirror. She has to look perfect, unaffected by the night's broken sleep and the journey in the overheated car. Her hand flutters towards her neck. Her skin is damp, tacky with powder. No point examining her face too closely. She studies her hands. You look fine. Good, even. Didn't the hotel porter say so himself? Beautiful. She rolls her shoulders forward, slowly inhales and exhales. She glances at the driver. Don't give him anything to gossip about. Like everyone, he's aware of the currency of others' doubts and misgivings.

No, the lighter won't be forced, she decides at last. She feels proud of her decisiveness. Have one of her husband's lackeys buy her another. Not a disaster after all. She removes the cigarette from her mouth, and places it on the seat next to her with the rest of the packet.

Perhaps it's just as well, given her husband's comments if there's even the faintest scent on her clothes. The other wives don't. Vile. Unnatural. Her chest tightens, thinking about him. Women's minds are enfeebled, he says, that's why they're prone to such vices. Given another chance, he would have married some flaxen-haired innocent from the countryside. He might have become a father. Look what he must tolerate instead.

She should have known, really. Men of that kind only grow more irascible with age. She saw the same thing happen to her father. His grip tightening around a tumbler of brown liquid she knew even as a child wasn't normally consumed in such quantities. The stained shirt. The round swollen head with its enlarged purple nose and permanently red cheeks. As the night wore on, he would want to talk. How the water looked from the port of Dar es Salaam. The planes of Windhoek. She cringes down to her toes. Best not to think about that given the state of her nerves. With a practised mental sleight of hand, her father disappears. Good. She shifts

around in her seat, uncomfortable, and pulls at the hem of her skirt. She notices them again, the cigarettes. She gives them her full attention for a moment. Considers throwing the lot out of the window, taking aim at the men and women primly advancing along the street towards the entrance of the building. This idea pleases her. Arm extended, the packet flying through the air, making light contact with the back of a woman's head, who would turn around, bewildered, the small missile on the ground. Ha! Instead, she inhales, closes her eyes.

What a pity. A smoke would have gone some way towards alleviating this headache, already broken through the drugs she took that morning. Four in quick succession with hot coffee, double what the doctor prescribed. Opening her eyes, she winces at the pain in her brow. She considers ingesting more, having the driver return her to the hotel, climbing back into bed with all her clothes on. Try again tomorrow. Leave a message for her husband with the doorman. Let sleep take her away – though these days it's not always where she wants to go. Her mind has begun to disobey her at night. She looks through the window with her eyes half-closed, not wanting to fully take it in.

She retrieves the compact mirror from her bag. Flicks it open, purses her lips, angles her head down. She studies herself, frowns.

She hasn't coloured her hair in four years. She is thinner than she has ever been thanks to the pills her doctor prescribed. There is little she would change about her life, all considered. Writing letters in the afternoon. Dictating to the maids when she's tired. Dinners at which every guest desires her attention. Has she heard about the minister's mistress, very young and fertile as a heifer? Covering her mouth, lowering her voice. Really? One drink becomes four or five. Six, with another bottle in the car on the way home. Conversations recalled the next morning as fragments, punctuated by thick wedges of luxuriant blackness. Unsteady promenades from her bed to a hot bath. Light fading in the distant window. Wrapped in a clean towel, reading a few lines of a romantic novel. At dusk, dressing again. Several wardrobes filled with silk and wool. Lately, with the gifts from her husband and his friends, more fur coats than she knows what to do with. (She lets the maids wear the Jews' furs as they clean the silver in the unheated rooms.) Money, no concern. Rations don't bother her. Only the occasional nervous episode. The maids are more obedient than they were when she was a young woman. They hardly look her in the eye any more.

‘Excuse me?’ The driver moves one hand over the wheel as if turning a corner. Though of course they are stationary. The engine is off, has been for over an hour.

‘Yes.’ Frau Grese grabs the lighter and turns it upside down.

‘Are you ready?’

She frowns. ‘Not quite, no.’

The driver says nothing. Removes his hat and runs a gloved hand through his hair. Not a sigh, such blatant impertinence would be too much of a risk, but she understands its meaning. He wants her out.

This annoys Frau Grese. He has no right to hurry her. This is his only job in her household. Remunerated well for it too. No doubt he’s promised some silly girl his presence at a tavern across town. She will get out in her own time.

‘You have somewhere you need to be?’

‘No, ma’am.’

‘Good.’

Before the business with the lighter she had been thinking about something. She leans back into her seat. She must return to that. Ah, yes: Frau Bechler and her awful letter.

If only she could remember what it was that she’d written to Margrit the week before. She puzzles over this for a minute or two. A single sheet of pleasantries, like all the others. Asking her to dine somewhere. Reflecting on a party given by a mutual friend. The perfunctory questions that would be echoed back to her. How is the husband, the house? She probably mentioned the children. She snaps the compact shut, remembering. In her letters to Margrit, and only Margrit, she reserves space (never more than a single paragraph) for remarks about art. Bland, uncontroversial praise for work made known to the nation by her husband’s advocacy. (Letters are opened whoever you are, after all.) A nod to their previous intimacy, the years they had gone to galleries together. Gently pointing out a detail, a name, an unusual technique visible on the canvas if you knew how to look, as Margrit did (who was educated at university in the history of art). She had learnt a lot in this manner. Then they would depart arm in arm to a cafe to talk. Frau Grese is staring at her knees, thinking vaguely about this lost past when it comes to her. A picture of a boat by Karl Leipold in which the sea and sky merge into a greyish brown sludge. They saw it together at an opening. This is what she mentioned in their last letter, after a long but

unfeeling passage of condolence. (Margrit's boys had been so very young, barely out of school, though all deaths for the Volk are noble, and sacrifices must be made.) Her question to Margrit was this: would she like such a picture in her home? Margrit's letter arrived promptly the next day. *I would no more purchase this painting than drown myself in a gutter full of shit.* Frau Grese was baffled, even wondered briefly about reporting her. (The assessment of Leipold seemed anti-German, in her opinion.) Then three days later, a telegram from Margrit's husband informed Frau Grese that her friend was dead. By her own hand, she heard at a party later that night, nearly choking on a slice of beef. Hydrochloric acid in a flute of champagne.

She coughs into her palm, suddenly tearful. No, she is not going to think about that today. She finds her handkerchief and twists it between her fingers. She is not going to consider that the two of them, once the dearest of friends, had not exchanged an honest word with one another in close to fifteen years. This was what Margrit accused her of that awful night after her boys were sent out east to fight. She made a scene at dinner, the men pretended not to notice, suddenly fascinated by their soup bowls. Certain death, Margrit roared. And for what? Frau Grese pulled her from the room into the dark corridor (shooing the maids listening at the door) and told her to calm down. Margrit had regarded her steadily. That's when she shouted at Frau Grese about her falseness, tears in her eyes. Frau Grese didn't know how to respond. Their lives were near perfect, she might have said. Wasn't Margrit happy? She'd begun to ask her this when Margrit turned from her and advanced towards the garden, where she remained for the rest of the evening. She'll freeze to death, one of the other wives said, sounding excited at the prospect. Frau Grese sees her friend trembling with rage in a thin silk dress with snow on the ground. She shakes her head. Letting her feelings get the better of her. She hadn't always been like that. Granted, it was hard to fully endorse the Führer's claims about the vulnerability of the Slavic people (from what she gathered, the offensive wasn't entirely going to plan). But to announce your misgivings in public!

