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And with one foot beyond the frontier I declare myself incapable of going further. For one step beyond the point where we have halted – and we should move out of the realm of stupidity, which is even still full of variety, and into the realm of wisdom, territory that is bleak and in general shunned.

Robert Musil, ‘On Stupidity’ 1937
Berlin, 1934

Even in the heart of the city the Royal Library seemed remote, an island of silence in the great noise and bustle, like a monastery or prison. If from the distance it resembled the bony cupola of an old skull, from up close the ceiling of the library was clearly transparent, a vaulted eye gazing down upon the city at work.

The doors were always open, and yet few dared enter. The gape and silence beyond made even the most curious feel as though they were about to enter a sanctum sanctorum, a shrine where strange rites were performed. Those who managed to reach the centre of the one vast room, around which a staircase rose and directed the eye, soon realised themselves caught within the crosshairs of the great lens above them, scurrying for the safety of the open air.

In this silence the scholars worked, and Dr. Paul Mobius was their longest serving member. He reached the building’s uppermost tier, where he found once again his reflection in the black marble wall that separated the higher from the lower. Once again his eyes sparkled in the light, restoring to his face its old ceramic glimmer.

Twelve other scholars shared the uppermost floor. These were the most diligent and incorruptible, and they needed to be - from the top floor the whole great sweep of Berlin lay before them. Beards of cloud approached the glass,
polishing the great dome before breaking up and reforming moments later, drifting aimlessly upon ancient currents. To Mobius and his colleagues it was almost as if the stormy legions were attracted to the dome by the strange magnetism of their own thought. Beaten down by hunger and weariness, Mobius had often gazed within the clouds and found there a new inspiration, an original tack, a mist of thought into which he hadn’t yet wandered.

As though punching in his timecard, Mobius coughed to signal his return. None of the scholars acknowledged this strange call, although all had heard him. The twelve men at their desks only hunkered deeper into thought. From behind, each had that posture peculiar to the scholar; head bowed over a scrawny neck, shoulders deeply pinched - soft creatures all, except for that hard rod of muscle bolted across their spines. To Mobius the men resembled nothing so much as ancient kites, able to fly only upon the strongest gusts of inspiration.

Mobius approached his desk, hidden from the others by a dogleg left. It was then that he noticed Esser, the philologist, turning to make eye contact with him. Esser pursed his lips and darted his eyes towards Mobius’ desk. He immediately repeated the action, eyes enlarged to capitalise his meaning. Mobius had a sudden awful image of Esser and himself as schoolboys at the back of the class, communicating in this universal schoolboy language. Fearing that Esser was about to begin again, he hurried past and turned the corner.

What he saw there stopped him in his tracks. Leaning over his desk, brazenly reading his notes, his back to Mobius, was a tall man in the black uniform of an SS officer.
The SS? It wasn’t unknown for the Gestapo to visit the library; after all, there were many among the scholars who might be working on subjects unwholesome to the new government. Nor was it unknown for representatives of the Academy to approach those scholars upon the highest tier with a mind towards recruitment. Anna B., his predecessor and once occupier of the desk, the only woman scholar to ever rise to such a position, had been approached by a representative from the university of T., who had heard of her efforts in the area of bacteria. Anna B. now lectured at the university and was consultant, according to rumour, to the Ministry of War.

Mobius paused with one foot raised, like a horse on parade. He didn’t know much about the uniforms of this new army, the SS, and so had no idea how senior this man might be. The runic symbols on the officer’s shoulders meant nothing to him. But looking closely, the suspicion came over Mobius that the man’s posture wasn’t that of a soldier. He was tall, but as stooped as any scholar. And he was reading Latin. And he was of a similar age to Mobius, in his late forties, if the grey-blond hair beneath the high and wide hat were anything to go by. Mobius watched the long fingers expertly restrain the pages of his notebook from rearing up and turning. This was a hand that Mobius vaguely recognised, except for the silver death’s head ring on one delicate finger. The finger that now raised and deftly flipped another page.

As though sensing that he were being watched, the officer turned slightly, and sniffed. Mobius’ gave an involuntary croak of horror.

‘Flade!’

‘My dear Mobius…I have found you.’
Mobius took a step back, as if to make way for the full force of the image of Flade, his oldest friend - reborn into the black chrysalis of the New Army. The same griping mouth, the same beak nose and smug eyes, clearly delighted by the impression he had made.

‘Mobius, you look awful. And I see your nerves haven’t improved.’

Mobius forgot himself and thrust out a hand. There was something about Flade’s voice when he spoke to Mobius, simultaneously sharp with ridicule and heavy with reproach, wielded in the manner of a broadsword, merely one among his armoury of cutting edges.

‘After twenty years, you don’t look very pleased to see me!’

Mobius shrugged. ‘Of course I am! It’s just…’

‘I know, I’ve interrupted you!’ Flade released Mobius’ hand and looked down to examine his own, as though Mobius’ touch might have stained him.

‘I’ve only today gained access to these notes.’

Flade smiled and closed his eyes in what was really a prolonged blink, his tactic whenever he wished to savour a secret knowledge.

‘You know?’

‘There are certain advantages to this…’

Flade touched the death’s head ring on his finger and bowed slightly.

‘You had something to do with the notes?’

Flade bowed deeper still, and his eyes glinted with crystal tears, as they always did when he commended another, or gave another charity, or imagined himself good. It was almost as though a chilly current flowed there beneath the glaze of blue ice, punctured only by acts of redeeming kindness.

‘At your service.’
Mobius had been trying to convince the poet’s estate to release his notes and letters for over a year, without any success. That morning the reserve librarian had handed him the first folio, without explanation, and couldn’t be pressed upon to reveal why the sudden change of heart. Since then Mobius had been studying feverishly, afraid that at any moment his good fortune might be reversed.

‘I impressed upon them how important these documents were to the intellectual vitality of the Reich. Nothing more…Come, let me take that.’

Flade reached across and took the folio. He turned and laid it respectfully beside Mobius’ workbooks.

‘Let’s eat together. You look just as impoverished as you did when we were students.’

* * *

Flade examined the edge of his glass for smudges, licked his lips and dabbed a toast at Mobius’ glass.

‘Good health.’

‘Heil Hitler,’ replied Mobius sarcastically.

‘Indeed.’ A cruel smile spread across Flade’s face. The sound of the Fuhrer’s name always had this effect upon him, and particularly there in the Pasternak.

‘Here’s to our old haunt.’

Mobius grunted at the appropriateness of the word. He and Flade had indeed haunted the Pasternak when they were students at Humboldt. Flade had
found the café and its inhabitants, Russian and Jewish emigres in the main, colourful. The air was filled around the clock with veils of smoke, maudlin Eastern music and conspiratorial whispering. Flade talked deceptively at length whilst eavesdropping on the conversations of the surrounding tables. He spoke Russian fluently, and was always eager for political gossip, no matter what the persuasion.

