

**Orkun Ertener: *Lebt***

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MÉDECINS SANS FRONTIÈRES

**I'm a mercenary; I get around a lot.**

We're flying over Lake Victoria when the telephone rings and grants Anna a reprieve until our landing. A French doctor is waiting at the airport in Entebbe, a man with whom she'll have an affair that I'll presumably need. It might result in an unexpected shakeup of her marriage, a serious crisis with a dangerously open conclusion, which would be useful for us but seems fairly unlikely to me in view of the effective, perhaps even tender arrangement from which Anna and her husband still both profit to this day. A generous marriage could be of some use as well, as long as we separate tolerance clearly enough from indifference. It would take some effort, though, to lose as few episodes as possible along the way.

In the middle of an absurdly long sentence about the overwhelming first glances of this cruel, painfully beautiful continent snatched out of the plane window, Anna apologizes and takes the call. During our conversations, which all take place at her request in her husband's corporate headquarters, never at her home, her cell phone only allows incoming calls from the children's nanny and her husband, Anna assured me. We've never been disturbed before, not in seven meetings. With a little luck I can hope for bad news, or at least unusually good news. I never expect a breakthrough, not with other clients either. In my business, clients pay in small change, in many instalments. A conceited smile, an embarrassed pause or an absent-minded gaze often help matters. But Anna has never surprised me. I ought to start worrying but it's worse than that. I'm beginning to get bored.

I release Anna with a wordless nod, get up, walk across the conference room with proportions aiming at a concert hall to the opposite wall of windows, and look out over the River Elbe and the other buildings of the Hafencity. The distance between us would be enough to count as privacy for most people; with Anna, it would be a stroke of luck.

'Hi Meike, what's up?' Anna asks, and I feel the first hint of disappointment welling up.

Not the slightest trace of concern in her tone, no unevenness in her voice, at most that slight impatience that sometimes sounds through when you're expecting long explanations. I'm standing with my back to her but the serenity of Anna's next question raises little hope that her face shows any more emotion.

'How did it happen?'

How did the milk get spilled? How did my child get run over by a bus? How on earth did I turn into this lizard in human form? Nothing's ruled out for the time being, and for the

time being I hear nothing more than the door opening and closing again. I don't have to turn around to know I'm alone in the room now. And I knew beforehand that Anna's a professional.

They're all professionals, to begin with. I like that. They've all learned to weigh up the measure of disconcertment and admiration, indulgence or curiosity, that they can expect, and most of them only start talking once they know the outcome. But what usually carries Anna forward is no use to her for what she's undertaken with me. Her consistent, monotonous attention and her merciless friendliness coupled with the ability to reduce every expression of emotion to an appropriate level are no use to her with me. She'd have to make a faux pas now and then so I can get my hands on something, and after all these hours she ought to know me well enough by now to be less scared. No matter how many times I've been told a story, I'm always hearing it for the first time.

The container ship that was moving slowly across the harbour basin when I came to the window begins its turning and docking manoeuvres. I watch tiredly as the city tries to reinvent itself along its river, wondering whether it's time to give up this commission. Only twice in fifteen years has there ever been nothing to read in the end, and in both cases it was because my clients, a fashion designer and a generous philanthropist, refused to go without their usual amount of wine or car driving while we were working together. The benefits of possible failure for your own work are often overestimated. That risk isn't enough to keep me awake – I need something else, something Anna's obviously not prepared to give.

Anna comes from an old Munich family. Her father, the director of a private bank, seems to have been one of those people who surround themselves with artists in an attempt to escape the tedium of money, which even back then meant supporting film makers, in Munich at least. At a party at her parents' house, a producer in search of the youngest child for a TV-series family spots the beauty and confidence of a ten-year-old girl come to wish her father good night. Her mother doesn't like the idea, her father gives his consent that very night, and Anna doesn't know she's entitled to an opinion of her own. From that point on, all of Germany watches her growing up twice a week for eight years, sends flowers and letters when she breaks her leg skiing, crosses their fingers for her during her brief liaison with a boy from her class at school, the insolent son of a regional minister, and congratulates her on graduating with top marks.

To please her mother, whose voice carries more weight since her father's death, Anna studies medicine after school, takes all her exams, gets her medical licence and goes back into TV without ever practising medicine. Anna is not really talented, she knows that herself, I can tell, but she chooses her roles carefully from the beginning, makes good decisions, and her past as a child in the public eye helps her, as does the viewers' enjoyment at seeing a woman with genuine alternatives find fulfilment. With intelligence and hard work, she builds up an audience that will watch any movie if she's in it.

At a party at her mother's house Anna, now thirty, meets Martin Eissler, twenty-three years her senior. Eissler took over his father's company a few years previously, one of the country's largest mail-order houses, restructures his inheritance with a thirst for

adventure and a lack of fear, and is on the lookout for a new, reliable travelling companion after a failed, childless marriage. Less than a year after their first meeting, Anna Roth, who keeps her surname, marries the man who strives successfully not to be a Hamburg businessman any more. Now that she is even less dependent on success, she becomes one of the most popular actresses on German TV. Her name guarantees dizzying ratings, which turn out even larger the more she stays out of the limelight before each new film. Anna concentrates on enjoying her acting, has a baby, a son now eight years old, and works on numerous charity projects, which have become possible and necessary as her husband's wealth has grown exponentially. For a humanitarian organization, she remembers her qualifications and travels regularly as a doctor to regions in need of aid and attention, making sure to take along selected press people to benefit the needy and herself. Her first assignment takes her to Uganda, where they had just arrived before she left the room.

Anna will be turning forty in a few months, and she probably came under pressure more than a year ago. When the time is ripe for an autobiography, the traders begin wooing the investment object whose photo is to appear on the cover in good time. It's often a question of money, but that will have played just as minor a role for Anna as freedom of speech, which is occasionally an obstacle. One of them gets the gig in the end, sets a publication date and then calls up the mercenaries, who have plenty of practice at seeing people the way they want to be seen, and asks which of them are available for the job. When my phone rings, in recent years it's usually about a name that commands a lot of attention, or there's something sensitive about the thing that demands more than taking dictation. But even I can't conjure something up that isn't there. For me to listen, someone has to talk to me.

Anna comes back, flashes me her working smile, apologizes without telling me why we were interrupted, and exhausts me by launching back into precisely the sentence interrupted by the phone call. Here they are again, the beauty and cruelty of Africa, the deep wisdom of folk knowledge and the nevertheless marauding superstition, here are the high walls that always need jumping, here's the all-engulfing corruption and never enough money, here's the indifference in Europe, its unbearable proportions, but also a task that puts what you want from your own life into perspective. The rules of the game require me to be patient. I hold out until a gap ensues while Anna drinks a sip of water.

'Was it anything important?' I ask, savouring the fraction of a second of wordless confusion in response.

Anna has never seen me as idiotic or inattentive, but didn't she just explain at length how much the organization's aims and her work for them mean to her?

'The phone call,' I say.

'My son hurt himself at his sports practice,' she says, the relief of understanding in her eyes. 'Meike called from the hospital, our nanny.'

Her tone is suddenly different. Shyer, quieter. Cautious. Perhaps it contains a kind of

apology for telling me such insignificant things. Or a warning. Wouldn't she have told me if she'd wanted to tell me?

'Don't you want to go to the hospital? We can carry on tomorrow.'

'They'll be home soon. It's only a greenstick fracture, an incomplete break. Happens a lot to children, heals quickly.'

And we're right back in Uganda, her voice rising as she talks about the children and parents there, their sicknesses, their deficiencies, the way they're at their mercy.