The car is now far too hot. Difficult to breathe, let alone to think. The driver's sour smell has penetrated the entire vehicle. That really was just like Margrit, she thinks, warming to her theme. Causing a fuss. Singling her out for criticism. Taking a so-called stand. This wasn't the first time they'd fallen out. No. Margrit didn't agree with her treatment of the maids in the

early years of her marriage. These were some of the first intimate conversations they'd had, once the afternoon coffees shifted into evening cocktails. Margrit thought her seducing them was immoral. Went pale, put her empty glass emphatically down on the marble countertop. I never force them, she'd said to Margrit, which was true, but such comments did nothing to placate her. You might try looking amongst your own circle, Margrit insisted. There are plenty of interested women, trust me. You might find you have more to talk about. It was all very puritanical of her, Frau Grese thought, and missed the point. She liked the girls' inelegance and inexperience. Their big open faces and flat bodies. Accustomed to the crude overtures of local boys, unaware it was possible for two women to fuck. Like this, Frau Grese would say. The curtains would be drawn. The gramophone on. The door locked from the inside. Two of their fingers, inserted into her mouth, moving her tongue over nails that tasted of cleaning fluid, then guiding them under her skirt, pushing their hesitant hands through her underwear. She enjoyed playing the maids off one another, the minor drama of glances and touches over dinner. If anything soured, she could easily have them dismissed. Her husband hardly listened as she lamented the careless destruction of crystalware she had dropped herself. Just get rid of the girl, he'd reply.

They agreed to disagree, her and Margrit. As long as you aren't – Margrit paused, considering the possibilities – ruining their lives. Of course she wasn't. Margrit implied her own lack of fidelity to her husband, but never told stories, itemized gifts and fucks, not as the other wives did in the years after. Frau Grese sat across from Margrit and a gorgeous mannish woman in a box at the Atlantic and had drawn the conclusion such a display surely intended. They weren't even sitting close to one another. But she saw something in the tension between their bodies, the different aspect in which Margrit lit her cigarette and opened her mouth to laugh.

It had been different with Hannah. How obvious the girl's longing had been. Frau Grese couldn't remember the last time someone had looked at her like that. And yet it took some of the risk out of it, knowing how easily Hannah could be possessed. But when Frau Grese had finally relented and given herself to Hannah, Hannah's hunger had intrigued her. How quickly her hands had moved from Frau Grese's neck to her breasts. She had known to use the flat of her tongue on her cunt. She had curled her fingers gently inside her and rocked. Frau Grese discovered later that these techniques had

been taught to her by Charlotte, who applied herself to her body in an almost identical fashion. Fucking Charlotte, she had the distinct sense of becoming Hannah, and retroactively becoming Charlotte on the occasions when she'd fucked Hannah, of being both women and herself simultaneously, occupying some thrilling space between all three.

Hannah's mouth always tasted of Loeser & Wolff tobacco. Cigarettes. A few minutes have passed without Frau Grese thinking of them. The packet reappears in her field of vision. All at once the headache envelops her from above. She grits her teeth. Moves her knees in a semicircle, twirls her wrists. The lighter glints up at her in appeal. Who is her husband to judge such habits? He's hardly without vices himself. She doesn't comment on it any more (she's learnt her lesson on that account) but his dependency on the drug is obvious, and only getting worse. From time to time, she takes a little morphine herself, always in the lowest possible concentration. The sensation is pleasant enough. She can go months between one injection and the next. Admittedly it's become more regular recently. She has some waiting in the hotel. Or did she already take that? She thinks about this. Perhaps. She makes a note to procure more for tomorrow from the office doctor.

The driver, who has hardly moved since he asked that question, then does the unthinkable. He opens the door and steps out of the car. Frau Grese is incensed. He will be dismissed tomorrow, she decides. He taps on the window.

'I need the air,' he says, raising his voice to be heard through the glass.

She rolls her eyes. It's true he looks queasy from heat, puce-coloured.

Fine, she mouths in response.

This buys her another twenty minutes at least. She turns away from the driver, who leans against a tree – not smoking, she notices – watching the couples holding hands with an unhappy expression on his face.

She tips forward and wrenches her shoulders back, feeling all her joints click. No, it wasn't the first or the second or even the third time she and Margrit had fought. Though they always forgive each other. Forgave, she corrects herself. There will be no more reconciliations. They'd argued repeatedly over Hannah and Charlotte. You're toying with the Jewish girls, Margrit said. Quietly, under her breath in the corner of a restaurant, a wedding party in full swing behind them. This didn't seem a fair assessment to Frau Grese, not to mention that it had nothing to do with Margrit. She

waited until she'd had a few more glasses of wine before she responded, grabbing Margrit's wrist as she stood to leave. I care about them deeply, she said, I've protected them as much as they've let me. Helped them. Fed and clothed them. Frau Grese purses her lips, the self-righteousness flowing back through her. If Hannah hadn't married that horrible little Communist from the museum, things might have turned out differently. Naturally it hadn't been her intention that Herr Gans-Meyer should be killed. But it wasn't as though she hadn't warned them. Several times over. And there was no denying he deserved punishment. Treason was a serious offence. Many had died for much less.

Frau Grese raises a hand to cover her eyes. The sun is angled directly into the car. It will set soon, she realizes. The day she never wanted to participate in is almost over. But the comfort she expects with this discovery does not arrive. She frowns. What's wrong, exactly? Not the cigarettes still. She knows she will have one soon, she's almost ready. No, it isn't that. She closes her eyes to better access her mind, and is surprised to find that she's still annoyed with Margrit. How dare she be so superior! Ruining her enjoyment of her new gem-encrusted tiara, a gift from her husband's colleague. Margrit had looked at it and said, 'How fortunate we've all been that the Jews have such good taste. If it were my relations, there would be nothing worth taking.' Blandly, like it was nothing to humiliate Frau Grese. A moan rises from her gut. Margrit hadn't understood. The strings she pulled for those Jewish girls, and how did they repay her? With absolute indifference and ingratitude. Sullying her name; running away like a bored teenager.

She touches her mouth. Her lipstick is now an oily paste. She cannot enter the museum in this state. She tries to push the bitterness aside, but it won't be moved. Margrit is dead, she thinks, emptying her handbag into her lap to retrieve her silver lipstick case. There is no point addressing her in this manner, settling scores. She will never see her again. She dabs imprecisely at her mouth. She cares very little about looking her best. She imagines her husband turning to her with that rictus grin, all his rage stored up for later. She laughs to herself. He won't like what he sees. She ceased to long ago. Frau Grese smiles as she applies pressure to the handle and steps out of the car.

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PART 6

1953

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MANCHESTER GUARDIAN, 8 APRIL 1953

For the first time in the United Kingdom a painting will be exhibited by the little-known German painter Answald Dietrich (1885–1938). Dietrich counted Adolf Hitler, Herman Göring and Joseph Goebbels amongst his collectors, but much of his most celebrated work has been lost or destroyed. The painting in question is an early and exceptionally rare example of his work and is known amongst connoisseurs of the period as ‘the Dietrich Venus’. Under the title *Venus* (1932), it was purchased at auction from Sotheby’s by the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, where it will be on display from next month.

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HANNAH SAT AT the kitchen table with the square of newspaper in one hand and the letter in the other. She took a deep breath and put the clipping to one side, which had stained the tips of her fingers black. Frowning, she wiped them against her apron. She stood up, went towards the sink, and stopped herself from executing some automatic gesture. The tap, the kettle, a teapot. One thing at a time, she thought, as she heard her husband shuffle from their bedroom across the corridor into the bathroom. She flattened the sheet of foolscap and read it again. The reassuring sound of the radio announcer took over. It would be useful to know what the weather would be like, whether she would need an umbrella. She took a deep breath. She'd already dissected the letter several times since its arrival in yesterday's post. After the initial shock had subsided, what surprised her most was that he would write to her in English, though she had hardly spoken, let alone written, German in years.

Dear Hannah,
I am not sure how to begin this letter. I have written many of its kind over the years, but it has never become any easier.

I recently returned to Berlin for the first time since 1938. I'd been given a telephone number of an old friend of ours, Edith, from whom I had managed to retrieve other addresses. The difficulties of this were great, but I won't bore you with details of that for the moment. I knew all of them believed I was dead. As did you. I hadn't known whether or

not you had survived. I was delighted to learn from Edith that you had been living in England for over a decade. I have resided in London for thirteen years. I have a small flat around the corner from the Wallace Collection. I was thrilled to discover that Berthe Morisot lodged in a boarding house nearby during a visit to the city in 1875, and in those weeks went regularly to commune with Fragonard and Hals.