Although Flade considered himself a Conservative, he was from money and could afford to be pragmatic. The only real difference, he knew, between himself and the young malcontents who’d once plotted in the Pasternak over vodka and summer wine was that Flade looked to the Right rather than the Left, to the West rather than the East. Then as now, Germany was surrounded by enemies jealous of her success, enemies who made fun of her and mocked her obvious destiny as economic and cultural leader! Who disputed the legitimacy of her cultural dominion over MittelEuropa, and yet flooded her cities with scavengers looking for opportunity! Flade smiled and took a deep breath. It was always a comfort to remind himself, that even if he were wrong, and the revolution did come about, then at least for him it made no real difference. As a historian Flade saw clearly that whatever the machinery of control, whatever the nature of the body politic, self-interest and character saw to it that certain types of people would always succeed. Flade counted himself among this type, although the same couldn’t be said for his friend.

Flade regarded Mobius as an eternal Simplicius Simplicissimus, both a simpleton and a scholar, the one contributing, unusually, to the other. His type was all too common, although rare in intellectual circles. Mobius’ ability to exist in a vacuum whilst remaining devoted wholly to his labour reminded Flade
of the peasants of the Black Forest where his family had their estate. If a cooper made a barrel for Flade’s father, it was as if the barrel were made not for his father but for the sake of the barrel itself. Contained in the barrel’s hoops and struts was something that could never be bought, the invisible signature of concentration and intent, and more, of love and craft, and love of craft. Despite the vagaries of fortune on which such small businesses depended, those strange but plucky people had about them the same pious single-mindedness and stubborn integrity as Mobius.

Flade knew no other scholar like him. The rest of their peers had either succeeded in making themselves a career out of history, or had been diverted elsewhere by the grim and banal need to survive. Flade’s admiration for Mobius was therefore personal, and so constituted he felt, no doubt mistakenly, a sound enough basis for friendship.

‘Why black?’ Mobius asked.

‘Black is the colour of death, of course.’

Flade grinned, and deliberately eyed Mobius’ punched up brown suit, too short for him in the legs, as always. And those grimy boots.

‘You look like a strong-arm in a girdle.’

Flade raised his eyebrows superciliously, and smiled. ‘I have always believed such considerations to be secondary to those of ambition.’

‘Yes, I know.’ Mobius scowled and drank down another glass. The drinks were on Flade, and the absinthe was top shelf. He should, he realised too late as he consumed another, savour it before swilling it down. A drink with a bite but no bark was a rare treat, yet habit was stronger, and it was Mobius’ habit to pour
his liquor under and past the tongue, so cheap and nasty was his usual drink. He watched Flade submerge the blazing sugar cube then guzzle expertly.

Mobius sneered. ‘One gets so tired of the taste of champagne.’

‘Indeed!’

Flade grinned forgivingly, and swallowed the contents of his glass. There was another reason why he had always sought out Mobius’ company, when they were students, despite the bemusement of his better friends. It wasn’t only that he, the Mephisto of their relationship, who had introduced Mobius to all of the pleasures the city could afford, had always enjoyed goading the youthful Mobius with curious temptations. It was more that Mobius, this wholly private man, of all the people he had ever known, was the only one who somehow saw through him, the widely admired charmer, the cocktail party charismatic, with his effortless talent for creating exactly the right impression. Flade might enjoy every manner of stimulation, but in Mobius’ eyes at least, his motivations began with something else altogether, and not something deep but something right there on the surface, like a rich man living on credit. It was a paradox how they complemented one another. Flade, who was rarely alone, who needed company, and particularly intimate company, was in fact selfish to his core, whereas Mobius, who was a loner - was by nature the opposite. Flade was therefore generous only towards Mobius, and Mobius, who would be grateful to any other, was unkindly dismissive of these gestures.

Flade poured Mobius another drink and grinned charmingly. If he had thrived of late, how pleasing it was that his friend had survived! He hadn’t seen Mobius for some twenty years - not since the start of the war, not since they
were students together! Occasionally he had made the odd enquiry of a once mutual acquaintance, but nobody knew anything. Mobius had disappeared.

Flade turned to the bar, elbow up and pointing to their glasses. The Frauerlin, a painted woman in her fifties, wheezed grumpily and twisted at a rash on her wrist.

‘You know, I don’t think she likes you.’

‘Quite. Although there was a time...She even looks familiar.’ Flade smirked like a wanton schoolboy. It was true that he had often bought himself a Frauerlin, or a cigarette girl, simply because he could. In fact it was due to Flade and his pocket book that Mobius had lost his virginity, an example of his influence that Mobius would never be allowed to forget.

* * *

Flade had introduced Mobius to Hannah after much solicitation. Mobius was suspicious, but his suspicions evaporated at his first sight of her. She was short and plump and her dark eyes were too close together, curious eyes that peered from above her long nose like a child spying over a fence. Mobius desired her instantly. She was a Prenzlauerberg barmaid, a young girl with all the coquettish tools necessary to her survival in that area of the city, charms that were harmlessly transparent to all but Mobius. At that time his lack of experience with the opposite sex meant that he was vulnerable to the clumsiest of charades, and therefore to a desire as emotional as it was physical. They sat together in the darkened cinema, her warm shoulder pressed to his, and every time she twitched in response to the film Mobius fell deeper in love. She smelt
somehow of milk, and on her breath the mints she chewed never quite overcame the bitter tang of coffee and cigarettes. The film was a popular vampire story, and towards the end when the ghoul was most active she took to squeezing his arm at the biceps, and alternately grunting and whimpering at the screen.

It was she who suggested they rent a room for the night, somewhere off the Kurfurstendamm, an area neither of them knew well. In the nicotine light of an ancient lantern she undressed them both, wordlessly and without eye contact, but gently, almost consolingly, as if she knew it was his first time. Her manner was maternal, although she was eighteen years old, and he twenty-three. As she leaned over him to unbuckle his belt, her heavy breasts fell against his face, and a creamy warmth rose from his groin to emerge from his mouth as a moan of pleasure. He was amazed to find his body suddenly relaxed, as though he had been all his life a sail full of icy northern wind, becalmed now in tropical seas, content to drift forever. She had begun her ministrations, and he his fumbling. The sensation as he entered a woman for the first time was a startling culmination of this new experience of heat; first the warmth of her in the cinema, then her lamplight fingers upon his body, now this impossible scald, tugging at him where they were joined. Or so he thought, until without warning he went rigid and there burst from his loins a new and immaculate heat!

He realised only a minute had passed since they had begun, it had seemed like hours, and he pressed her eyes with wooing kisses. She drew him into her arms and fell promptly asleep, snoring a little while he puzzled himself a place upon her shoulder. Mobius closed his eyes but couldn’t sleep. He was eager again but his heart’s desire was stronger! It tossed and turned inside his chest, awoken out of its lifelong hibernation, drumming out a happily narcotic code
that made him believe for the first time that there might exist within him a soul, a soul not individual in nature but one shared between two.

For once Mobius gave himself up to immediate sensation, to the present, letting the orbiting impressions of warmth and desire align themselves with the more precise observations of his more immediate senses; her moon coloured skin and dawn blue eyelids, the wavelike rocking of her breath on his ear, her briny oil still warm on his stomach.