'We had a patient with breast cancer. Twenty-two or twenty-three years old, a mother of three. She'd just stopped breastfeeding her youngest child, an eleven-month-old girl. Before she came to us she'd been treated by the village medicine man. He had a sure-fire diagnosis and a therapy.'

Anna drinks a sip of water she doesn't need. It's for the sake of my concentration.

'It was her baby's fault. She was possessed by evil and had made her mother sick in the place where she'd barbarically drunk her soul. The girl had to be taken out of the house so that the demon would leave the sick woman. It took us a while to believe what the interpreter was telling us, and then we drove straight to the village. The little girl was dead. She hadn't crawled away, who knows for how many days. She lay outside the house and was ignored by everyone apart from the dogs, which didn't yet quite dare to approach the body.'

It's a good story. Anna knows I'm waiting for her, and she's throwing me something I can't possibly mistake for a bone.

'What happened to the woman?'

'You mean, was she punished?'

'For example.'

'That didn't interest us; she didn't have much longer to live anyway. Our team leader treated her from then on. My assignment finished shortly afterwards.'

That means we'll soon be back in Germany. There's no time left; I have to make a decision. If I want to make the next few weeks easier for Anna and myself I'm going to have to press the button that I rarely use, and don't like pressing.

'Your team leader?' I ask.

'Alain Janvier. From Marseilles. The section head for East Africa.'

'Right,' I say. 'Didn't Dr Janvier pick you up when you arrived at the airport? I think I've seen a photo.' Anyone who's done their homework like I have deserves the kind of

appreciative look that Anna now spices up for me with a touch of embarrassment.

‘We’d arranged a small press conference. To raise donations from Germany.’

I nod, releasing her from unnecessary scruples with an appropriate facial expression, and then I ask, ‘Dr Janvier and you, did you end up in bed right on that first night? Or did you get closer and closer while you were amputating legs, until all the boundaries fell one by one?’

‘We didn’t amputate legs. I’m not trained for that. It was mainly a vaccination campaign.’

I wasn’t hoping for a sudden cloudburst to clear the air, but her casual response surprises me. Anna does at least stand up and take a few steps. Some people have their faces and voices under control, but need their legs to decontaminate themselves from emotional upsets. I wait, confident there’s more to come.

‘What makes you so sure of that?’ asks Anna.

‘There were rumours. Is there anything behind them?’

There weren’t any rumours, of course. Anna’s people will have taken care of that. And Birgit’s stories are never only rumours. Birgit works for Germany’s largest gossip magazine in Munich and knows the things nobody says. Every time I start a new project I call her first to hear what I can’t read about my future conversation partner, and it costs me nothing more than a crate of sixteen-year-old Lagavulin, which I send every year for her birthday, and the willingness to answer the phone when she calls every few months to tell someone how much she hates herself. At university I wrote half of Birgit’s final thesis because she couldn’t get any more deadline extensions, and she didn’t speak to me for months afterwards. Now she can say thank you, she has two daughters who she’s allowed to see every second weekend, and she knows her drinking problem will end up killing her.

‘Do you want to write about it?’ Anna asks.

‘It’s your story.’

Neither of us says anything, for long enough for other people to write a haiku or stop bouncing after a bungee jump, and then Anna’s eyes flash a smile I’ve never seen before. It hits me absolutely unprepared, between the shoulder blades.

‘Do you really believe that?’ asks Anna. ‘You believe people can own stories like you own a house?’

No ridicule, no distrust. The purity of a question. Probably. Before I have time to answer, Anna looks at her watch.

‘I think I will make it to the hospital. Shall we carry on tomorrow?’

I nod. Now I'm smiling.

**TAXI**        **I believe everything.** That's why they come to me. That's why they confide in me what they only voice to others. When they await my questions impatiently, when they see every thoughtless movement of my head as a signpost, when they use my gazes to fill in their gaps and start forgetting me the more attention they pay me, that's when they've got me on their side. Then there are no others.

It's a simple business deal that most of them soon understand. They don't lie, no matter how far they veer away from the facts, and I don't doubt. When a lie has to be told to hide the truth, I take care of it. They're the ones who have to doubt. That's the other part of the deal, and they grasp that quickly too – that I can only piece them together if they fall apart. Only occasionally; with some of them, all I need is a single hesitation or one abrupt word. I collect up moments of confusion, their silence before the next sentence, every desire for incompleteness. I can't work any other way. I don't want to know what's concealed in their depths; they don't even have to see it themselves. But to make them talk, to get rid of whatever might be distorting their voices, I need certainty. I have to be sure they have something I'm not allowed to hear.

In the beginning they only sense that it's good for them when they let things slip, when they surprise themselves in front of me. In the end they know it. They read the finished manuscript over and over, I imagine, incredulously drawn into the absolute emptiness between the lines. Then they call me up, and every time I hear a smug, invulnerable smile: it was right for them to trust me, it's right for them to forget me. Meeting after meeting they tried in vain to calculate the sum of the individual parts, constantly weighing up their strength against the familiar fear, and now they're standing intoxicated before their own image, an image no X-ray machine and no infrared camera could ever get at. Above the protective glaze, the basic tone I carefully select for every individual, it has only a single layer, its visible surface. All that is dark, all the contradictions and unspoken secrets are so precisely lit that they can remain hidden for ever.

When they hang up the phone I know that we'll next meet as strangers. All we'll talk about then will be a few dates and figures that need correcting, names that ought not to be included in the pages of the book, as their discretion advises them or their lawyer, sometimes places they got mixed up in the flow of their memories and have meanwhile looked up. In the end we shake hands one last time, and it's my modest good fortune that all they'll remember is my name. They'll never see me again, and if I see them it'll be on covers of books on display in stores, the perfect Christmas gifts. Sometimes I barely recognize them in the cover photos, but I usually remember every one of their possibilities, chances that solidified into irrefutable opportunities in the storyline.

Anna and I haven't got that far yet, and less than an hour ago I wouldn't have bet we'd ever get there. But that smile at the end – I can't get it out of my head. I pay, ask the driver for a receipt and get out of the car outside the hotel. I stop outside the entrance, light a cigarette and call our number.

Sandra is home already; she finished the monastery project this morning. The house party next week will probably be cancelled, she tells me. Karin is dead, our small friend and neighbour from the ground floor. The hearse is still parked outside. We'd seen it coming, but now it seems sudden and almost unexpected.

**SALONIKI**                    **Sailing boats in the late evening light** and two or three beers are usually enough to make me feel maudlin. I had a grilled mullet filet and a glass of Sancerre a few doors down before I saved the day's work on my notebook in my room and said goodnight to my daughter on the phone. Now I'm sitting on a lounge chair on the rooftop terrace of my designer hotel, its witty neo-British style thankfully exerting no particular influence up here, looking out over the Outer Alster Lake and imagining Karin on a sailing excursion, with a red scarf around her neck and a man more than two heads taller than her pouring her a glass of wine and endlessly praising her canapés. Karin was younger than me but it's not the first time I've thought of her in Technicolor; she always reminded me of Jane Wyman, not just because of her eyes and her dress sense. Although her life was no 1950s melodrama, it had the seriousness and the aura of an eternally hopeful single woman who manages to deal with life. The fact that I heard the best dirty jokes I remember from her and always envied her for her bizarre holiday trips never stopped me imagining running into a handsome gardener in the hallway, a good man who loved her.