[Something had been crossed out after this, and Hannah once again brought the paper closer to her face. There was the letter 'I' – and the rest was illegible.]

Edith informed me of your marriage. I can only offer my most heartfelt congratulations. I feared writing to you would be needlessly upsetting, until I opened last month's *Manchester Guardian*. One of your paintings is being exhibited in Cambridge, having sold for a fair sum at Sotheby's. I thought all those works had been destroyed. I enclose the notice. I will take the train to see it on 14 May, arriving at the station just after midday. I know it's rather short notice, but perhaps you would consider making the journey from Birmingham, and spending the day together.

Yours,
Saul

A small voice began to count to ten from the opposite chair. Hannah put the letter down and forced a smile. She would feed her daughter breakfast (Rose was four years old and shared her husband's freckled, pink colouring) and she would be driven to the train station. She had arranged it all the day before, telephoning the lending library to tell them she would need the day off. (They were so kind to her there, such decent people, and didn't press her to explain.) She recalled bending down to the mat and seeing the envelope addressed to Mrs Hannah Armitage at that exact hour the previous morning. The handwriting had been familiar. The way the H was double the size of the A: she had immediately known it was Saul. This cannot be, she'd thought, reeling from the gut-punch of its revelation. Saul was alive. She whispered it to herself again. He was alive.

The kitchen suddenly felt cold, and she remembered her bare shoulders in Ingrid's dress. The second-class compartment, the handbag with a single

pair of clean knickers balled inside. The uniformed drunks, their stench of sandwich meat and beer, her terror mounting as they moved down the carriage, the same order barked on a loop. *Papers, papers.* Blood had boiled in her head; bile had spun in her stomach; her breath had stopped. Was it visible, she'd wondered over and over during those years, had it clung to everything she'd ever touched, her difference, her wrongness? She knew she had to pull herself together. *Papers, papers*. She'd handed them the identity card provided by Frau Grese: Helga Dietrich, née Schmidt, born in 1900. (A decade before her birth, but malnutrition and sleeplessness disguised her real age.) The men had nodded, satisfied. That was it. That was how her survival was won.

She stopped herself there, feeling the fabric of something essential – her peace, her clarity – give. There was no point raking over all that again. With effort she returned to her marital home, the linoleum where she stood in her slippers, one hand pressed against the warming radiator.

The day before, she had taken the letter straight to her bedroom and closed the door. This is impossible, she'd thought. Rain and birds had chattered faintly in the garden. She had sat and listened. Slowly, doubt had crept in. What Klaus had heard might only have been a rumour, and it was common then for hearsay to masquerade as fact. She'd left Germany under another name herself. She'd remained like that, her mind curiously blank, until it was time to collect her daughter from nursery. At dinner (a casserole she'd burnt, scraping half into the bin) she had said simply, 'I'm visiting a friend tomorrow in Cambridge.' Her husband had nodded pleasantly in agreement. 'Very good,' he'd said, not looking up from the newspaper.

Long ago she'd decided not to overburden her husband with details about her life in Berlin, not least because anyone with a passing knowledge of world events at that time could guess at her circumstances. (The mothers at her daughter's nursery detected her accented English and fell silent in her company.) She had never wanted to arouse pity in him, this much she'd said to her husband when they had only known each other a single afternoon.

She met Edward during her tenure as a domestic servant in a large, gloomy house in a village south of Wolverhampton, the third position of its kind and the first to properly stick. Rain was permanently streaming down the windows and the cot in which she slept was damp to the touch, even in the height of summer. Hannah fed the horses apples, read haltingly aloud from the novels of Jane Austen and attended to her mistress's clothes in the

small, windowless room in which they were chilled like fine wine. He was a friend of the family visiting during a convalescence, seriously wounded on the front for the second time in circumstances everyone but Edward himself regarded as heroic. It was 1941. The young man who rang the doorbell (in a chequered suit that appeared large on his small frame, smiling apologetically) didn't look like Hannah imagined he would from the comments she'd heard around the house. She hadn't been in England long enough to understand how understatement asserted someone's beauty and charm even more than openly remarking on it. Hence the dismissive remarks about the young scholar, who would, her mistress was fond of murmuring under her breath, break a few hearts in his lifetime. Edward addressed Hannah directly in German, asking her if she'd read Goethe, of all things, and she nearly jumped out of her skin. No, she replied very demurely in English. He came to find her after dinner. He undressed her urgently in the box room, her mistress reading the newspaper on the floor below. A few months later they were engaged.

He knew she had been a seamstress, and that she'd been married to a man who was murdered in a camp just before the war. He had listened gravely as she explained this – she'd only told the story once. Hannah could still see his expression very clearly. It had conveyed to Hannah with a moving simplicity and forthrightness his desire to shield her from any more pain.

Hannah wiped her eyes and crossed the room to meet her husband, a leading authority in obstetric medicine, who she loved dearly, who was a good man, who could be relied upon to take care of her.

They didn't have much time if she intended to catch the eight o'clock, Edward said, as there might be a little traffic. Rose was lifted into his arms: she would be dropped at his mother's on the way. Hannah thanked him, and went to pick up her coat from the stand and study herself in the mirror one last time. She would arrive at an extraordinarily measured phrase for her feelings on the train, she decided. Start from the evening you left him, and simply tell him everything. Go day by day if you have to.

They drove to the train station. Edward was talking about possible gifts for his mother's birthday and appeared unconcerned that Hannah was only half listening. Had she remembered her small packet of aspirin, her new lipstick? She touched these reassuring shapes again inside the handbag she had cleaned thoroughly the night before, needing a distraction with a

semblance of usefulness. She'd tipped out crumbs from Rose's sandwich, a toothpick, an old tissue, and thought, am I really seeing Saul tomorrow?

'Have a nice day,' Hannah said to Edward as she stepped out of the car. Her husband looked back at her eagerly and said a few words she didn't entirely hear, it being an unusually windy morning. Edward would give a lecture, she thought, followed by another just after lunch. He would then drink a pint of ale very slowly at a shaded table of the pub with the biologist from the neighbouring office, return home and fall asleep in the armchair. It would be an ordinary Thursday for him.

Once Hannah changed trains, the connection made by a hair's breadth in a mild panic (confirming with the distracted conductor inside the carriage), she fell asleep, waking only when that same man called Cambridge as the next stop. It was disappointing not to have had more time to prepare. Suddenly she felt flustered. Having forgotten her compact mirror, she attempted to gauge her appearance from her reflection in the window. There seemed to be nothing there but an oval of pale, quivering light. She reapplied her lipstick and pinched colour into her cheeks. She put to herself a series of questions she had been avoiding all morning. What if he had changed beyond recognition, having succumbed to unhappiness and bitterness, as many like them had? Despite everything, this somehow seemed unlikely. (An enviable temperament for a husband, her mother had always said.) The next thought was harder, and she felt herself blushing against the emotion it dragged to the surface. Would she mind if he had a new wife? Young, beautiful; English, bound to have suffered too, but not the same suffering, which was somehow harder to bear. It was embarrassing how much the idea displeased her. After all, didn't she have Edward?

She stepped onto the platform and checked her watch. It was ten minutes to twelve. The concourse was packed with men, their faces obscured by hats and newspapers. Saul had never been punctual. This had frustrated her (she remembered once hiding his watch in the sock drawer to make a point) but it was now a great relief. She might take a minute to gather herself. She walked out from under the awning onto the street.

He was sitting on a bench reading a book. Sleeves rolled up, sunburnt forearms thickly crosshatched with dark hairs, a hat at his side. The sight of him moved Hannah with such a blunt physical force that she gasped. There he is. There is my husband. As she'd slept, the train had taken her elsewhere, across the English Channel, out of time. A voice sang in her

ears: ‘A widow at her age, childless too, and her looks hardly fitting for a woman so young, a great shame.’ (This was her first mistress, a stout flannel merchant’s wife in Rochdale.) She felt sweat on the back of her neck, Diana’s spear reaching towards her prey. She saw Saul as he was before she knew his name: a young man with a mop of untidy hair and attractive creases around his eyes, enraptured by a detail in a painting. She saw Saul with his head thrown back in a room lit by two thin candles, his eyes closed, the muscles in his outstretched arms tensed. She watched Saul in a pair of threadbare swimming trunks dive into the lake, beckoning her in and holding her body under the water, giddy, enjoying their sudden weightlessness. She heard Saul reading the newspaper aloud in bed, talking in that warm, measured way he had when he was explaining an idea.