Mobius had felt love before, but that was mere steam off a damp sock compared to the sudden combustion of feelings he now felt watching her sleep! Yes, this young woman was different. His newest organ, his soul, could tell. She was gentle and caring and affectionate. He believed that somehow she knew him, and her understanding of his need for sensual delicacy was all the evidence he desired. He allowed himself to drift towards sleep, as one who succumbs not to pleasure but to an absence of pain.

He awoke during the night, not knowing whether he had slept a little or a great deal. The lamplight remained upon his face, and his eyes suffered because of it. Hannah continued to sleep beside him, in the shade he offered her. As the harsh light forced upon Mobius a greater clarity he began to notice dampness across his chest and arm. He touched himself with the cautious fingers of his free hand, and found himself wet. He tried to manoeuvre away from her, fearing a nosebleed or something more sinister, because where her breasts had previously been soft and full there were now two hard and unyielding lumps. He jerked his head upright, and in so doing exposed her face to the lamplight. Her eyelids quivered once and then she too was awake, recognising immediately the quantity of milk she had issued over them. She leapt to her feet and began to
dress, whimpering and scolding herself alternately. Before Mobius was able to
decide whether to express consolation or apology she was gone, without a
backward glance, forever. He sat on the bed and smoked, shaking and dazed,
half covered by the sheet she had flung at him.

Flade was still awake, as if expecting his call. As soon as Mobius began to
confess his love for Hannah, Flade interrupted – ‘My dear Mobius, you think
too much for someone like her! She’s young, she wants to have fun, she wants
to dance, to laugh, and besides…’

Mobius begged Flade to give him her address, confiding his intention to
take her away to the coast, precisely for the purposes of fun, for the duration of
the summer, if Flade would lend him the money.

‘Mobius, I’m afraid that won’t be possible, you see, she is already married,
to a policeman, and with children too…I know, don’t interrupt, I know what she
told you, whatever it was, was simply what you wanted to hear. And what you
see in her, is simply what you need to see…’

Mobius hung up the earphone, not wishing for a lecture, not now, and not
in that mock compassionate voice. He lit another cigarette and tried hard to
concentrate upon the rising whorls of smoke in an effort to clear his heart of
panic, but no, his anxiety like his cigarette was a controlled fire set to burn itself
out in the emptiness of the lobby. With the rest of Flade’s spending money he
caught a taxi home.

Mobius didn’t speak to anyone for a month. He remained alone in his room
struggling mightily against self-pity and resentment, seeking to keep bitterness
at bay and learn from the experience. Above all, he realised, his heart must be
kept open! If there was something fragile about him, something that made him
different to the hateful Flade, then that fragility must be preserved. He had always felt a stranger in this world, and his separation from the others wasn’t so much a matter of the tongue but a distance in the eyes. He kept returning to the image of Hannah’s eyes, just before she had fallen asleep. He had sensed the distance then, it was his one intimation that his woozy love had been false and oblivious to the object of his love. She had been bought for him by Flade, like a present for a child, a pet to caress and hold, and he had created her in his love’s own image!

Mobius drank heavily in an effort to understand the mystery of his premature love. He had the persistent suspicion that what to him was a mystery was to everyone else a blunt truth, a matter of the so-called ‘facts of life’. He tried to quarantine his feelings and clear his mind but his thoughts were consumed with the memory of Hannah, her curious nose and clandestine smell. Eventually, it was his returning time and again to the same ground that made him realise that he shouldn’t look upon the symptoms but upon the desire. How easily his desire had influenced his perception of the girl! Perhaps there was more! He took to his books and began to read.

When a month of research and feverish writing had passed and he had understood his love, he emerged from his incarceration and began to walk. He walked all day and night, pausing only to rest his aching shins and heels, continuing along the canals and backstreets and out into the minor suburbs, seeking to lose himself in observation and the rhythm of his feet. His voice had been whittled down by pain to an almost inaudible mumble. Fortunately for him, the barfrauen and wurst-sellers who operated under the noisy S-Bahn tracks were expert at lip-reading. It wasn’t until he bumped into Flade in the
street, on his way back from a gaming club and wearing the kind of smile suggesting he had won yet again, that there was aroused in Mobius such a tirade of anger that he was cured of silence properly. For the first and last time he insulted Flade mercilessly, shaking him by the lapels there in the public street. Flade of course apologised unconditionally, for what he couldn’t remember but with an earnestness that wore on Mobius’ anger and left him feeling foolish and exposed. Mobius let himself be led into the nearest bar, where he drank a tumbler of appelschnapps and fell instantly asleep.

*   *   *

The new round of drinks came and Mobius allowed himself the luxury of taste, letting the liquid drain over his tongue and catch in his throat. Flade was still watching the Frauerlin and flicking back through all the faces of all the girls seduced by his wallet. He would be at it some time. Mobius rubbed his finger around the rim of the glass, trying to summon up some demon spirit to get him out of this. Flade always succeeded in making him feel worn out, poor and shabby. It didn’t matter that he looked shabby; where he lived he didn’t seem out of place. Neither was it because he had learned to wear his poverty as a badge of pride. He wasn’t an artist. It was just that it didn’t matter, not when there was his work to attend to. That poverty was regarded as a vice by some, and unmanly by others was of no consequence to him. Even as a student he had been immune to the necessity of presenting himself well. He had never had the knack, and it seemed as though the more he fussed over how he looked the more cluttered his exterior became. Before he and his friends ventured out began the
nightly ritual, they circling him and removing his scarfs, his gloves, tucking this in and pulling at that, opening this out and packing that away, taking their time and Mobius smiling grimly, allowing them this affectionate entertainment, one of the many privileges of their superior sexual prowess.

Far the greatest curse however was Flade’s similar physique. Flade took pleasure in passing on to Mobius the many items he had worn either once or not at all, suits he had ordered from Paris and London, or shirts and shoes from Italy that upon arrival failed inspection. At the commencement of each season Flade paraded his new costumes before Mobius, who swore at length how well he looked, only to have Flade smirk at his reflection and shake his head. Knowing full well that because of his pitiful stipend, Mobius derived a considerable portion of his income from the selling on of his rejected fashions, Flade then demanded of Mobius, as comic reward for his expense, that he now confront the mirror and prove definitively to Flade that the fault lay in the cut and the cloth, rather than in his own person. Flade could choose and choose wrongly, but he could never excuse the displaying of his mistakes. Without remorse he aborted himself of his failed acquisitions, forcing them upon the hapless Mobius, who resembled a convict in a gentleman’s stolen clothes.

That Flade now wore the black uniform of the New Army was evidence that he had tapped his way into some important vein of power. It was hard to believe that the pompous and eerily lewd man before him would ever be allowed to work for the State. It was clear in both Flade’s expression and history that he aspired to nothing other than self-enrichment.

‘Have you heard of Karl Maria Wiligut?’
Mobius awoke from his reverie to find Flade’s voice altered only slightly by his querulously raised nose. Flade was clearly asking a question he knew he would have to answer himself.