It's not the best view of Hamburg from up here, but in combination with the thought of the nights in a refrigerated drawer ahead of Karin, it's good enough to ask myself once again whether I'm old enough to finally live by the water myself. A harbour would be good, perhaps a ferry port, not an industrial site, and of course a number of bays with former fishing ports where yachts and leisure boats are now moored, including my own, now that I'm making wishes. We wouldn't need a sea view at every meal; most of the restaurants I'd go to would be in town anyway, where the best yoga teachers, graffiti artists and ice cream designers would be. But that yearning for faraway places would be essential on the terrace of our house: the casual glance that longs for the small islands off the coast in the evening light, as if I'd never set foot on them, and the gaze that follows the ferries to North Africa until they've left enough of the balmy taste of departure to sit still. I'm just thinking up pointless new arguments for Sandra, designed to suffuse the risk of change in the glimmer of security, when someone wrenches me away from my imaginary Mediterranean building blocks.

'Mr Evinman? Can Evinman?'

She's stopped just behind where I'm sitting. I have to look over my shoulder, and I look up at a woman in her early forties. Her long black hair is as loose and expressive as the look in her dark eyes, her short summer dress with its aggressive décolleté perhaps a little optimistic for a June evening in Germany.

'Yes?'

'Ellen Reichert. Hello.'

She comes close and reaches out her hand, which I take without standing up, incapable of working out how quickly and seriously I'd get out of the low seat.

'I'm Martin Eissler's assistant. I'm taking care of your project with Anna.'

And then Ellen Reichert is sitting opposite me and gesturing for the waiter, all in a single flowing movement.

'Will you have another?' she asks.

'Maybe later,' I say, waiting while she orders a gin and tonic and the young man with a ponytail goes away again.

'Ms Baumann has been dealing with the organizational details. Is she not doing that any more?'

'Martin has a whole harem of assistants. It's my turn today.'

She knows what she's saying and how she says it. Routine is nothing she's not familiar with.

'Your turn at what? I haven't been looked after round the clock so far.'

She laughs. I'm being funny because Ellen Reichert is being polite. 'It's a nice name, by the way. *Can*,' says Ellen Reichert with a broad smile. 'Although it must cause you all sorts of trouble.'

'Trouble?'

'*Zan, Kan*. I've heard lots of different pronunciations from our staff. The woman from your publishing house who called to make the first appointment even called you *Shan*. But really it's easy enough to find out.'

A flirt by habit, I assume. There are worse things in the world. 'And you did find out?' I ask.

'Can like *jungle*, that's what I read. Sounded mysterious.'

From zero to hero. I hadn't expected looks like this tonight. Why shouldn't I take them as if they were really meant for me, for the time being?

'Does the name mean anything?' Ellen Reichert asks.

'Nothing I'd need to be ashamed of,' I say.

She does me a favour and laughs. Then she lets her laugh drift into a smile, the kind that

regrets and consoles even before there's any need for consolation.

'Anna asked me to talk to you. She has to cancel your sitting tomorrow.'

She really uses the word sitting, but I can think about that later.

'Why?'

'Anna would like to stay with her son. He's hurt himself, as you know.'

'And there's been a problem with the phone bill? She couldn't call and tell me herself?'

Another laugh would probably be too much to expect, from Ellen Reichert's point of view. The gin and tonic deposited on the barely knee-level table helps her. She thanks the waiter as enthusiastically as if he'd offered to donate a kidney, stares at her drink for a while without touching it, crosses her legs, places her wrists on the top knee and looks at me with the kind of face that would accompany a sigh in a comic. Some people put on that look when they know there's no better way to make things easier than the truth.

'The two appointments next week will have to be cancelled too. Anna doesn't know yet how things will go with her son.'

I leave Ellen Reichert alone with my silence and concentrate on my mistake. The foray with Anna's affair was hubris, not just cocky but pure arrogance. There was no reason to be impatient; everyone needs time and we had plenty left. And yet I still behaved like an amateur, an oversexed potentate who can't bear it when the woman his eyes have alighted on plays hard to get. There was something about Anna that incited me to break my own rules. Perhaps the fear that her distrust might be down to insight into human nature.

'The Uganda trick could have worked,' says Ellen Reichert. 'Pulling a lover out of a hat. Surprising and simple – I like that kind of thing. But perhaps it was a bit too much for Anna. Too soon. You were rather impatient, weren't you?'

Was I thinking out loud? It would be the first time, or at least the first time I've noticed it.

'Anna told you about it?'

'No. I was listening.'

'You were listening?'

'It's my job to make sure our recordings are typed up and archived. Sometimes I listen in.'

'Your recordings?'

I know how people sound when they repeat someone's statements in question form for

the second time running, and I can imagine how I look. But I don't seem to have any other choice right now, and it suits Ellen Reichert fine. She doles out information as soberly as if she were passing me the salt.

'We're recording your interviews with Anna. It's in the contract, I believe.'

'That's about the recordings I make if I need them for my work.'

She gives an indulgent smile in an attempt to fan away my erupting bad mood.

'I'm sure there's a reciprocity clause. Just as a precaution, I assume.'

Anna and I were never alone. Hidden microphones, perhaps cameras, different typists every day, this woman here. And certainly at least one other person.

'Does Anna's husband get the transcripts?'

Ellen Reichert laughs.

'They're on our server but I don't think Martin has time for that kind of thing. He's in Buenos Aires today, for example, trying to buy a South American airline that no one needs. Purely for his own pleasure, if you ask me. But who knows? It wouldn't be the first time he's turned a wreck of a company into a leading brand.'

As she chatters away, Anna's question echoes in my mind. Do I believe people can own stories the way they own a house?

'It was pretty crazy,' says someone at the table behind me, presumably the blonde who was standing at the balustrade with a friend with her back to the view, to survey the playing field before she picked a table. 'I didn't know Uwe could be such a party animal.'

'That was nothing,' comes the reply. 'You should have seen him at Fernando's leaving party.'

Ellen Reichert puts up with our silence. She leans down to the table and takes longer than necessary to pick up her glass. The sight of it does actually distract me but I'm still far from calm.

'I could have called you, of course,' she says. 'But I wanted to meet you in person.'

She takes a sip and puts her glass back down. This time I make sure I avert my eyes in time to the evening sky behind her.

'It was my job to make a preliminary choice of possible authors for the book.'

'Anna's the author.'

If Ellen Reichert even registers my tone of voice it's like water off a duck's back to her. She looks at me curiously, absolutely relaxed.

'How would you refer to yourself? As a helper? A midwife?'

'I don't have a word for it,' I lie.

She accepts it and nods as if she might come back to it later.

'Your name was at the top of the list of suggestions from the publishing house. Once I'd read some of the books you were involved with I crossed all the others off.'

'*You* chose me?'

'Anna read the books too. She never had any doubt about my recommendation.'

Anna never mentioned a word about it. I even had the impression she had no clear idea of what my part of our work together consisted of.

'What did you read?'

'We really liked the beekeeping woman who moved to Palestine. The composer with the criminal son. The athlete who handed back her gold medals. I guess not all of them are commissions? Do you look for some of the stories yourself?'

'Rarely,' I say, looking around for the young waiter, holding my empty beer glass in his direction and hoping Ellen Reichert's stare will have faded by the time I look back at her.

'We could book a return flight for you tomorrow morning,' she says. 'But then again, you've already planned for the day. I might have something of interest for you.'

No one would actually use the smutty response that comes into my mind. But I forego politeness as well and don't ask any questions, although Ellen Reichert gives me plenty of time to do so.

'My grandfather turned a hundred this year,' she says when her patience runs out. 'He's had an unusual life.'

'I hear that a lot. Whenever I make the mistake of telling people at parties how I earn my living there's always someone who knows of an incredible biography I absolutely have to look into. It's often their own.'

Ellen Reichert knows as little as I do what she did to she deserve that. It doesn't dent her mild demeanour.