‘Hello,’ she said. ‘I can scarcely believe it’s you.’

How odd to speak to him in this new voice, she thought. Her words struggled through all the time and emotion that separated them, and came out soft, uncertain. She plunged her trembling hands into her pockets. These might be necessary, she immediately thought, if a handshake is the right greeting in the circumstances. (How does one welcome a risen ghost?) He looks lovely, she thought. Not at all old. That final summer, living off stale bread and vegetable peel, we ceased to even look like ourselves. The greying stubble was the only feature she didn’t recognize, and she studied it, realizing too late this meant she was staring at his lips. She was back inside their room now, watching Saul lift his shirt over his head. She recalled the slightly frantic way he held himself inside her, his breath quiet and ragged. Until she’d met Edward, she hadn’t known that men had their own styles with a woman’s body. Edward was languid, confident, but she missed Saul’s hunger. She sighed. Such thoughts won’t make this any easier, she thought. She touched the ends of her hair, and blushed.

‘Hannah,’ he said with a start, and stood up. ‘I’m so pleased you’re here. I wasn’t sure that you would come, or rather I would have understood if you were apprehensive or merely busy – I’m sorry, how are you?’

She looks like an English housewife, he thought, and could have laughed at the absurdity of seeing her in this guise, her hair sensibly pinned, her face dry from powder. And yet he knew he couldn’t look at her too closely. He was remembering her body. Holding her in a silk nightdress, slowly lifting its hem above her thighs, his fingers finding her in the dark. He forced himself back into the present, to the middle-aged married woman stood

before him in a coat too heavy for spring, adjusting her hairpins. Here she is, he thought, and she's been dressing and undressing and taking walks and looking at paintings and meeting scores of English men and women, and for that entire time I might have simply caught a train to see her. If this had happened sooner, they might have fallen into each other's arms. They might have kissed on that bench with the absorption they had once lost hours to in the shadowy corners of bars near his apartment. He might have unfastened the top two buttons on his shirt so Hannah could press her hand against his chest. It was awful, how desperately he wanted Hannah to touch him. But there was no use thinking like this. Because the fact was, too much time had passed. They were practically strangers. She was another man's wife now.

'I'm well, thank you,' Hannah said quickly. 'I hope you don't mind talking in English?'

'Of course not. I can't say that speaking German in public endears you to strangers, even now.'

'Don't stand up,' Hannah said. 'I'd rather sit. I'm actually rather nervous, aren't you?'

Why can you not simply say how you feel? she thought. How she had longed to look at his face just one more time, how she had begged and bargained with God, and would have exchanged anything for it in the years afterwards. Her own life frequently felt less important than seeing him again. It would have been nothing to give away.

'I'm the same,' he said. 'I hardly slept last night.' He looked down at his shoes. 'I'm sorry for writing so suddenly. It must have been a great shock.'

'I read your letter so many times,' Hannah said. 'Hoping, I suppose, it would feel more real. I could probably recite it now by heart.' She looked around her at the young men in gowns talking volubly, fussing at their sleeves. They were unlikely to have any real privacy that day. This would have to do. She swallowed, looked at him steadily. 'The notion that you were alive was so – I can't think how to describe it. Shocking, as you say.' She paused as though to test the word against her feelings. 'It was like everything that had happened since was somehow false as well.' She wrinkled her nose. Up flashed those same images, the carriage and uniforms and sunrise over the border. 'Do you understand?' she asked.

'I do,' he said quietly.

It had been terrible; he couldn't bring himself to tell Hannah just how terrible it had been, the years he had spent trying to reach her, all that

fruitless searching. Over time, the urgency of his desperation had softened into acceptance and grief. You couldn't live like that forever, his friends had insisted, a line had to be drawn somewhere. Occasional leads from the International Tracing Service had come to nothing. She had vanished, he was told flatly by state officials, it wasn't uncommon. He had planned to return to Berlin and seek out Elke Grese, who he was certain would know Hannah's whereabouts. When he was told Frau Grese was dead (she had killed her husband and herself shortly before the war ended), he feared he would never find Hannah. Maria had died in childbirth a year after they'd left, he discovered. Olga had taken her last breath on a cold night in one of the war's dramatic crescendos underneath the bomb-struck rubble that had housed her for four decades. Charlotte had disappeared, and nobody seemed to know whether she'd survived either. He had run out of options. Eventually an English friend visiting Hong Kong had met Edith by chance at a dinner party and returned with the revelation that his wife was safe.

'Did Edith tell you I have a child?'

'She did,' said Saul, nodding. 'A girl. She told me all about your family when she came to London.'

Edith knew Hannah's husband from a friend of an aunt who'd employed her in a house in the English countryside. 'What's he like?' Saul had asked of Edward. Edith had shrugged. 'He's very sensible,' she'd said pointedly. 'You shouldn't worry. They're well suited. They'll have a nice life together.' These comments had enraged Saul, though he wasn't exactly sure who he was angry at. After he'd put Edith into a taxi, slurring their assurances to write, he had taken off his hat and thrown it to the ground. Stamping on the black felt until it was completely misshapen, he had walked directly into a lamp post and begun to cry.

Hannah couldn't think what to say next. There was so much else she could never describe. How she had spoken to Saul at night on first arriving in England, exhausted by days silently wrestling with the new language. His presence was so real to her she would spend hours recounting the little triumphs in the household in which she'd been employed. His responses entered her mind with a vividness that suggested he was pressed against the wall in the room next door. His jokes made her laugh so much she had to bury her head under the pillow for fear of waking the other girls. Perhaps it had been her brothers all along. Or her parents. Maybe not just them, but

everyone, the entire Scheunenviertel taking turns to entertain her as she lay dreaming in the foul servants' quarters of that house in Manchester.

Saul put his hand on Hannah's shoulder. He had explained how he had gotten out of Germany so many times now. But each telling made the circumstances more absurd to him.

'You must wonder how I'm here?'

'Of course. But you don't need to tell me if you'd rather not go over it.'

'It's alright. I feel like I'm telling a story about someone else.'

Hannah put her hand on his.

'The chaos on the transport was beyond description,' he said. 'A mix-up with identity papers meant I was released in another man's place. I didn't think – I just ran. I kept going until I had crossed the border. I wrote to Ingrid and Hans when I got to Paris, but they had no idea where you were. They said you'd gone to our flat and never returned. Then they were arrested and – I expect you know the rest. Their execution still haunts me. Well, after that, I feared the worst for you too. I didn't simply give up. For years I searched—' He was tearful, shaking. None of it was coming out right.

Hannah closed her eyes. What was it that she wanted to say to him? For years she had blamed herself. Any happiness she felt would be crushed by the same dull realization: Saul was dead, and she might have prevented it. At the birth of her daughter, she had held the mewling creature in her arms and thought, I all but murdered Saul myself. Shame had dragged her deep under the surface of experience, above which she could dimly perceive her English friends and family turn to one another and laugh, at ease. She had been drowned, she had settled at the very bottom of an ocean where she had resigned herself to rot, and now she had been pulled to shore. The breath had returned to her lungs. She would tell him some version of this later, she decided. She might simply say she was relieved.

'I'm glad you looked for me,' Hannah said. 'I had this feeling at the time that it really did matter whether or not I survived, especially once I arrived in England. I had got that far. The energy to continue believing that, after everything that had happened, seemed to come from outside of me. It was so strong and pure. Perhaps it came from you.'

Saul took her hand. He stopped himself from stroking her fingers. Or kneading her wrist. He would just hold her hand while she cried. Hannah pushed her face into the shoulder of his coat, which only smelt of him

faintly. A cloud was tugged over the sun, then shooed away by the wind. Hannah patted at the tears on her cheeks ineffectually. Saul offered her his handkerchief.