‘He’s possibly the most influential historian in the country at the moment. They call him Himmler’s Rasputin.’

‘Never heard of him. What’s his field? Christ the German? The Plague and the Perfidious Jew?’

‘Not far from the truth, I’m afraid. Apart from designing this ring…’ Flade showed Mobius the ring again, and this time Mobius couldn’t help noticing the skull, staring dully out at him, exactly the kind of badly drawn skull boys create in their pirate fantasies. ‘He’s an Austrian, a retired and much decorated Colonel, who claims to be the sole descendent of an ancient tribe of Aryans, suppressed by the Christians but returned to invigorate the spiritual life of the German people.’

Mobius laughed automatically, the same clipped laugh reserved for the bad taste jokes that circulated nightly round the bar where he drank. But Flade wasn’t joking. ‘I’m afraid it’s true. And yes, there’s no need to say it.’

‘There shouldn’t be a need for anyone to say it.’

‘He has great influence over Reichsfuhrer Himmler.’

Mobius shrugged. ‘Flade, I appreciate the drinks…But after all these years! What is your point?’

‘I was getting to that. It’s a long and I think significant story, but I see you lack the patience, as ever…’

‘If you put yourself in my position…’

‘In your position I would be immensely curious, not to say…grateful.’
Mobius smiled bitterly, as one whose low opinion of people is constantly confirmed. It had been a matter of time, after all.

‘You do realise we’re headed for another war.’

Mobius sneered. ‘Come on. How long can this last? These people…your buffoonish friends!’

‘Precisely my point. That is why, not tomorrow, or even next year, but then…There will be war.’

‘Rubbish.’

Mobius topped up his glass. He was beginning to overheat. The talk of war always had this effect on him.

‘Things are changing quickly Mobius, and while you have managed, so far, to isolate yourself from the facts of life, that will soon be impossible.’

Flade closed his eyes, and in an effort to attain the appropriate gravitas even allowed himself a weary sigh.

‘Mobius, I came to you as a friend. I’m part of a Special Research Unit, and my offices are on Prinz Albrecht Strasse, number eight.’

Mobius lit another of Flade’s cigarettes, the last in the packet. There was a growing unease in his chest that could only be stifled by smoke. He had drunk enough, and had reached that plateau where whatever happened next wouldn’t matter at all, not tonight at least, and yet there remained within him a strange anxiety, somewhere beyond the boundaries of his comprehension. He was aware that Flade was offering him a deal of some kind, and felt sure that he would refuse it. Nevertheless, the uniform before him was so steeped in blackness, so magnificently and hideously black that it dominated both the room and the man within it. Mobius had always believed that evil was active in the
world solely as an aspect of human agency, but found himself now frightened of a uniform, that most commonplace feature of Prussian life. It was almost as if the uniform were imbued with a purer and more powerful fear than his own, the one infecting the other, awakening in him a long dormant recognition and anxiety.

‘Number eight is now the headquarters of the SS, the SD and the Gestapo.’

Flade waited for Mobius’ indignation to grow, and yet Mobius said nothing, appeared paralysed of speech, and was instead staring strangely at his sleeve.

‘Mobius! The nail that sticks out will get hammered back in! Homosexuals, the deformed, the unemployable, the criminal, the dissolute, the…scholarly. All will be put to work, in camps or elsewhere. They mean to take a broom to this country and sweep it clean! I’m gathering a team of researchers together, and I can promise you’ll be allowed to continue your studies in peace. Everything you need will be provided. All the fruits of the coming windfall will be brought to you. You will be safe.’

Mobius appeared dazed, and unable to reply. He stared intensely at Flade’s sleeve, which stretched now across the table, vivid and shimmeringly black against the white tablecloth, foregrounding the open palm of the hand extended towards him, beseeching. The hand appeared to float there on the table, a hairless white spider turned upon its back, and quivering.

‘Mobius? I thought you’d be pleased. I’m trying to help you, after all. Mobius? Answer me!’

Mobius attempted to stand, pushing down upon the flimsy table, thrashing the legs of his chair with his feet. Glasses fell to the floor amidst a storm of
cinder and ash. The white spider scuttled back into its sleeve. Mobius lumbered away, swimming through the drowning with rapid parting strokes.
The moon was as yellow as a jaundiced eye. Mobius noticed it on Tor Strasse and turned left down Hamburgerstrasse. As soon as he had gained the pavement with the deepest eaves he glanced up and there it was again, bobbing above the rickety gables and laying down a woozy phosphorescence over the cold black slate and peering windows. Mobius turned left down Sophienstrasse and then right into the first courtyard of the Hackescher maze. One courtyard led onto another, and the comfortingly human smells of cabbage and potato, damp washing and sewer seemed to both ward off the moon and the even more disturbing memory of Flade. Above him in one of the tenement rooms a man was singing a nasally sonorous ode to summer asparagus, magnified and given depth by the close walls of the courtyard, floating blithely above a chorus of wailing babies and the mournful dirge of a hurdy gurdy, churning out an off-key version of ‘Starlight’. Dogs and donkeys slept in small humpies beneath the stairwells, and the smell of straw, fur and urine was sharp in his nostrils. The rear-ends of the restaurants and lokals that lined the outer walls of the Hofe began to appear like bird’s nests dug into the muddy banks of the alley down which he walked, faster now, an invisible current guiding him home.

‘Bastard’, Mobius muttered. The word had risen through him fully formed, allied to the image of Flade’s smug face. ‘Bastard’, he said again, kicking at the severed end of a parsnip, kicking it closer to the bin from which it had toppled. ‘Filthy’, he said, referring not to the streets or a general condition but to himself, and the chill grime that played across his skin. ‘Filthy and hungry’, he
continued, building upon the original, making for himself a mantra of his own drunken misery that he repeated with every step. There was no wood for the stove at home and not even enough coin in his pocket for the black bread and thin soup that was his usual dinner. His feet knew what to do, however, and what he needed, and he hurried through the darkness towards that single pane of light wherein the smells of laughter, the sounds of thirst and the taste of warmth would greet him and revive him with a blissful confusion.

*          *          *

‘Ach, Herr Professor! Welcome!’ Frau Kunstler swept a great meaty arm at Mobius, then whooped it back to show him the room and its denizens, as though it were his first night and he needed introduction. In fact he had drunk in Frau Kunstler’s regularly for some ten years, ever since returning from the war. That he had returned four years later than everyone else, detained for his own good in a sick house for the nervous, the trembling and insane, was something that not even Frau Kunstler knew about. Precisely because she didn’t know, her voice when she pronounced his name bore the habitual irony she used to address her betters. This was an irony she had never managed to lose when addressing Mobius simply because he was the only educated man, the only object available to her from that class of people she blamed for the death of her husband, Frank. He had survived the war less one arm but been killed by the Freikorps during the general strike, when Red Berlin had been a fact and Frank had taken to the streets to defend it. ‘Herr Professor, your seat!’
Mobius gave them all his gentle smile as he climbed over their legs to get at his stool, positioned by Frau Kunstler at the margins of their small society. The irony was there again in her voice but softened with affection and maternal concern, the kind of voice an elderly prostitute might use to address a long-standing but incapacitated client. He was off the streets and into the boudoir, and Frau Kunstler’s soft voice was reserved only for her regulars.