'My grandfather was an engineer. He developed a process in the fifties that's still used today for mobile telephones and wireless networks. Spread-spectrum technique or something like that; I don't know much about it.'

'How I invented the cell phone and nobody noticed? Would that be the working title?'

There's a sudden visible flicker of tiredness in Ellen Reichert's eyes. She must have been wrong about me; words on paper obviously don't give any indication of the writer's class after all. The waiter brings my bottled beer and a glass – fast service here – and the young man with the ponytail tries to make eye contact with Ellen Reichert for another burst of her affections. She pays no attention. She goes on talking unperturbed, with a force in her voice that heats up her eyes.

'I only mentioned his profession because he holds patents that allow him a certain freedom of movement. He'd pay the appropriate fee for your work but he's not interested in publication. He just wants to know his story's been put down on paper.'

'What has he got to tell?' I ask. Because I want to know.

Perhaps I've had enough of the hand of cards I'm playing and can't take Ellen Reichert's piercing gaze any more. Or perhaps I'm already caught on one of those rods whose bait I can rarely resist. My oldest client was seventy-two; I've never had a hundred years of material.

'He was in Greece in the Second World War. Mainly in Thessaloniki. The town was the stronghold of the Sephardic Jews until the Germans invaded; they made up the majority of the population. My grandfather changed a lot there.'

'Some kind of Greek version of Oskar Schindler?'

'More like a war criminal. He was in the SS.'

VANILLA                    **I know that scent.** It's so familiar and indiscreet that I can't block it out, but I don't recognize it either. I can't ask; the old man is too far away now to bring him back to our time zone. The scent without a name, not unpleasant but quite voluptuous, drapes itself over the hot Balkan day on which he's on duty. 1942, the eleventh of July, a Saturday, he remembers exactly.

'The plaza was full of people even at eight in the morning. Platia Eleftherias, Freedom Square, and it's still called that now, I believe. Nine thousand men had learned over the past fifteen months how seriously Germans take punctuality. They'd been told they had to register there to be consigned for work, but that wasn't what they were there for. We gathered them up, made them stand to begin with, took away their hats and sunglasses. Anyone who had a drink with him had to hand it in. No one was allowed to smoke. No one was allowed to go to the toilet. Anyone who relieved himself there and then because he could no longer stand it, anyone caught with wet pants soon saw what became of him. There they stood, all nine thousand of them, all between eighteen and forty-five, barely any of them dared to whisper, and the sun rose higher and higher in the sky.'

The sky is so deep blue that it's no wonder so many people are out on the deck of the white cruise ship moving past behind Anton Mahler. We're sitting in a conservatory that must have been added onto the house or at least enlarged. From outside on our arrival, it

looked to me as if the house was tilting over towards the River Elbe and might give in to its weight at any time and slip into the water. The whole thing is a kind of greenhouse, probably fifteen degrees warmer than the polite spring outside and full of plants, many of which sport large garish flowers. Orchids, I assume, but I don't have an eye for plants or an ear for their names. His back to the river view, a hundred-year-old man is sitting opposite me in a wheelchair, oxygen tubes in each nostril and a plaid blanket over his knees, which he presumably only needs in here because he'd miss it otherwise. His nurse, who was introduced to me as Karol, is a man of thirty or perhaps thirty-two, standing guard over the closed door with his arms folded, not taking his eyes off me. A short white coat over white linen trousers, white socks in bright red clogs and a glare so convincing that I start feeling suspicious of myself.

Barely noticeable between two tall flowerless plants in a basketwork chair, Ellen is not disturbing the view between her grandfather and me, firing me on from the sidelines with her eyes. Mahler takes no notice, or at least needs no encouragement.

'The first of them fell right at the beginning, and not just the older ones. I remember a very young one with a stutter, who had less of a problem with the terrible humid heat than with a fear he'd probably never experienced before. Like the others who fell down, they immediately poured water over him. We only started beating and kicking them later, I believe. At some point, about an hour or two later, we started the gymnastics. They had to do knee bends and press-ups, as many as they could, with no target at the end to relieve them. We set the dogs on the ones who collapsed. We beat them with clubs and our rifles. We kicked them until they stood up again or stayed down for good. I got one myself who never got up again. We made some of them dance, naked, their arms over each other's shoulders. We wanted to see a Greek folk dance but none of them knew one. Others had to roll across the square like barrels or sing to us. I can't remember it all being agreed beforehand. They call that kind of thing group dynamics now, is that right? We had it on both sides. None of the Jews tried to escape, there was no resistance, everyone did what everyone else did. I can't imagine that was only down to the men with machine guns positioned on the roofs. We let them go at around two o'clock. The ones left lying on the plaza had it all behind them. The others knew what to expect.'

Mahler breaks off, all of a sudden inhaling his fix from the oxygen tubes in deep, noisy breaths that weren't necessary before, and I get the pause to think that I need. I still have no idea what I'm doing here; I don't know why I might be important to this garrulous old man, and I certainly don't understand the cheerful look I'm receiving now. Ellen seems to think it's my turn. I've heard quite a lot, related with admirable perseverance and organization, concentrated on the key aspects, whatever they may be in the end. I haven't been told how Mahler ended up in the SS; perhaps he considers that self-explanatory; I barely know who his parents were or how his life went before he got to Greece. But I do know he was in Paris for the invasion, twenty-eight years old at the time, and was posted from there to Salonica just under a year later. And I know he's a murderer.

‘Were you ever brought to justice for it?’ I ask, ignoring the chaotic rhythm of his breathing.

Mahler isn’t hard of hearing; I don’t think I’ve overlooked any indications. And his grotesquely loud inhalations have nothing to do with a real shortage of breath or other complaints, otherwise Karol would be right by his side to pat him on the back. Probably, Mahler’s just an old nicotine junkie who’s not allowed to light up the cigarette he needs at certain moments, so he’s replaced it with oxygen rushes. There’s nothing to prevent him from answering. Except perhaps my question.

‘You committed a murder, as you’ve just told me, at least one, and you were an accomplice to a number of other murders. Was it ever followed up?’

I’m afraid by this point I’m firmly on Karol’s list of potential victims, what with endangering his employer and thereby Karol’s job with my coarse questions and their possible consequences, but evading his stare and looking at Ellen is no solution either. She nods at me as if lost for words in her enthusiasm for my question, a gesture copied from local TV presenters trying to keep people talking.

‘No,’ says Mahler, although I’d almost given up hope of a reply. ‘I wouldn’t have evaded justice but nothing happened. After the war I came forward immediately. There was no other option, with the blood-group tattoo I had, like all Waffen-SS men.’

It takes him a while to push up the left sleeve of his cardigan and shirt, but he wants to do it for himself and punishes Karol with a strict look for dashing to his aid. The nurse returns to his position by the door and after some arduous fiddling, Mahler shows me the inside of his wrinkled upper arm. A few centimetres above the elbow, the skin is stained pale blue. I can’t make out the lettering from where I’m sitting, although it would presumably be the same from close up, on his overripe flesh.

‘Many comrades shot themselves in the arm back then, but I didn’t want that. It wasn’t logical. The victors soon worked out why so many men had alleged war-wounds in the same place. I told them my name, my rank, my unit, where I’d been deployed. I answered all their questions but never mentioned details unless someone asked for them.’

Details.

‘I was classified as a minor case and given a job by the British as soon as the formalities were dealt with, as a translator to start with. I’d spent part of my degree before the war at Imperial College in London, so my English was very good. A few months later I got an army post in my profession as a communications engineer. It paid well, I had nice colleagues, including two or actually even three who remained friends for decades, and after all the war years the work was more than pleasant, later even very helpful. In 1950 I switched to the private sector and spent ten years at Siemens in Munich, then set up my own business and moved back to Hamburg. No one ever asked me anything about what I did in the war. To begin with that surprised me, sometimes even annoyed me, but at some point you don’t just get used to it, you start to remember most things like stories you heard years ago from someone you once knew well but have long since lost contact with.’