‘Are you familiar with Cambridge?’ she said after a while.

‘No,’ he said. ‘But I’m told the route from the station is very simple.’ He was relieved at the reprieve. He reached into his pocket for the map. It seemed wise not to overburden their first meeting with emotion. Besides, he wanted to see her smile, laugh. ‘Straight ahead,’ he announced, and tentatively touched her elbow.

It felt good to have Saul hold her as they walked. It was reassuringly familiar in a way she’d feared nothing from her past would ever be to her. Hannah turned to him, smiling.

‘Are you married?’ she asked.

‘I’m not,’ he said. ‘I suppose I’ve never really . . .’

He trailed off. He might have said, I am married to you. He hadn’t been without opportunity for another marriage. He’d had many lovers since arriving in England, more than he could count. He pictured himself easing the door to his flat open with his shoulder, flicking on the light switch and manoeuvring his companion for the night towards his bed, which the charwoman always dressed too tightly with linen. Occasionally they would notice the wedding ring on the bedside table. ‘She’ll be wondering where you are,’ these women would pronounce, rolling their eyes. The banality of the accusation pleased him so much he almost encouraged it; he never once corrected these women’s assumptions. The young men he’d picked up in smoke-grimed pubs had never mentioned it. He’d enjoyed the unspoken agreement to discretion in these encounters, the tactful way conversation had veered towards the neutral ground of literature and art. But he’d stopped that some years ago: it had begun to depress him. The men had been gentle, intelligent, acquiescent, just as he had been at that age, and he’d been confronted with all the naivety and hope that had been taken from him. Women didn’t spark the same grief. None of them reminded him of Hannah.

No, he couldn’t tell Hannah any of that. And it wasn’t the only thing it felt necessary to hide. When he went to Berlin a month ago, he had rung the bell to the final apartment they had shared, and a young woman had answered the door. Limp, orange hair cut into an unflattering bell. Large eyes a shade of blue that was almost white. Not exactly beautiful. But he

had felt something enter him, unlike desire's habitual dull alarm. He wanted to check under the floorboards, he had announced without explanation, like he was a tradesman there to check her plumbing. To her credit she had agreed, shrugging as she moved backwards, clearing his path. Then she had followed him as he marched directly to the bedroom, and watched as he pulled up a plank of wood to reveal a bundle of sketchbooks and letters, and a small canvas coated in dust. A nude portrait of him at twenty-eight. Fortified by youth and innocence, and visibly in love in the way he still noticed in people now. They had looked at it quietly. Vibrating with adrenaline, he had attempted to speak. The stranger had put her hand on the small of his back. He had been certain he would say something if he just opened his mouth and waited. Nothing. The stranger had then stood in front of him. She had embraced him with real warmth, her fingers working over his shoulder blades. It had seemed a natural extension of this consolation when she kissed him. He hadn't expected that he would undress the stranger, press his mouth against her small white breasts. Afterwards, listing around as though drunk, he had cut his heel on a loose skirting board in the bathroom as he attempted to wash himself in the sink. He had nearly laughed at the absurdity of it all, his blood on the chequered linoleum, leaving his mark like a stray cat returned to lay claim to its territory. In the end he had stayed there three days, hardly leaving this woman's bedroom. They had never spoken about the painting. She was only twenty, but that meant she had nothing to do with what had happened to him, he reasoned. He couldn't stop thinking about her: Birgit was her name. Even now with Hannah at his side, he struggled against the image of Birgit lowering her body onto his, her expression gravely serious, like they risked something truly awful happening each time they fucked.

He was thinking about someone, Hannah thought. She shrank into her coat, feeling plain and unwanted. Vaguely she recognized the absence in his expression, as it had once pertained to her. She pressed her arm closer to his side.

'Your work has kept you busy, I imagine,' she said.

'I suppose it has,' he replied. 'I work at a small museum in London. It's in Richmond, if you know it. I always thought I would write a book, but I've been rather disorganized.' He frowned. He really ought to finish that paper on Grosz.

The Fitzwilliam Museum was bigger than Hannah expected. She craned

her neck, shaded her eyes, and took the whole of it in from behind the railings. Trumpington Street was busy with students, who talked into each other's faces rather than look as they walked. Three charged into Hannah as she pondered the sky above the museum, its streaks and dribbles of cloud. How was it that even this looked different in England? More uncertain, as though out of politeness.

Saul climbed the steps and hesitated, turning at the threshold. Hannah bit her lip. My wife has married an Englishman, he thought. The injustice of it took him aback for a moment. He squinted into the noon sun and added silently to himself, we might have had our own child. He knew this was a dangerous way to think. Great effort had gone into dismantling such dreams. More noisy undergraduates made their way around Hannah, who continued to block the narrow thoroughfare. Saul let himself briefly burn with this unhappiness. He lit a cigarette, and each exhalation brought more feeling out of his chest. Being unanchored, he reflected, had given him a different sort of life in the end. Freedom, books; lovers boundless in number, boundless in tenderness. Slowly Hannah climbed the steps to join him.

'Would you like one?' Saul took the cigarette from his mouth.

'No, thank you.' Edward would smell it on her dress, Hannah thought.

'Frau Grese would probably have seen this as a triumph,' Saul said, gesturing around him. He was trying to sound good-humoured. 'Having Dietrich somewhere like this. German tastes invading the most rarefied English soil.'

Hannah sighed. The name she knew it would be impossible for them to avoid.

'I hoped when I arrived in England that I would never have to think about her again,' Hannah said. That conviction had proven challenging over the years. There were women with a certain shade of dyed blonde hair who could still floor her entirely. One had recently moved into the house opposite her own. She told Edward she had seen her kicking their neighbour's cat so as to avoid the inevitable dinner invitation. She had promised herself that she would at least never have to look at Frau Grese's body again. Yet here she was.

Saul wasn't sure how to respond to this. It had been a mistake, perhaps. They might simply have met near his flat, walked around Hyde Park and talked. He could have finally shown her *The Laughing Cavalier*, the

feuilletine ruff that no reproduction came close to capturing. He pictured Hannah washing her hands in his bathroom sink, rain having forced them indoors. Her blouse drying on a radiator. Turning to him as she stepped out of her skirt. He might have asked her to lie down on the bed as he kissed her. He had never been so preoccupied with a woman's mouth as he had been with hers. He looked at it now. It was still perfect. He had to remind himself that he had a question for Hannah he couldn't ask anywhere else.

They moved inside the museum. Saul marched over to the information desk. Hannah watched him from the corner of her eye. Because she had given it all up so long ago, because her ambitions were to raise Rose and please Edward, she found museums faintly accusatory. Nobody had forced her to stop painting. And yet she couldn't remember the last time she had even seen an exhibition, let alone picked up a paintbrush.

They followed the directions given by a woman with a long white bob at the desk, and made their way separately up a set of stairs. Rilke was right, Saul thought as he passed through a room of underwhelming Italian pictures, the people walking in front of the paintings are always more interesting than the paintings themselves. They took a left at the end of a corridor and wandered into a small, circular gallery.

Saul took Hannah's hand. But she felt oddly calm. It came to her suddenly that she knew who was waiting for her in that painting – it wasn't just Elke. Herself at twenty-one, naive and ambitious, holding a paintbrush, unaware of what was to come: she was there too. A man shook his head and turned away from her picture, made a shrugging gesture of aversion: this modern stuff wasn't for him. Saul heard Hannah's breath slow. He took a step closer to read the label.

ANSWALD DIETRICH (GERMAN, 1885–1938)
VENUS, 1932
OIL ON CANVAS
47 X 65 INCHES

Executed circa 1932, the present work relates to approximately eleven paintings completed between 1931 and 1938, of which only one is extant. Born and raised in Mannheim, and trained at the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts, Answald Dietrich married the artist Helga Schmidt (1901–?) in 1925 before arriving in Berlin in

1928. Dietrich began his career during the final years of the Weimar Republic and rose to prominence during the Third Reich. This painting displays a neoclassicism typical of Dietrich's oeuvre. The sitter's sensual curves, immaculate pale skin and carefully groomed hair allude to Renaissance examples of the genre. Yet in her alert and engaging expression, and in the dynamism and self-assurance of her pose, Dietrich subtly reinvents this tradition and gives a sense of the modern German woman.