Those who stumbled for the first time into the cramped and low room were always regaled with coarse abuse. This was sport indeed, but necessary given the limitations of space and her peculiar need for freedom of expression. Frau Kunstler spoke her mind and encouraged her customers to do so as well. Where other Frauerlin endeavoured in the traditional fashion to make their customers blush with coy looks and specialist attentions, a feature of the city often written about in guidebooks, it was Frau Kunstler’s belief that if a man was unable to defend himself then and there at the door, with wit, humour and courage then he was not only unfit for their company but suspect as well. The moment they parted the curtains and uprighted themselves she was upon them. Her often fulfilled aim was to send them recoiling in backward staggers of shame and bewilderment so that they hit their heads on the way out. Some men would freeze, immobilised by shock and the stare of a dozen sets of eyes, wilting under the hail of laughter, glued there to the spot and waiting to be dismissed. There was something in Frau Kunstler’s voice that paralysed these hulking labourers and hod carriers and barrow boys, pickpockets, doormen and licence inspectors, fruiterers from the vegetable market and hawkers of pens, knives and dirty postcards – something resonant of both the scolding mother and regimental sergeant major, something that stripped them of their false identities and remade
them into the truthful image of the frightened infant and callow recruit. It was a rare man indeed who succumbed to neither shame nor fear, who stood there at the door without wincing or reddening, whose initial fierceness faded and gave rise to a hopeful smile or some mumbled rejoinder as the challenges lessened in fury and the laughter changed from sarcastic to brotherly. This rare man was directed with a wielded salami to a special seat amongst them, given a complimentary schnapps and named Frank for the night, in honour of her true and valiant husband, who one day long ago had wandered through the same door and met the same storm with a gale of hearty laughter.

The only man to have affected an altogether different entry had been Mobius, one wintry evening all those years ago. He had had a bad day ‘on the books’, and had walked through the sleeting streets hoping to recover the remnant of a phrase he had lost on the front steps of the library. Nearly ten years he had been away from his books! His mind was rusty, everything was an effort, everything had been forgotten.

It was a simple phrase and beautifully formed, the kind of phrase that more often visits poets than historians, so that he was unaware of the snow that gathered on his bare head. He was equally careless in avoiding the awnings that leant out onto the street, and collected grey slush over his shoulders and back. Even so, he continued, but only so far as an altercation on the next corner. A rag and bones man sitting astride a cartload of junk was goading his horse to barge through a large party of deaf mutes, gesticulating wildly and moaning in the same eerie language as the wind. Mobius stepped through them, his fists clenched as he walked, twisting his head wildly in an effort to separate mind from body.
But as he gained the Hackescher slum a young boy barred his way. The boy stood in the middle of the arch and stared at Mobius. Despite the cold he was barefoot and in his shirtsleeves. Bangs of lush gypsy hair coiled from his head in all directions. His deep black eyes were startled and intent, and around his inflamed nostrils were two red wreaths of dried blood. His mouth was open and stupidly gawping. The effect of this visitation upon Mobius was one of terror and revulsion. He gripped his coat to him as though the boy might invade his soul through a frontal assault, as though the thick woollen barrier might prevent this. Just back from the war, just out of the asylum and here was the gatekeeper to some new and unknown hell! Finally the boy stood aside to let him pass, thrusting a hand into the mess of hair and pulling harshly. Mobius skirted the boy, unable to break from the staring eyes until the gloom of the tunnel overtook him and he was pursued not by the eyes but the sound of piteous laughter. Mobius threw himself into the first lit doorway, stumbling into a hail of invective that he simply failed to hear, stepping through a many-limbed obstacle he failed to see, and fell upon a table, dragging his coat about his head. This dramatic entry was rewarded, when he was calm enough to withdraw his guard, with backslaps and cheers and a large glass of winking spirit. They were mistaken, his name wasn’t Frank, but what did that matter now that he was safe and surrounded by friends!

*   *   *

Mobius finally gained his stool and sat himself down. The stool had been ‘procured’ by Frau Kunstler’s son Albert, especially for Mobius, hoisted off a
roadside mound and lovingly restored so that he might rest himself upon a seat specific to his height and weight. Frau Kunstler had noticed early that Mobius had a tendency to rock back on his stool when thinking, and so Albert had reinforced the legs with thin strips of steel. As it did every night when he sat down, the stool gave a welcoming little snore. Mobius thought of it as the kind of sound a wife might make, if he were late and she were already sleeping, as he climbed into their warm bed.

Like all of the men and women who frequented Frau Kunstler’s, Mobius treated the bar as a kind of extended living room. Most of them either lived in the surrounding tenements or the mud floor hovels beneath them, those that used to house animals and were now, with the simple addition of a padlock and key thought sufficient for human habitation. In Frau Kunstler’s at least were some of the rituals of family life; the wiping of boots and the clearing of tables, the emptying of ashtrays and feeding of the stove. There was something of the lodger about each of them. They had no entitlement to anything and yet by right of temporal passage had laid sentimental claim to the meagre fittings and the emotional spaces they occupied. Frau Kunstler not only encouraged this for the purposes of loyalty and peacefulness, but took a hand in it by providing each of her regulars with his or her own chair, especially positioned by her during the daylight hours. If she were trying to encourage a match she might place the widowed Frau Hasslich’s velveteen piano stool discreetly alongside the converted beer keg designated to Herr Schmidt, a generous but lonely man recently employed as a tram conductor. So too if a man had quarrelled with another the previous evening he might arrive to find his stool placed beside that of his enemy – so that they might drink together and become reconciled. In the
brief minutes of leisure Frau Kunstler allowed herself before opening, she would sit behind her bar with a glass of sweet Rhinish wine and lovingly regard the play of empty seats before her. Each of the seats contained the personality of its tenant, each of whom she knew intimately. As the wine reached her weary legs and thinned her sluggish blood, Frau Kunstler let herself imagine her retirement, somewhere in the country perhaps or away by the sea, just herself and the seats to keep her company. Someday too she would die, and it was her secret wish that God might let her take the seats with her, so that when their turn came each of her loyal customers would find themselves a place reserved in heaven.

It was then that Frau Kunstler spied Herr Speck turning from her, trying to furtively lever a note from his jacket to give to Mickelmas, a five mark note no less, when he owed her for a month of food and drink, when he had only just pleaded for further credit! Mickelmas bought and sold whatever he could lay his thieving hands upon, and all of her customers and even she relied on him for those floating objects of desire that circulated secretly from hand to grubby hand but couldn’t be found in the shops, at least not for any reasonable price.