‘And now? Now you’re just not dying? Your creator is making you wait too long and you have to find a way to take the pressure off up here?’

To hell with Karol and his glares. Isn’t that a Polish name? Some comrade of Mahler’s will have torn up and salted his forefathers’ earth back in the day. Is anyone really such a professional that he can care for a man who just happens not to be behind his own family’s nightmare? Mahler is silent again, looking at me like he’s trying to understand my question. Is he seriously weighing it up, engineer through and through? In that case his long stare at his granddaughter, which she absorbs with an uncharacteristic lack of expression, could mean one only thing. That Mahler knows as little as I do about why the two of us are sweating it out together in here.

‘Wouldn’t it be better to go looking for a nice public prosecutor for a heart to heart? As far as I know there’s still a central office for Nazi crimes. Shall I get you their number? They’d open a bottle of champagne if they got their hands on someone like you, I’m sure.’

Cheap indignation – who knows where it comes from and how genuine it is, but it’s certainly harming my curiosity. It seems not to upset Mahler in the slightest, though. He’s still saying nothing, but if I’m not mistaken the look seeking its way onto his face is something like a smile, driven by curiosity. From one blink to the next, the old man’s eyes are looking more and more lively as he approaches the parallel universe in which I live.

‘What do you want from me?’ I help him out. ‘What do you think I can do for you?’

I still can’t make out the attitude behind Mahler’s airtight phrasing; anything is possible, from liquidated shame to a detached, unblemished feeling of simply having been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Yet all of a sudden I’m certain he wanted to be friendly when he welcomed us into his private jungle. He’s doing someone a favour. There’s no doubt who that person is.

‘Tell him about grandmother,’ says Ellen.

Mahler explores my face further, as he responds to Ellen in a sharp voice that can’t have any fault of mine.

‘You didn’t know her.’

An old family chestnut? Ellen’s only response is a tired nod. She refuses to dance to grandpa’s tune, her eyes say, or not today anyway.

‘Her visit in the summer,’ she says patiently. ‘Don’t you want to tell him about that?’

Mahler’s eyes are still fixed on my face, as though looking for the answer to Ellen’s question there. He does seem to find it.

‘The album,’ he says. ‘Please.’

Karol springs into action and leaves our climate zone, as Mahler pulls the tubes out of his nose with a determination that suggests he can't possibly tell whatever story he has to tell while looking so pathetic.

'I loved Hilde from the very first day. The first say of her life, I mean, the day she was born. Her parents were neighbours, our mothers were friends. I was eight when my mother ran next door one day to help the midwife. Us usual, I was outside with Kurt, our old gardener, who was a kind of open-air father to me in the summer. At some point we heard a veritable scream drifting faintly into the garden, and that must have been something so unusual that Kurt not only smiled, which he very rarely did; he even patted me on the head. Hours later – Kurt had long since finished the hedge – my mother called me. I was to have a good wash and come to welcome the new-born baby. I stopped at Auntie Irmgard's bedroom door, not daring to go any further. But I saw the girl in her arms, or actually only her face, and I heard her name and knew I would one day marry Hilde. Rather a bizarre thought for an eight-year-old, don't you think? A strange obsession. But I never forgot it. I simply waited until she was old enough. Hilde never had a chance to get any other husband.'

Mahler allows himself a laugh, rolling out of his throat in bursts, and then gives a sign to Karol, who is back. Dutifully but with great reluctance, to judge by his face, Karol hands me the requested album, a digital picture frame. For one or two instants the scent of Karol's aftershave, surprisingly playful for a man like him, overlays the other smell dominating the room, something I still can't quite place. The device is showing a black-and-white photo of a woman in her early twenties. An average face, not even her eyes peaking my curiosity, her clothing practical, rather athletic for her time, against the entrance of a white, religious-looking building in the background. The picture is too small to identify the church but I guess at Sacré-Cœur.

'We married in the spring of 1940. Hilde's parents weren't too happy about it but we didn't give them much choice in the matter. They were Christians, devout Christians, and they never understood why the nice boy next door joined the party, the SS even. My own parents were no different. There was no chance of a honeymoon. The western campaign started but thankfully it was soon over. Paris was a peaceful city by August. Barely any shots had been fired before and by then there were none at all to be heard. I managed to get leave and Hilde came to visit me. Paris in summer, our honeymoon at last. We only had a little over a week but it was a wonderful time.'

I read about it once; I can remember photos. Germans taking snapshots in front of the Eiffel Tower, relaxing at pavement cafés in Saint-Germain-des-Prés and taking enchanted trips along the Seine on open-topped boats. Four almost carefree years, a successful works outing with no end. The fact that the German tourists were in uniform and all France's clocks were adjusted to show the time in their guests' homeland probably didn't trouble people for too long. You soon get used to superficialities, I assume.

'The two years after that were very difficult for us, as a young couple. Salonica was more than a thousand kilometres further away than Paris so Hilde and I barely saw each other. But in the third year, in the summer of 43, we thought we'd found another good moment.

Everything was going according to plan for me. The Reich Security Main Office special unit had arrived in Salonica in February to put into practice what had been specified for the solution of the Jewish question, and the ghettos we'd set up after that were almost empty again by the summer. The last transports were scheduled for mid-August and my leave was to begin at the end of the month. Hilde was very keen to go to the sea; she'd never been to Greece. I began to plan our vacation.'

With my eyes deliberately fixed on Mahler, I'm not paying enough attention to the digital picture frame, it seems. If it's an album like the old man said, there must be more photos stored on it, and somewhere there must be a button to call them up. I want to see more of Hilde, who was so keen to go to the sea, perhaps even pictures of Salonica, but suddenly Karol has reached my side unnoticed and grabs the device; if I wasn't quick enough to grip it tightly he'd have torn it away from me by now. I didn't see Mahler giving him any instructions. Karol acting of his own accord encourages me to put more energy into our tug-of-war and I could keep it up for a while if it wasn't for Ellen's look, which weakens my fingers. I give in and Karol rescues the device and takes up his position by the door again. Mahler seems not to have noticed anything. His attention is devoted entirely to the place where he is in his mind.

'I found lovely lodgings for us on Sarantopourou, that was the name of the street, on the second floor of a villa that had belonged to a well-known landscape architect. The apartment had a shady balcony with a wonderful view of an enchanted garden, containing the rarest and most beautiful plants I'd ever seen. There was even a sea view from the rooftop terrace. I was constantly imagining Hilde and myself sitting there in the evenings, enjoying the sunset. I could hardly concentrate on my work; I was counting the days. Who could have guessed what horror awaited us?'

Mahler subsides in his seat, needs a break. Why the pitying look in Karol's eyes? Does he understand anything of all this? He hasn't yet spoken a word; perhaps he doesn't speak enough German to grasp the details and not fall for Mahler's tear-shrouded eyes. If Karol has a heart then he's the one out of all the insane people in here that would worry me the most.

'I had ordered a Hauptscharführer who owed me a favour to accompany Hilde from Vienna to Salonica,' says Mahler, who seems to have recovered somewhat from the prospect of the horrors awaiting them. 'Shortly before their arrival in Salonica, Hilde's train made an unscheduled stop, unfortunately not at all by coincidence. The cretin to whom I'd entrusted my wife's safety didn't have the slightest idea. Partisans in Wehrmacht uniforms. They captured Hilde and no one but my useless non-commissioned officer noticed a thing. They impressed upon him only to speak to me about it, and luckily he kept his word. They would make contact with me, they told him, and I'd soon find out what I had to do. The man used up the last of his discretion when he passed on the message, I realized; he'd have raised the alarm sooner or later. So I shot him and made sure his body was never found. Then I waited for Hilde's kidnappers to get in touch.'