From the artist; the Grese Family, Berlin; Paula Neumann, Munich, by 1947; by whom acquired from the above.

'Well?' Saul said. He could think of nothing more to say. He respected Hannah's silence, her stillness. She was an astonishing-looking woman, Elke Grese, he thought. The museum had a spectacular Titian he had rushed past to reach Hannah's picture, and he had to admit that Elke Grese held her own against that model.

He's looking at me, Hannah thought with a stab of annoyance. He's brought me all the way here and he couldn't care less about the picture.

'It's obvious this was my first portrait of her,' she said. Before I knew anything about her, she thought. 'The feet are awkward.' She beckoned Saul to the side of the painting and motioned towards the ankles.

If only Charlotte was there with them, she thought. She wondered if Saul knew Charlotte had survived. Under a pseudonym, Charlotte had published a short memoir that had sold well in England. Despite attempts made by journalists to unmask the writer, her true identity remained a secret. Hannah only knew herself because Charlotte mentioned it off-handedly in a letter. (Charlotte had put a great deal of the money she'd made into finding Hannah, and had, only eighteen months ago, through the usual mixture of stubborn persistence and chance, successfully traced her to a suburb in Birmingham.) Charlotte's book featured nobody that resembled either Hannah or Saul. Hannah had found her erasure from the story of their final years in Berlin oddly moving, like Charlotte was trying to protect them all from what had actually happened. Charlotte's gossipy letters from New York reached Hannah at random intervals, and were as amusing as they were withholding. In that sense, Charlotte hadn't changed. Occasionally

Hannah would read a letter clearly intended for someone else. Hannah struggled to write interesting responses, and never mentioned Edward.

Hannah knew Elke was dead. She had read it in the paper, had fainted in the newsagents, dragging a promotional stand of mints and chocolates down with her. Afterwards, she had smoked an entire packet of cigarettes on the step outside, shaking from head to foot. The details were sordid. There were drugs involved, their bodies had decomposed for weeks before they were found; it was the source of a minor scandal after the war had ended. Hannah had imagined she would feel Elke's presence behind the painting as though it was simply a door to another room. Close enough to touch. But the canvas was solidly two-dimensional. The paint was just paint. Elke was not there.

'There were times I convinced myself none of it had ever happened,' Hannah said. 'It was like a bad dream. I hadn't any proof. I took nothing with me. And I never did anything like that again.'

'You stopped painting?'

'I couldn't imagine anything worse after what happened.'

Saul rubbed his chin in a way Hannah recognized. He's going to ask me something, she thought.

'I wrote to you because I had a question about your pictures,' Saul said. The trembling in his hands had returned. 'I wanted to see you, of course I did. I wanted to see the painting together. But it's more than that.' It was true that he had fantasized about a reconciliation, an agreement to honour the ketubah he had lost somewhere between the friend's apartment in Moabit and the transport to Oranienburg. Base motives have in them more energy than noble ones. Where was it he read that?

'I wanted to see you too,' Hannah said.

They smiled at each other.

'I could change this.' Saul pointed at the label. 'Write an article explaining everything. A book, even. There are photographic reproductions of the nudes, the commissions. And you left all your sketchbooks in the apartment. Under the loose floorboard next to that decrepit chiffonier. They're in my flat now. You didn't burn all of Elke Grese's letters, and you were right not to. We could reattribute all of Answald Dietrich's work to you. To Hannah Sherman or Gans-Meyer or Armitage, however you would like to be described. We could rewrite our history.' When he had arrived at this final phrase in his notebook on the train it had seemed overly

grandiose. Don’t alienate her with your egotistical nonsense, he’d thought. But he now felt tears start in his eyes. Yes, it would be a way to reckon with all they had lost. He thought about his mother. Ageing several decades in the year after the occupation. The typhus that had killed her and several hundred others in one block of the camp alone.

Hannah had ceased to listen. She saw it all surging past her, the excitable wives sweating through their blouses, banknotes in a shoebox, Elke’s outstretched body and brittle smile. Had she not spent the best part of ten years trying to forget it all? Her parents, her brothers, the wives and young children she would never meet. (All of them were murdered, it had been confirmed in writing. Unimaginable horrors were contained in the few lines it took to report this in a telegram. She hadn’t wanted to know any more than that.) She felt herself plunging down towards it, the past: the rough fabric of her smock, the feel of paint underneath her fingernails, Charlotte whispering in her ear as they threaded between the crowds of a club. Saul in the galleries of the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, young and unbearably handsome, surrounded by paintings she’d read had been destroyed in a fire. She watched them burn, one after another: angels, Madonnas, kings.

She looked again at Frau Grese. Wanting her and refusing all logical argument against her, never quite understanding why she felt as she did, had destroyed her life. But if she hadn’t gone back to her – repeatedly, irrationally – as she had reflected with a mixture of remorse and heavily subdued pride in the years since, many of these paintings wouldn’t exist. Arguably, neither would she. How else would she have boarded that train to Paris?

‘You needn’t decide now,’ Saul said. We might discuss it again somewhere more private, he thought.

Her mother’s face: Hannah had long ago forgotten it. But she had never been able to stop seeing Frau Grese. For years she had been plagued by dreams.

‘Was there much there?’

‘In our apartment?’

She nodded.

‘More than I thought there would be. I hadn’t known you’d brought all that’ – he struggled for the word – ‘juvenilia, I suppose, along with you.’

Suddenly it was in her mind – in her veins – in the soles of her feet. Her mother undressed in a draughty room at the top of a stuccoed building in

Schöneberg. She had kept the large black sketchbook full of studies for that nude. Frau Grese had never seen it. It was wholly hers, never touched by Dietrich. She might forswear that artist and become another.

Outside the sun emerged from behind a cloud, and filled the gallery with a warm, diffuse light. Saul could see she was thinking it over. She was no longer crying. He would wait. They had several hours until the museum closed. Saul placed his hand on her waist. This time, Hannah didn’t flinch. They studied the picture in silence.

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Historical Notes

THE CHARACTERS IN this novel are fictional. The historical events, cultural institutions and political figures (with the exception of Elke and Kurt Grese) are not. The novel traces the emergence of the violent persecution of the Jewish community in Germany that would culminate in the murder of approximately six million Jewish people across Europe. They also violently persecuted and murdered people with disabilities, Roma and Sinti people, queer people, Serb and Polish civilians, and political dissidents. After Adolf Hitler seized power, and in the subsequent World War, many of the buildings, streets and businesses referenced in this novel were destroyed. Even the nation's art was vulnerable. The paintings Hannah admires in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in the early parts of the novel were amongst more than 400 paintings incinerated in a fire in 1945.