Frau Kunstler’s eyes grew large and fiery as she let the Red come over her, tingling her fingers and hands, thrusting out her chest and bringing veins to her neck and forehead, feeding the poison whip that lay coiled in her mouth. The Red! Suddenly she was over the bar and rounding upon poor Speck, berating and standing over him, boxing his ears with blows that never struck but nonetheless made him wince and flinch and cower. Speck! A first class hero with a medal to prove it! Whose hands had killed so many men, whose favourite weapon had been the sheared edge of a common shovel, who had leapt amongst
the enemy like a demented reaper and seemed invulnerable to bullet or blade or fizzing shrapnel. Speck! Now reduced to tears beneath the fury of the Red. How long had she suffered him? How many times had she made allowances, let things slide, passed over his name on the ledger and accepted his feeble excuses? Only to have him disrespect her good nature, abuse her charitable self right there in her own parlour! And wasn’t he lucky that his debt wasn’t greater? Hadn’t she seen his boy Wouter out in the street last autumn with no shoes? Hadn’t she taken him to the Jewish drapers and put warm socks and new boots on his feet and never said a word about it? Well? Hadn’t she? Speck blubbered and beseeched her with fawning desperate hands, brushed off her like dirt. Speck, who one foggy morning had had to execute a deserter from another regiment, a child so terrified of death and the grim merciless faces of his executioners that he had screamed! Mutti! Screamed for his mother! Speck heard the sound again, it couldn’t be called a voice, more the same terrible falsetto of the animals slaughtered by the Muslim Turks, sawing knives across tender throats and spilling out the shrieking blood.

The terrible voice faded as Frau Kunstler let herself be calmed. Mickelmas and Schmidt and young Berndt pleaded with her in turn, massaging her hands, wiping the sweaty ropes of grey hair from the face that they each kissed and nuzzled. Albert had arrived just in time to console Speck, who sat staring quietly at the spilt red wine at his feet. Mickelmas produced a tattered envelope from his pocket and opened it beneath Frau Kunstler’s nose in the manner of smelling salts. The sight of money revived her, and her heart swelled with guilt and pleasure as Mickelmas explained, gently and clearly, but not without an edge of pride, how they had been collecting the money for weeks, money for
her, for her upcoming birthday. Didn’t the stove, after all, keep smoking? Wasn’t
it held together with wedges of steel and crudely hammered tin? Wasn’t
it time she let them buy her a new stove? One that was easy on her back and
safe for her lungs? Frau Kunstler split like a grape, sobbing praises and weeping
apologies, letting herself be guided to where Speck was smiling the smile of the
newly redeemed, the pardoned on the brink of death, the prodigal returned to
her weighty embrace. Cheers filled the small room as they kissed and made up.

Young Berndt rushed to his hurdy gurdy and wheezed out the first few bars of
‘Summertime’. Albert was already behind the bar with a tray of full glasses.

Frau Kunstler span a meaty arm at the tray as she let herself be taken into a
cramped waltz by that rascal Mickelmas.

Albert passed Mobius his usual schnapps and he drank it at once, pouring it
under his tongue to drain down his throat. Then he took another drink and
sipped at it delicately, his tongue pressed safely against the roof of his mouth,
turned in his seat to face the others. One by one he smiled and met eyes with
them, toasting and sipping in the one fluid and ancient movement.

As a youth this was exactly the sort of bar that terrified him. His father and
mother drank only moderately at home, seated at the stove with its missing
doors, she staring wistfully into the coals or sewing stuffed bears for the tourist
shops, he carving obscure objects from scrap wood with his penknife, all of
which were offered to the flames. Mobius meanwhile busied himself with
reading, deeply absorbed in the books his mother ‘borrowed’ from the libraries
of the middle-class houses where she cleaned for a living. Mobius had often
enough been sent to buy drinks when visitors dropped around, but Frau Vogel
had had a bell installed at the back door of her small bar, precisely for this
purpose, and so it wasn’t until he was in his late teens that he first set foot between the solid wooden doors, reinforced with black iron rods, of a lokal.

Mobius watched his fellow drinkers carouse and toddle and shout with an immense satisfaction. Again, this is what he imagined family life to be like. He had been an only child and so had missed the tumult of sibship. If his family’s room had seemed like a tiny hamlet in a secluded forest, then the neighbouring rooms crammed with children and all the extended family appeared like one teeming metropolis against which no door could be shut, or order be imposed, or catastrophe harm. So too in the lokal he saw himself as the strange uncle, crowded into a corner, called upon only occasionally to intervene or aid, but who otherwise might pass his time unnoticed and alone, although never lonely.

Mobius took no part in their society unless he wanted to. Often he could sit and stare at the dusty wallpaper for hours, quietly sipping, protecting his delicate tongue and letting his mind drone down from the intellectual exertions of the day. There was something gently soporific about the deep maroon colour of the back wall that drew him endlessly towards it, something of the darkened womb, and the more tired he was and the drunker he became the more it seemed to pulse, to croon out its own native lullaby.

However, if it was a more vital optical experience he sought he could always turn on his stool to face the bar itself, and find there the sparkling glasses that stood upended in one long-legged row like a chain of dancehall girls, linked by the arms, lit discreetly from behind and below, so that each had its own charming character but not enough to distract from the overall spectacle. One by one they would be taken from the glass shelf as though chosen by some wealthy client invisible in the crowd, the power of whose wallet couldn’t be
ignored, even as Albert or Frau Kunstler shuffled the others back together, concealing her absence for as long as the liaison might last.

Mobius smiled at Albert, who was wiping glasses with a lazy vigilance, one eye on his mother, who might at any moment break from her dancing to scold him. The boy was rude with health and more besides. The patrons universally loved him, and his skin glowed in recognition of their easy affection. Albert was a homosexual of the most obvious variety, but just let anyone judge him for it! They’d soon find themselves buried under a barrage of fists and kicks, escorted down to the canal and tossed onto a passing barge, or thrown into the watch house, fitted up for some minor crime.

Albert had grown up amongst them, together with their own children, fatherless but not without family. He was from them, belonged to them, but was destined for greater things. Everyone knew it, especially his mother. His quick wit and style, his movie star looks and influential friends, all indicated a fate quite unlike their own, one they couldn’t begrudge him. His were not airs but natural graces. He might become an actor, a director, a company executive or a racing car driver! He rewarded their encouragement and blessings with loyalty, a form of tolerance that reflected their own. Even though they felt coarse and foolish before his beauty and charm, Albert gave no indication that he might prefer to be elsewhere. When he was with them he was part of them, and that was that!

Mobius and Albert watched his mother dance, each foot like the point of a child’s spinning top over which burgeoned her stockinged legs, her massive buttocks and waist, the centre of gravity around which she turned, stately and
magnificent, defying the great weight of the two full jugs of cream shelved upon the puny chest of Michelmas. His hands rested one upon her wide and rounded shoulder, the other upon the straining fabric above her hip. His dark eyes were intent upon her face, scanning for signs of pleasure as though this were a different act of love, a slow and deliberate shifting of flesh dictated by the rhythm of her breathing and not the clapping hands of their friends. ‘Veni! Vidi! Vici!’ he shouted at the top of his lungs, breaking the spell he imagined he had cast over her, drawing from the widow an immediate slap, fitted perfectly into the sound of their final clapping and stamp of feet.