I'm no longer thinking about why I'm being told what I'm being told. I'm no longer

looking around. I'm leaning back, gazing at the plaid of Mahler's blanket and listening. At some point I'll get out of here. Provided Karol does me the favour of stepping aside from the doorway. At some point I'll be somewhere else and then I can look for a standpoint. Or forget everything. I'm a specialist for scattered discoveries, for flotsam and jetsam washed up by the waves of memory and reflection. I'm usually quite good at making something out of it, something people can walk into and often even live inside, and over fifteen years in my job I've worked up the patience I need. But this – this even makes me miss Anna, who presumably wouldn't even reveal her favourite kind of breakfast cereal.

'They left me in the lurch for a few days and then they sent a young boy, fourteen or fifteen at the most. He told me their demands. If I wanted to see Hilde alive, I was to make sure their comrades were set free. We'd captured them some time ago; they were still alive, most of them at least, because we hoped to get out of them where we'd find their accomplices. I made the boy wait a quarter of an hour for my answer and then I'd decided. Giving into them and betraying my country was out of the question. But I had to save Hilde. If I could. I wanted to offer my life in exchange for hers and I asked the boy to take me to his people. He refused, so I cut off the little finger of his left hand, then the middle finger. When I put the knife to his thumb he agreed to take me.'

I can't help looking at Ellen. Absorbed in concentration, she's listening to this man who's her grandfather; judging by the surname, probably her mother's father. He must have given her presents when she was a child, they presumably spent Christmases together and he'll have bought her ice creams and sweets when they were out, knowing that her parents disapproved. And now she's listening to him, certainly not for the first time or I wouldn't be here. Now there's a glow of excitement in her eyes, the kind anyone telling a bedtime story can only wish for. If it wasn't absolutely out of the question I'd be sure she was enjoying what she's hearing.

'The men who had Hilde didn't accept my offer. They were happy to end my life if I refused to do what they wanted, but they weren't prepared to spare Hilde's life. They knew the name of the man I'd kicked to death on Freedom Square, they knew exactly who I'd shot over the past two years or interrogated in such a way that they hadn't lived to tell the tale. They knew so much that I didn't have a chance of survival. They didn't want to spare Hilde either. She'd seen and heard too much, she was dangerous. She was my wife. I would have understood only too well if they'd killed Hilde before me. In my eyes' view. These men and women on whom our fate depended had certainly lost people too because we'd taken them from them. Suddenly a man stood up who had previously been silent. They called him Chaim, but by the way he spoke to me later I don't think he was a Jew. And he wasn't really one of them either. Although he knew his way around the town, he didn't seem to be from Salonica. Perhaps he was an arms dealer, a messenger, a helper from abroad; there were plenty of those around at the time. In any case he wasn't one of them but he did have their respect. They listened to him when he began to stand up for Hilde, an innocent woman. As far as I understood with my patchy Greek, he reminded them that they weren't Germans, that *they* didn't do that kind of thing. The man even tried to protect me, for reasons of common sense. He used the word *Sippenhaft*, something everyone understood in those days whether they spoke German or

not, and everyone could imagine what would happen in the town if an SS Untersturmführer was killed. When their discussions grew more heated we were taken out and locked up, together, thank God. We held hands and hardly spoke. At some point Hilde told me she'd seen the sea when they'd brought her there. Azure blue, she said. In the middle of the night, the man who'd spoken up for us came and led us out. None of the others were to be seen. We didn't know whether he'd convinced them to set us free or was acting of his own accord. He drove us to the town and said goodbye. We were in safety.'

Any ending is fine by me, if need be even a happy ending. Mahler has truly earned his exhaustion and I ought to have done enough by now as well to be let back out. But the old man rights himself again. There's a second helping for those who can't cope with open questions. I personally would rather give Karol a massage than ask a question.

'I had announced Hilde's visit, so we had to find an explanation for her delayed arrival, something no one could doubt. We said the Hauptscharführer who was supposed to accompany her hadn't turned up in Vienna, which had delayed Hilde's departure. I had enough influence to evade any further enquiries. The man was reported missing and then put on the wanted list as a deserter, until more important things than him came up. We cut our vacation short. I used my remaining leave to take Hilde home safely, and on my return to Salonica I held back as far as possible. I never revealed where the partisans' mountain hideout was, where Hilde and I were kept prisoners. Until our withdrawal in the autumn I turned a blind eye wherever I could.'

That was it; now he's silent again, fixing up his oxygen tubes. Do I have to say anything before I get up; does anyone expect me to shake hands with Mahler? Karol ought not to be a problem, at any rate. He'll be glad to see the back of me. None of his possible glares would be a price too high for my freedom.

'Tell him the name of the man who saved you,' says Ellen.

A regretful look from Mahler, a brief moment of shame over his inadequacy, probably a familiar feeling these days.

'Didn't I mention that? Chaim. They called him Chaim.'

'His surname,' says Ellen.

'Evinman. That's how he introduced himself to us that night. He never said his first name himself.'

Evinman. There's a point to the story. I stay seated, of course. And I ask the question of course, the question I have to ask. 'What's the smell in here? That heavy, pervasive smell. I'm sure I know it but I can't think what it is.'

'Vanilla planifolia,' says Karol. 'We have a number of them here. Their scent is stronger than the other plants. Did you know that vanilla is an orchid?'

I shake my head. Perhaps there's a trace of an accent; why not? But Karol's German is as clear as a bell and good enough to have understood all the implications of what Mahler said.

'The scent you associate with vanilla is its base note, so to speak. You noticed it but probably only recognized it subconsciously. It's overlaid by the orchid's other scents. The bouquet as a whole is reminiscent of tobacco, rather more spicy than sweet. Some people think of an old cognac.'

'Karol's not only an excellent nurse,' says Ellen, 'he also has green fingers. You should have seen all this before he came. My grandfather's had problems taking care of it himself in recent years, sadly.'

There's no doubt about it – Ellen has a talent for bringing the right people together. I give Karol a nod of thanks for the information and then I turn to Mahler.

'You know my name?'

Another blush of shame.

'I'm sorry,' he says. 'Ellen did introduce you but I hardly take any notice of names these days. My short-term memory is no good at all.'

'My name is Evinman,' I say. 'Can Evinman.'

What comes next is too much. The surprise in his eyes, the excitement, the joy.

'Are you... I mean, was he a relative of yours? Yes, you have a certain similarity, I think.'

I don't reply, and Mahler seems to turn to Ellen for help.

'Is he his grandson? You've found his grandson?'

Karol steps up behind the wheelchair, releases the brake and begins to push Mahler out of the room.

'You need your injection,' he says. 'It's already half an hour past the time. And then you need a rest. You're welcome to talk again later.'

The last sentence might have been for me. But all I can see is Karol's back and Mahler's vain efforts to turn around to me before he's wheeled out of the room.

Ellen looks at me, full of expectation. Doesn't she deserve a smile? Haven't I just unwrapped my present?