I had in mind several European Jewish women artists when writing Hannah's life, many of whom had their careers destroyed and their lives ended by the ascent of the Third Reich. Charlotte Salomon (1917–43) grew up in an assimilated Jewish family in Charlottenburg. *Life? Or Theatre?* consists of 1,325 gouache drawings created within two years after she escaped Germany for the South of France. It is now recognized as a masterpiece, utterly *sui generis*. She was murdered in Auschwitz aged twenty-six. Salomon is unusual in receiving such posthumous acclaim. Most work by artists murdered by the regime was lost or destroyed, with a small fraction entering museum stores and private collections, hidden from public view. Chana Kowalska (1904–42) grew up in Poland, studied in

Berlin and later lived in Paris. Alongside her art practice, she was involved in Communist activities and the French Resistance. She was murdered in Auschwitz. Alicja Hohermann (1902–43) studied in Warsaw before moving to Paris. Her paintings of women and floral arrangements are romantic, frothy and feminine. She was murdered in Auschwitz. Nathalie Kraemer (1891–1943) studied and worked in Paris, and produced remarkable, austere portraits of the prewar French Jewish milieu. She was murdered in Auschwitz. Frania Hart (1896–1943) studied in Warsaw and Vienna before arriving in Paris. Little survives except black-and-white photographic reproductions: a man reading on a sofa; still life of slick, gleaming fish. She was murdered in Auschwitz. The work of Gertrud Kauders (1883–1942) was discovered hidden behind the walls of a house in Prague in 2018. Scores of warm-toned portraits of women. She was murdered in a death camp in Poland. Olga Oppenheimer (1886–1941) was an important part of the German avant-garde as one of the founding members of Gereonsklub, a Cologne-based exhibiting society. She died after contracting typhus at the Lublin-Majdanek concentration camp in Poland. Gela Seksztajn (1907–43) painted sensitive portraits that captured Jewish cultural life in Warsaw. She hid her paintings alongside other documentation of Jewish life in archive boxes and milk cans buried under a cellar in the Warsaw Ghetto. She was killed in the ghetto uprising. Else Berg (1877–1942) studied in Antwerp and Berlin, then settled in Amsterdam with her husband, the artist Mommie Schwarz. In a 1917 self-portrait she is dressed in the same cobalt blue as the sky behind her, smiling faintly. The couple were murdered in Auschwitz. Alice Haarburger (1891–1942) enjoyed a successful career in Stuttgart before 1933, after which she was only permitted to exhibit her work in Jewish shows, a measure under which all these artists suffered. In a 1930 self-portrait, she looks out wearing golden spectacles, her expression haughty, defiant. She was deported to the Riga Ghetto and murdered not long afterwards. Paula Gans (1883–1941) moved to Hamburg from Prague to pursue her artistic career, exhibiting with the city’s artists’ association before Hitler rose to power. She took her own life on hearing she was being deported to the Minsk Ghetto. Friedl Dicker-Brandeis (1898–1944) studied at the Bauhaus School, then moved to Vienna. She is best known for her educational initiatives for children in Theresienstadt concentration camp, but she was also a prolific artist. She was murdered in Auschwitz. Malva Schalek (1882–1944) moved from Prague to Vienna to study, and became

known for her portraits, which she continued to make even after being incarcerated in the Theresienstadt Ghetto. Her paintings were later found behind a wall in the ghetto barracks. She was murdered in Auschwitz. Mariane Franken (1884–1945) was an active member of artistic circles in Amsterdam, and was praised for her still-life paintings. She was murdered in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Of the many male artists murdered by the regime, I found myself thinking most about Felix Nussbaum (1904–44), who continued to paint after escaping incarceration, producing works that directly addressed the horrors of the Holocaust. He was murdered in Auschwitz, along with his wife, the painter Felka Platek (1899–1944). This is not a comprehensive list of those who were killed, or of the losses to avant-garde cultures and art histories incurred by the Holocaust, but a snapshot.

Hannah's survival had precedents, however. Lotte Laserstein (1898–1993) and Marie-Louise von Motesiczky (1906–96) were so assimilated they did not regard themselves as Jewish, but were forced to flee nevertheless and survived after seeking asylum in Sweden and the UK respectively. Eva Hesse (1936–70), Sonia Delaunay (1885–1979), Erna Rosenstein (1913–2004), Mela Muter (1876–1967), Alice Halicka (1894–1975), Edith Birkin (1927–2018), Hilde Goldschmidt (1897–1980), Lene Schneider-Kainer (1885–1971) and Marie Vorobieff /'Marevna' (1892–1984) were amongst the artists who survived the Holocaust, and formed a corrective chorus of female creativity that underlay my research.

Saul's collection of photographic reproductions draws inspiration from the collecting practices of the German-Jewish museum curator Max Jacob Friedländer (1867–1958), who amassed around 15,000 photographs and reproductions of paintings from the Netherlands. Friedländer was dismissed from his position as Director of the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in 1933. I was also thinking about the curator of the Bavarian State Paintings Collection, August Liebmann Mayer (1885–1944), who was murdered in Auschwitz; and professor at the University of Berlin, Adolph Goldschmidt (1866–1944), who died in exile in Basel. Others still were on my mind who were expelled from universities, and never had the opportunity to pursue an interest in art history. When Elke mentions the grand apartments on Bleibtreustrasse, she is referring to the home of Alfred Flechtheim (1878–1937), an important art dealer who specialized in European modernism and

who, after relentless persecution by the Nazi regime, fled Germany with nothing. His heirs are still fighting for the restitution of his collection.

Hannah is a seamstress, reflecting the trade's entanglement with Jewishness and modern art. Chaim Soutine (1893–1943) was the child of a Jewish mender. Clara Klinghoffer (1900–70) learnt to draw in her family's dressmaking shop. Chana Orloff (1880–1968) relocated to Paris in 1910 to become a dressmaker. Frania Hart (1896–1943) came from a family of fabric merchants. Lea Grundig's (1906–77) mother worked in clothes manufacturing. Theresa Bernstein (1890–2002) was the child of a Jewish textile manufacturer.

Hannah is a composite figure. Her thoughts, feelings and desires, her upbringing and ambitions, are borrowings from these artists' lives in service of a counter-narrative of Jewish survival and flourishing. I hoped to write a novel primarily about Jewish life, not Jewish death.

The novel owes a lot to encounters in artists' archives and in museums across Europe and the UK. Wherever possible I filtered Hannah's voice through the forms of self-expression (paintings, drawings, diaries, letters) used by the women on which she was modelled. Nothing can be done to alleviate the pain of so much extinguished possibility. But there was a reparative force in writing about the pleasures, joy, dreams and intimacies of a young Jewish woman in Berlin during a historical moment in which the personhood of women like her was increasingly reviled, and would be subject to vicious dehumanization. Hannah is not real, but there were many women who lived as she did, who shared her hopes, interests and fears. This book is for them.

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List of Artworks

The following artworks are mentioned in the novel, listed here in order of appearance. Many of them are viewable online.

Tintoretto, *The Annunciation*, 1587 – formerly in the collection of the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin, and destroyed in a fire in 1945.

Sandro Botticelli, *Madonna and Child with Angels Carrying Candlesticks*, c. 1485/1490 – formerly in the collection of the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin, and destroyed in a fire in 1945.

Vincenzo Foppa (c. 1430–1515/1516), *Christ Mourned*, n.d. – formerly in the collection of the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin, and destroyed in a fire in 1945.

Francesco Bonsignori, *Saint Sebastian*, 1485 – formerly in the collection of the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin, and destroyed in a fire in 1945.

Caravaggio, *Boy with Basket of Fruit*, 1593 – Galleria Borghese, Rome.

Peter Paul Rubens, *Diana Hunting Stags*, 1630 – formerly in the collection of the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin, and destroyed in a fire in 1945.

Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, 1503 – Louvre Museum, Paris.

Sandro Botticelli (and workshop), *The Annunciation*, c.1464–1505 – formerly in the collection of the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin, and destroyed in a fire in 1945.

Petrus Christus, *Portrait of a Young Girl*, 1465–70 – Gemäldegalerie,

Berlin.

Albrecht Dürer, *Nude Self Portrait*, 1503–5 – Kunstsammlungen, Weimar.

Rembrandt, *Jacob Wrestling the Angel*, 1659 – Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.

Mary Cassatt, *The Letter*, 1890 – in various impressions, including the Art Institute of Chicago and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Kitagawa Utamaro, *Head of Woman Holding Towel in her Mouth*, 1806.

Peter Paul Rubens, *The Fur*, 1630s – Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

Raphael, *La Fornarina*, 1518 – Borghese Gallery, Rome.

Botticelli (or workshop), *Venus*, 1490 – Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.

Rembrandt, *An Old Woman called 'The Artist's Mother'*, c. 1627–9 – Royal Collection Trust, London.

Rembrandt, *The Prophetess Anna*, 1631 – Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Tate Britain is home to the largest collection of works by J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851), including many of his landscapes.

There are a large number of photographs by August Sander (1876–1964) available to view online in the collection at MoMa, New York.