Mobius grinned at Albert, a beatific grin that crystallised all that he was feeling. The boy had his mother’s hair the colour of melted butter, and his eyes were her’s as well, dark blue and flecked with grey, fathomless and ancient like those of a wolf. He was dressed in his waiter’s uniform, in preparation for his midnight to dawn shift in an illegal gaming club somewhere near Alexanderplatz.

Mobius sighed. How unlike Albert he had been at his age! He had had no secret life to conceal, no blandishments nor fears or passions to meddle with his humdrum student’s existence. He had struggled, sure enough, to become part of the wealthier society that had populated the Humboldt, whose paragon of style over substance had been the foppish Flade, but only so far as to be absorbed into the student body superficially, like a splinter beneath the skin. He had quite happily played by himself as a child, locked in his room when his mother went off to work. To his knowledge it had never troubled him at all, being alone and confined, not when he had his books! Outside in the courtyard the other children fought and scratched and bellowed. Repetitive noises of bouncing balls and tin
wheels crashing into the walls did nothing to him, and nothing for him. Sometimes he climbed upon the drawers and peered out of the window that allowed him a view of the rooms opposite and the sky above, curtained with smog and the same low clouds that gathered with him on the ceiling of the Royal Library. Sometimes when his mother returned home, exhausted and rushing to prepare their meal before his father arrived, he might venture to the doorway of their bedroom and watch her at work, peeling onions and potatoes, grating parsnip and beetroot, grinding pepper and salt. He had never asked to be let out and she had never asked him to leave.

Was he envious of Albert? Certainly. The boy wore his easy charms as others wore crucifix and amulets, to enchant and divert and protect. There was nothing about him to make another wary, or suspicious, or guarded. He had retained the openness of the child whilst transcending its vulnerability, like the kind of hound that pleases children by day and protects the house at night.

Mobius was well aware that his own face lacked those simple emblems necessary to be disarming, and that ever since the war even the lingua franca of chit-chat was difficult for him. He had only one advantage; that he was alone in the world and when he died no one would pray for him, sing to him or mourn him. He had a full glass of spirit, he had his seat and he had his lokal. He had Albert, he had Frau Kunstler, he had Michelmas and Frau Hasslich. He had pickled onions and dancing glasses. He had a room of his own and two good neighbours. And he had his work. Most of all, he had his work. His work and the schnapps.

It was only then that he remembered Flade, and his cautionary tale.

‘Do you think we’re headed for another war Albert?’
Albert smiled, as though he had been waiting for just such a question.  

‘No, Herr Professor. The people wouldn’t stand for it. Not after the last one. Not after all we have suffered. Not now that things are getting better.’  

‘Thank you Albert. I believe you’re right.’  

‘You’re welcome, Herr Professor. Most welcome.’  

Mobius nodded and accepted another glass, but the boy’s voice stayed with him. It was a practice voice, an actor’s voice, the voice Albert used when he wanted to appear considerate, intelligent and serious. It was the kind of voice one uses when talking to older people, to idiots and children, overripe with reassurance and confidence.  

But Mobius didn’t feel reassured, or confident. If it meant another war, how he hoped that tomorrow would never come! How he hoped that Albert would never grow older! How he hoped that Michelmas wouldn’t be caught thieving, and that Frau Kunstler would never receive a new stove!
The sun didn’t wait for Mobius but rose of its own accord, feeling its way cautiously above the cold northern morning, unable to penetrate the stone buildings darkened with age. On the streets the people walked with shoulders hunched and collars raised. No-one was taken in by the golden light and its promise of warmth.

Mobius awoke to the sight of Carl’s great hairy ankles, only inches from his face. Carl giggled and prodded Mobius in the bladder, his most vulnerable point. Mobius attempted to climb out of bed but slipped and fell to the floor. He lay there and allowed himself to be nudged at, toed upon, then stood over.

It was a Saturday morning and Carl’s grandfather Gustav was at work, fitting flag-holders to the window frames of suburban buildings. He wouldn’t be back until evening. ‘Deggs!’ Carl shouted in a language only Mobius and Gustav could understand. That no word must begin with a vowel was only one of the grammatical rules Carl had created deep within his muddled head. His was a language, sure enough, but Carl was its only native speaker. ‘Deggs varoom!’ he shouted reproachfully, and began to stamp upon Mobius, forcing him to reply. ‘Deggs, yes, you have?’

Carl produced four eggs from beneath his shirt, nested easily within the palm of one hand.

‘Open the window Carl, will you please?’

Carl did as he was asked, without ever taking his eyes from Mobius, crouched there upon the boards. If Mobius made a sudden movement he would
be ready with a withering scream. Instead Mobius stood quietly, righting himself upon the bed. He walked the short distance to the bucket to relieve himself. The cold wind blew through the window and immediately vacated the room of odour.

‘Shut the window please Carl, and bolt it too.’

Carl bolted the wooden blinds shut. The print of one great hand remained engraved in the silver damp that covered the blind.

Mobius completed his toilet by dousing his face with water taken from the other bucket by the front door. Both buckets lasted him a week, sometimes two. He filled the one as he emptied the other, and vice versa. This bucket was nearly empty, and the other nearly full.

Carl was waiting by the spirit stove, impatiently stepping from foot to foot, squeezing his penis through the thin material of his ragged trousers. He was unable to stand still, and lifted his feet high from the ground before setting them down. It was almost as though he had been subject from birth to some mythical torment, condemned to tread an eternally burning floor.

In his manner of stepping upon the spot he reminded Mobius of ‘The Famed Jongleur’, a chimpanzee who had performed in the parks of Mobius’ childhood. The chimpanzee was able to balance; three on his head, one in his mouth, one in either hand and another gripped in his foot a selection of plates spinning on the sharp points of candlesticks. Dressed in a blue and white striped rowing jersey, laced at the collar, and pleated woollen trousers, ‘The Famed Jongleur’ stood on a bentwood chair and span his plates and even tossed and caught them from foot to hand and hand to mouth, all the while maintaining on his wizened face an expression of detachment and tranquillity.
It was said that the ‘Famed Jongleur’ was older than the oldest human, ate only roasted chestnuts and drank nothing but mead. He smoked cigars between every performance, and blew the smoke out in languorous streams through his nose.

The ‘Famed Jongleur’ played only with children, and birds. He fed both the fragments of chestnut he wouldn’t share with either dogs or adults. It was a bobbing and chirping carousel of sparrows he was feeding when the infant Mobius staggered from his distracted father and approached him. The great monkey put an arm around Mobius and guided him onto his lap. He fed Mobius a piece of chestnut he had softened with his teeth. Mobius ate the chestnut and grimaced, pretend coughed, and smiled cheekily. He pulled upon the chimpanzee’s nipple and attempted to suckle. The monkey shifted him so that they stood face to face, with Mobius balanced upon the creature’s knees. The chimpanzee beetled his extravagant brow and exposed his teeth, making Mobius laugh delightedly. A sparrow landed on Mobius’ head then alighted as quickly as it had come, returning moments later to scratch at his scalp and tug at an errant hair. Mobius squealed with pleasure and struggled against the monkey’s grip, trying to get at the curious little assailant. But the monkey held him fast, blowing gently upon his head, arising the tender hairs to stand and be tugged at, as two more sparrows landed and began to peck, encouraged by the boy’s excited laughter.