**ROTATION I can always manage four times**, and sometimes the stone skips five, six or even seven times across the water before it sinks. It's a widespread misapprehension that stones bounce off the water. Ben and I looked it up together when he was seven or eight. The water surface isn't a firm body that a stone could bounce back off. Thrown powerfully at a low angle, stabilized by its spin – in physics terms, its angular momentum – the stone dips slightly into the water and creates a bow wave that it initially pushes ahead of itself and then soon catches up with due to its higher velocity. Then it glides up on this wave like on a ski-jump, shoots out of the water and sinks back into it after it's reached the highest point of the curve, only to rise out of the water again on the next wave it creates. That repeats itself as long as the kinetic energy that propels it forwards and the rotation energy that protects it from lurching remain large enough. Essentially, in other words, it's surfing and not jumping, and it's a very old pastime. Even Homer kept his heroes busy with it, as we found out, but that interested Ben about as much at the time as he'd be interested in watching his father standing by the water today, trying to keep his stones from sinking for longer than mine, until I run out of suitable stones.

'L'chaim,' says Ellen. 'You know the toast. To life! Chaim is the Hebrew word for life. And I don't have to tell you what your own name means in translation.'

We're standing on the bank of the Elbe, Mahler's house enthroned behind us on the other side of the road, fitting perfectly into the picture-postcard view of Blankenese proffered to the passing ships, if you turn a blind eye to its overly large conservatory that I hope never to set foot in again. Ellen is talking to me, has been for some time, but I still have enough flat stones not to have to look at her.

'Can means life. Even if you don't speak Turkish any more, you must know that. You have the same first name and practically the same surname. That can't be a coincidence.'

Ellen is going to a lot of trouble. I don't know what depends on my agreement for her, and I'd rather not know. But there's probably no easy way to get out of it for me. I mess up my next stone's throw, casting it straight into the water at first contact.

'And Evinman's not a surname that exists. I didn't find anyone. Only you.'

'Found me? What do you mean? Were you looking for me?'

The two women jogging past us in sports outfits make an effort to look over at us as little as possible, but of course they have to try to identify us. One must keep up with the neighbours' domestic arguments. I'm loud, I hear that for myself, I'm shouting at a woman I didn't even know this time yesterday.

'I wasn't looking for you,' says Ellen. 'I found you. By coincidence. On the list of suggestions that the publishers sent to Anna. I recognized the name and asked my grandfather if I remembered it rightly.'

'And then? Then you came up with the performance up there and auditioned for roles, or did you write the monologues for him? And where did you get the Polish grizzly bear from? Out of a James Bond film? Is he even Polish, the stooge with the red shoes?'

‘Karol? He came via a very good agency, I really recommend them. Do you have a relative who needs a carer? No, I apologize. There can’t be anyone in your case.’

Ellen’s tone doesn’t stay sharp for long; the gentleness returns instantly as soon as she concentrates.

‘You were eight when your parents died. You *were* eight, weren’t you? If you were that age you must remember. Weren’t you ever in Turkey all that time, did you never see your grandparents? Haven’t you got any photos? Any kind of documents? Letters, your birth certificate. You must have something?’

I did too much talking last night on the hotel’s rooftop terrace, drank too much, and now I’m rueing the seconds when I submitted to her kiss later on. It was no longer than that, perhaps not even that long, I’m sure of that. And actually it was more a loss of orientation than a submission. We took the lift down and she got out on my floor to say goodbye. It came as no surprise when she took me gently by the shoulders; kisses on the cheeks are routine for some people, and I’m not denying I enjoyed the smell of her. But when the prescribed kisses ended up on my mouth, which her tongue managed to open quickly, it took me a couple of heartbeats to remember I was still sober enough. To recall that there’s a reason when something like that happens to me. I could stuff a cushion with the hair I’ve lost, I’m paying off a mortgage, I’m married. I released myself from Ellen’s clutches, as carefully and quickly as I could, made a joke that fell flat before the last word, said my goodbyes. Until tomorrow. She took the stairs down and had her appointment confirmed. Her grandfather could prepare for his performance.

‘Why are you interested in all this?’ I ask, throwing the flat stone I’ve still got in my left hand unused into the Elbe. With some semblance of calm, I think. ‘What do you want from me?’

Ellen doesn’t answer. Like an ultrasound device, her eyes scan my face. I can’t work out whether she’s looking for cancer beneath the surface or an all-clear signal. All at once, Ellen looks needy, almost sad, putting me even more on my guard. She turns around and points at the house next to her grandfather’s.

‘That’s where it came from, my grandmother’s first scream that my grandfather and the gardener heard. You remember. He still lives here; he never really left. But she did. I really didn’t know her, he’s right. And I only met him recently too. A few years ago.’

I was wrong. There weren’t any presents, no Christmases, no ice creams.

‘My grandmother died in 1950, six weeks after my mother was born. That was why he moved to Munich. He wanted to draw a line under it all. Just like my mother, eighteen years later. She ran away, couldn’t even wait until she finished school. She hasn’t seen him again to this day.’

‘Are you surprised?’ I ask. ‘That was 1968. She must have asked questions, like all the young people then. She probably found out what he did in the war. Who her father really is.’

Not a thought that interests Ellen. If she was even listening.

‘My mother’s sure that her mother, Hilde, committed suicide. It looked like an accident: the car’s engine floods in the middle of a level crossing and she doesn’t make it out in time. But there was a witness, a farmer ploughing his field nearby. My mother found him later. He remembered it well. He was very surprised that the car stood still for so long. It didn’t drive on, the man said, and no one got out. He was too far away to help.’

Another story – Ellen is a Russian doll made of story after story. Every word she says makes me doubt more and more that it can all be put together again once we’ve got to the last one.

‘Almost all my life, I thought my grandfather was dead. My parents lied to me for all those years. Then I found a letter they hadn’t destroyed soon enough. The management of his retirement home had questions he couldn’t answer for himself because he was barely speaking. I took him out of the expensive hole where he’d buried himself, brought him back to his house, which was falling apart because my mother wanted nothing to do with it, and looked for help.’

‘Karol? That was the best idea you ever had.’

Ellen ignores my comment. She’s not interested in arguing, or any kind of exchange. She’s filling me in.

‘We fixed up the house, Karol employed more carers to ensure he’s looked after around the clock and I went through all his papers. He’d documented everything down to the last detail, his whole life.’

‘And you just gave it back to him? Other people would have called the police.’

‘They couldn’t have children, he and my grandmother. In those days they couldn’t find out what the cause was. Who the cause was. And then in 1949 she suddenly got pregnant after all.’

Ellen turns around again, staring silently at her grandparents’ homes. The next chapter needs more mental preparation. I can barely hear her when she goes on.

‘Chaim, the man who saved them in Salonica, the man with the same surname as you – he stayed in touch with them. Even after the war. He visited them here in Hamburg. There are photos, letters. I’m certain he’s my mother’s father. Her real father.’

She turns to me, wanting to get what she deserves – my confusion, my curiosity or my protest; I must be capable of summoning up some emotion or other. What she gets is a look that I hope is sufficiently expressionless.

‘That Evinman is my grandfather. Perhaps you’re related to him as well, very likely in fact. There’s no one else with that name and you hardly knew your parents. You don’t know anything about your origins. If he was a relative of yours then we’re related too.’

I smile. I can't help it; I know people like this. They're marvellous, I've worked with a few of them, virtuoso tightrope walkers between reality and the high they talk themselves into without any chemical assistance. They excel in some field or other, they have good manners, and for a long time you don't notice anything apart from a little exaggerated boldness and lack of distance, which not only pass for enthusiasm and warmth but are enjoyed and admired by people who feel less blessed in that department. But when one of these darlings of fortune gets their teeth into something, an idea, a feud, a desire, then those who envied them moments before are quick to notice it's better not to stay around them. Up to now it's been different for me – I've always been curious enough. But I'm not just standing by and watching this time.

'Chaim wasn't a Jew, he didn't come from Salonica. You heard what he said. Isn't it possible that the man came from Turkey, like your parents? From Istanbul? You were born there. But we'd probably have to start looking in Salonica. We can fly out together.'