Joachim Lüchteke, *Allegory of Art*, 1595 – Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

George Grosz, *The Suicide*, 1916 – Tate, London.

Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, 1534 – Uffizi, Florence.

Giorgine and Titian, *Dresden Venus*, 1510 – Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden.

Michelangelo, Sistine Chapel paintings, 1508–12 – Vatican Museums, Rome.

Albrecht Dürer, *Allegory of Youth and Age*, 1520 – British Museum, London.

Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait with Beret and Turned-Up Collar*, 1659 – National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; *Self-Portrait at Easel*, 1660 – Louvre, Paris; *Self Portrait with Saskia*, c. 1635 – Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden; *Self-Portrait in a Plumed Hat*, 1629 – Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.

A gift of Frankish scramasaxes is mentioned in the Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Vol. 26, No. 2, February 1931. They remain in the collection.

Vincent Van Gogh, *Still Life with Cabbage and Clogs*, 1881 – Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Otto Dix, *War Cripples*, 1920 – Museum of Modern Art, New York City.

Uccello, *The Battle of San Romano*, 1435–55 – There are three paintings in the sequence, at National Gallery, London; Uffizi, Florence; Louvre, Paris.

Giotto, Scrovegni Chapel frescoes, 1305 – Padua.

George Grosz, *Shut up and do your duty*, 1927 – there are various versions of the print, including at LACMA, Los Angeles.

There are eleven portraits in the 'Windsor Beauties' series. A typical example is: Peter Lely, *Frances Stuart, Duchess of Richmond*, before 1662 – Royal Collection Trust, London.

Three of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's landscapes are in the collection at the British Library, London.

Peter Lely, *Nymphs by a Fountain*, 1650 – Dulwich Picture Gallery, London.

Antonio Canova, *Venus Victrix*, 1805–8– Borghese Gallery, Rome.

Franz Marc did numerous paintings of blue horses (and other multi-coloured animals) in the early 1910s. One example is *The Large Blue Horses*, 1911 – The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

Francisco Goya, *The Black Paintings*, 1819–23 – Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.

Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, *Marie Antoinette in a Chemise Dress*, 1783 – Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

Albrecht Dürer, *Christ Among the Doctors*, 1506 – Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.

Christian Schad, *Self-Portrait with Model*, 1927 – Tate, London.

Albrecht Dürer, *Madonna with the Siskin*, 1506 – Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.

Palma Vecchio, *Rachel and Jacob*, 1520 – Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden.

Albrecht Dürer, *Vier Bücher von menschlicher Proportion*, 1528 – National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh.

Albrecht Dürer, *Heller-Altar*, 1507–9 – Historische Museum, Frankfurt.

Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, 1612 – Uffizi, Florence.

George Grosz's erotic drawings are scattered across public and private collections. For example, *Erotic Scene*, 1912 – LACMA, Los Angeles.

Rembrandt, *The Jewish Bride*, 1665 – Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Frans Hals, *The Laughing Cavalier*, 1624 – The Wallace Collection, London.

Peter Paul Rubens, *Hercules and Omphale*, 1602 – Louvre, Paris.
Hans Cranach, *Hercules at the Court of Omphale*, 1537 – Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.
There are a number of marine scenes by Karl Leipold in the Neue Pinakothek, Munich.
Titian, *Venus and Cupid with Lute Player*, 1555 – The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to my brilliant friend, first reader and beloved agent, Harriet Moore: I am so lucky to have you. Thank you to Orla King for your insight and ambition for the novel; thank you to Cara Reilly for joining Orla and bringing your rigour and vision to the table. It has been a great privilege to have been edited so wisely and sensitively by you both. Thank you to everyone at Picador and Henry Holt & Company for working so hard on this book.

Thank you to The Leverhulme Trust for the fellowship that allowed me to research and write this book. Enormous thanks to Sam Rose at The University of St Andrews for his patience, understanding and interest in this project; thanks too to Linda Goddard for conversations about women artists' life writing. Thank you to Harriet Loffler at The Women's Art Collection and Andrew Nairne at Kettle's Yard for opportunities to work and think with your collections. Thank you to Karen Livingstone, Rachel Polonsky and the fellowship at Murray Edwards College, University of Cambridge, for offering me such an inspiring intellectual home.

I visited a huge number of museums and art galleries across Europe and America during the research for this book. I won't name them all here. Particularly invaluable were: in Berlin, the Gemäldegalerie, the Alte Nationalgalerie, the Bode-Museum, the Jewish Museum Berlin and the Berlinische Galerie (thank you to the archivist there, Philip Gorki, who arranged my access to Lotte Laserstein's archive); in New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Jewish Museum and the Neue Galerie

New York; in Brussels, the Jewish Museum of Belgium, where I saw remarkable paintings by Felix Nussbaum; in Paris, The Louvre, the Musée d'Orsay and the Musée d'art et d'histoire du Judaïsme; in Amsterdam, the Jewish Cultural Quarter and the Rijksmuseum; in Vienna, the Kunsthistorisches Museum, the Albertina and the Leopold Museum. The Museum der Verlorenen Generation (Museum of the Lost Generation) in Salzburg has an extensive online collection that was essential in my research. Thank you to Sanders Bernstein for showing me round Berlin, and for taking me to Charlotte Salomon's stolperstein.

Many thanks to Carol Mavor for the example of her own writing, her advocacy of my work and for the detail about the Mary Cassatt print that I attribute to Charlotte's governess, which, at a workshop organised by the brilliant Alice Butler, was what sparked the writing of this novel. Thank you to Jennifer Carvahlo, for her support of my writing practice and the life it has made possible. Thank you to all the contemporary artists I've interviewed and written about over the last few years: in particular, Yulia Iosilzon and Megan Rooney. Thank you to Margie and Wayne MacKinnon at Calliope Arts for the trip to Florence between rounds of edits.

Thank you to my family, for their faith and unflagging support. I'm endlessly grateful to my parents, Debra and Duncan, who this book is dedicated to. Thank you to my twin brother, Daniel, for encouraging my stories since childhood, and for bringing my wonderful sister-in-law, Elsa McBride, into my life. Thank you to Raphael for sharing your interest in the history of left-wing Jewish thought. And thank you to Anna Quirk, forever a Birrell in our eyes, for the pleasures of sisterhood, for emotional counsel, adventure and silliness.

I feel the deepest gratitude for the transformative love and friendship of Beatrice Kelly, Victoria Baena, Jess Cotton, Helen Ritchie, Sally Coleman, Anna Brownstead, Laura Moseley, Imogen Wilson and Zoe MacFayden. Special thanks to Henry and Tabitha Armitage, and to my beautiful godson Kit. Thank you to Willo Madeley, who made me howl with laughter when I needed it most. Thank you to Gulzaar Barn, whose remarkable heart and mind continue to inspire my thinking and writing. Isabel Seligman remains the art historian I most admire: I am so thankful for your genius, generosity and empathy. Jenny Page offered humour, care, reassurance, wisdom and emotional acuity. Sing Yun Lee is the reason why the inner lives of artists captivate me so much: I wouldn't have written a word without your

compassion, curiosity and constant (thank God) dialogue. Thank you to Megan Hunter: for the radiant beam of your attention, for courage, for laughter and for light. Thank you to Louis Klee: for a happiness I hadn’t thought possible, for changing my life (and Pancake’s), for a world infinitely enriched by your presence and love.

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First published 2026 by Picador

This electronic edition published 2026 by Picador
an imprint of Pan Macmillan
The Smithson, 6 Briset Street, London EC1M 5NR
EU representative: Macmillan Publishers Ireland Ltd, 1st Floor,
The Liffey Trust Centre, 117–126 Sheriff Street Upper,
Dublin 1 D01 YC43
Associated companies throughout the world

ISBN 978-1-0350-8579-8

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Jacket design by Moesha Parirenyatwa, Picador Art Department
Jacket image © Sasha/Hulton Archive/Getty Images
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Extract from *Life? or Theatre?* by Charlotte Salomon, translated by Leila Vennewitz (TASCHEN, 2017)

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