My silence had no impact on Ellen, perhaps not even my presence.

'I want to know who the man was, what that part of me means to me. It would be a chance for you too. If it's true what you say then you know nothing about your origins. Do you always want to fill unwritten pages? Don't you want to flick back and see what others wrote before you?'

'Can you give me a lift to the airport?' I ask. 'Or can I get a taxi somewhere round here?'

Ellen launches herself towards me but stops at arm's length. I don't think she can distinguish between disappointment and anger. And I certainly don't think I'll evade my punishment. But she doesn't hit me.

'You'll get a taxi,' she says calmly, turning away and walking to her car parked outside Mahler's house.

I wait until Ellen's driven off. Then I take out my phone, switch it on and listen to the mailbox. Sandra wishes me a good day. She and the children are fine but she has to work longer today; her boss has finally got that commission to renovate the old lamp factory. I'm relieved she won't be coming to this evening's reading. The second message is from Anna, asking me to return her call urgently. She wants to know why I didn't turn up for our appointment.

**EMERGENCY EXITS** Most of my parents thought I was a timid child, although it was never a question of fear. I could never explain it to anyone then. I didn't yet know the words that now circle uselessly around my head whenever I'm on a plane, trying to ignore the helpless gestures flight attendants are forced to make by security regulations and employment contracts.

'Anyone who believes in the unlikely,' said Georg after the only shootout in my life, 'won't waste too much time on the likely. They'll be obsessed with the possible.'

He was twenty-five at the time, four months older than I was, and it sounded like he'd calculated what he said down to the last decimal point and was absolutely sure of it.

Somewhere near Atlanta, I pulled up at a gas point as he jerked out of a sleep he'd just fallen into. We still had hours to go before we reached New Orleans. I'd have preferred it if he'd slept a bit more because I wanted to switch to the passenger seat once night fell. My eyes have never coped well with growing darkness but Georg didn't know that back then. I didn't want to risk either driving us into a ditch or falling victim to wordless but all the more painful ridicule if my usual evening speed meant every truck had to overtake us. As he woke up, Georg looked around in panic, as shouted, 'Keep driving, get right back on the road!'

He was steeped in a fear for which there was no cause in the reality I thought I had in full view. One or two metres away, on the other side of the gas pumps, was a pick-up, its driver presumably already inside paying the bill. And the old Dodge, the only other vehicle at the gas station, could only belong to the attendant, whom I instantly envisaged as just like his car, pragmatic and with no interest in appearances. It was my first trip to the USA and I was obsessed with finding all the clichés I'd brought along with me.

'You're dreaming,' I said to Georg. 'Go back to sleep.'

He shook his head mutely and stayed dazed, which I took for the last vestiges of sleep. I got out of the car, walked around it and had the gas pump nozzle in my hand when two young men came out of the pay booth and ran towards the pick-up. Two very young men, younger than us. Teenagers. One of them, the white one, had a gun in his hand. Directly after them came a man with a rifle. He stopped outside the entrance and started shooting. Without a word, without a yell, without any excitement that I'd noticed. The first shot missed, the second hit our rear window on the right, and I didn't notice where the third hit. I was crouched on the ground, heard Georg screaming and saw the fireball in my mind's eye, the one we'd burn to death in if another bullet hit one of the gas pumps. There were no more shots. I heard an engine, screeching tyres, and then it was quieter than ever before in my life.

They were very friendly, the police officers and the paramedics who gave us a check-up on the spot to be on the safe side. A policewoman yelled at the trigger-happy attendant but he didn't look as if he'd choose another way out the next time. While they got us a new rental car and dealt with all the formalities, we were treated to cheesecake at the police station and looked at photos of teenagers holding numbers in front of their chests. More as a gesture of politeness and respect than a genuine official procedure. We could have got a motel room for the night as well, but Georg and I wanted to keep driving. You soon get used to hearing 'take care' in America, but when the policewoman said it this time it sounded deadly serious.

I was on the passenger's seat, it was well into the night and there'd been a long silence, when I asked Georg how he'd known what would happen.

'I didn't know,' he said, and only miles of silence later did he say those words that I

haven't forgotten, which I always hear in his voice whenever I think of them.

I talked to Anna on the phone. She didn't cancel our appointment, neither today's nor the two next week. She didn't say anything at all about me yesterday to Ellen, whom she knows as her husband's assistant. She didn't know our conversations were being recorded. So she says. Anna talked to me the way Anna talks: an employee's extravagant lie or a greenstick fracture – there's no great difference. She asked me to give her some time to make enquiries.

During our second call, there was motion in Anna's voice, to which I paid almost more attention than to what she'd found out in the meantime. Ellen called in sick this morning. When they went to check, her office was cleared out and all the data wiped from her computer. There were no personal items left and it's not yet clear whether any company documents are missing. Ellen can't be reached at the moment, neither on her mobile nor on her landline at home. Anna's husband, whom she called in South America, experienced Ellen Reichert as reliable and competent in the three years she worked for him, unremarkable in the best way. He doesn't have the slightest explanation for what happened, nor can he believe it did happen. Of course he didn't know my conversations with Anna were being recorded. So he says, according to Anna, whom I've arranged to call again tomorrow, also about our appointments next week, which might clash with Karin's funeral. For the time being, Anna has said all she has to say, with a growing sense of unrest that was clearly audible and that can only be a good thing for our work together, should it go on.

I ask for coffee and water without gas, as we call it even on German planes nowadays to make ourselves understood, and I look out of the window and think about the day I last saw the two only other people by the name of Evinman, people I knew as a child. We were on our Easter holiday on the North Sea coast. My parents wanted to see an ocean they could barely imagine and we'd taken Andreas along, the son of my primary school teacher, a woman my parents had deliberately befriended from the very first day. I felt uncomfortable getting extra attention from the teacher but on the other hand I liked her, and I liked Andreas even more. He was an only child too, an eleven-year-old three years my senior, and he loved the role of big brother just as much as I enjoyed having someone to take decisions off my hands.

On one of the first days, my parents decided to take an afternoon walk along this strange sea that regularly pulled back from the beaches. They didn't insist on us going with them. They handed Andreas a five-mark coin, a real treasure at that time when converted into ice cream, gave us permission to go to the hotel's TV room if there was another guest in there, an adult at least, and impressed upon us not to leave the hotel grounds, whatever we did. From the hotel's terrace, I saw them walking along the mudflats in the green rubber boots they'd bought in the village. They never wore boots like that at home, which had always confused me because they insisted on me putting mine on as soon as the slightest drop of rain fell. I assume they considered them a custom to which children had to get used to if they weren't to stand out in Germany.

I didn't watch them for long. Andreas called me and I think we had a good time, spent in

the TV room although there was no one there but us. It was only long after darkness fell that I got scared, and at some point scared Andreas too. But we still held out for a while, half an hour, perhaps a whole hour, before he called his parents. There was enough change left over from the five marks. Andreas's father didn't talk to him for long. He instructed us to go to Reception, hotfoot – I remember the word, which Andreas repeated later – and then my teacher's husband called the hotel. The waiting began. We were sent to our room to bed; strangers liked to give children straightforward orders at that time. At some point we managed to fall asleep. Even I did. The next morning, Andreas's parents were there. They had arrived during the night but didn't want to wake us. My parents stayed missing. Two people who'd grown up with the Mediterranean and didn't know the dangers of the tides. Their bodies were never found.

All that is thirty-five years ago. It was possible, or else it wouldn't have happened, and it wasn't particularly unlikely. The name Evinman has since only ever played a role when it came to me, or later Sandra and the children.