Mobius freed a hand and struck it hard against the chimpanzee’s face, chuckling when there was no response. Mobius struck him again, this time keeping his grip upon the frayed grey beard and struggling to draw their faces together so that he might achieve a bite. The birds fluttered above him and filled
his ears with laughter. He grappled at the chimpanzee’s face and twisted the loose jowls, digging in and scratching. He released his grip and made for the creature’s eyes, attempting to pierce the granite stare that had now come between them. Mobius looked into the hard yellow eyes and was immediately frightened. A brutal grip suddenly hurt his shoulder, a grip that he would never forget - it was his earliest memory. Mobius wailed and collapsed into the creature’s lap. He looked for his father and found an eager crowd of onlookers above him.

‘Regard this’, said the gypsy owner, laughing along with the rest, ‘the beast suffers restraint where the child knows not when to stop!’

Mobius was taken up by his father and humoured with gentle words, while some of the laughing women patted him and nuzzled at his ears. The chimpanzee sat quietly on the ground, waiting patiently for the cigar the owner removed from an oilcloth in his vest.

Carl’s ferocious grip had the same paralytic effect upon Mobius as had the grip of the chimpanzee, and Mobius was just as cautious of Carl’s boisterous happiness as he was his fits of anger and despair.

Mobius hastened to the stove lest his preoccupation be noticed. Carl knelt immediately by his side. The observance of ritual was important, and the creation of flame and its application to their own ends was a miracle that never ceased to amaze him. He trembled lest the flame cupped in Mobius’ hand should flicker or dwindle. Every flame was like the first and last flame. Every flame contained the possibility of both eternal light and eternal darkness. Carl laughed with relief as the alcohol took up and began to dance.
Mobius placed the frypan onto the flame. They watched the grey fat dissolve and bubble and begin to brown at the edges.

‘O.K. Deggs.’

Carl cracked an egg flat on the floor, as his grandfather had taught him, then passed it to Mobius. Mobius broke the egg and Carl averted his eyes, as always caught between hunger and squeamishness. Mobius quickly stirred the eggs together so that Carl could take over, with the spoon he carried everywhere for this purpose. He took it from his trouser pocket, straightened it and began to caress the surface of the eggs like a child combing a doll’s hair. Mobius turned off the flame and set about trying to find a spoon of his own. His terrible hunger and the pain in his head goaded him as he searched amongst the books and papers that covered the one table in the room. Carl was lifting and folding through the fluffy eggs. Mobius sat on his haunches beside Carl and waited. Carl was intent upon the eggs in a way that was strangely moving – the ritual was not to be disturbed. Finally the boy began to mumble, then speak, a kind of hum and whirring talk that not even Mobius could understand, although its gravity made one think of a prayer, or incantation. Whatever the meaning, the method was sound, and when Carl finished with a series of quickly chanted repetitions of the word ‘deggs’, the eggs were perfectly cooked. They both began to eat immediately.

When they were finished Mobius lay on his bed and listened to Carl sing. Mobius recognised it as the song Carl had composed on a visit they had made together to the seaside. It had been a windy day, with waves crashing on the rocky shore and great gulls circling over them. Carl now reproduced their high hungry keening, making the waves with his fingers. Nearly everything he sang
was strangely affecting in a way that was beyond Mobius’ ability to understand.
No wonder fools had once been regarded as possessed, and therefore dangerous.
In more barbarous times they had been destroyed by the thousands.

‘Walleyyya!’

Gustav had returned early from work. He curled his dusty head around the
door and finding Carl’s eyes, widened his own in mock surprise. Carl leapt into
the air and chased him outside.

Mobius rolled onto his side and listened to Carl in their room next-door,
harmonising with Gustav’s clopping boots, clattering tools and grunts of pain as
he was squeezed, rubbed, patted and kissed. Carl sang out the story of the
morning while Gustav sought to calm him with deft interjections of soothing
Ohhh’s and Aahh’s and Is that so’s?

The library was shut for the weekend. Later in the day Mobius would visit
the bookseller on Leipziger Strasse. He was nearly out of money and had only a
few more books left to sell. Herr Klose was a Czech and the same man Mobius’
mother had visited, all those years ago. He had bought from her the books she
stole from the houses where she worked, when necessary. She was given a list
of authors by Herr Klose whose works she hunted out in the great oak panelled
rooms designed for reading and contemplation. If the titles weren’t dusty it was
only because of her hand, not theirs. She had never been caught, the missing
books were never noticed, and thus was the teenage Mobius introduced to the
great works of literature, history and the natural sciences, before they made their
inevitable way to market.
Mobius looked around the small room and tried to find his mother. This had been their home; this was where he had been raised, but there was no sign of his mother now. When she had died, while Mobius had been at the front, his father had been forced to sell everything she had accumulated in life to pay for her death. Gone was the tarnished samovar her grandfather had won in a card game across the Silesian border, the sea chest in which her father had shipped in and shipped out, and the wicker basket with its trove of sewing and embroidery tools. Missing from the windowsill were the baroque cherubs that used to glory in the morning sun. Gone were all the dresses and hats and shoes and scarves, and the fashion magazines brought from Paris and gifted to her by an employer.

All that remained was the memory of the sound of her bare feet, moving stickily over the polished boards in summer. That and the smell of raw amber, which she bought from a Balt grocer’s wife and used to rub across her breasts, once a week, on Sunday mornings. She wasn’t a woman who sang, and so he couldn’t remember her voice. She wasn’t a woman who kissed him, and so he couldn’t remember her face. He remembered only her hands, which had been perpetually warm, even in winter, and which she used to place between his shirt and his skin, in the flat of his chest, when he was a boy and having trouble breathing.

Of his father there was much that remained. Mobius had never strayed too far from his father, and on his return from the war had visited him three or four times a week, and more if things were bad. Mobius’ father had become arthritic at an early age, in his hands in particular; it was the bricklayer’s curse. He made ends meet during the Inflation by working with Gustav stencilling numbers on the doors of tenement rooms, as the police at the time had insisted be done.
After a long sickness, his father’s death was quick once the pneumonia took hold. Overnight he withered to the size and weight of a dog’s carcass. His eyes burned with fever and an endless thirst. But there was nothing to be said. They had said everything they needed to say. Everything they wanted to say was said with their eyes, which were calm and tender. Finally his father’s eyes became frightened, and Mobius wept, and his father squeezed his hand then disappeared finally into his body, which continued all night to rattle and wheeze and fight against life.

Mobius moved into the room that same weekend. He inhabited the room in a way that suggested he was afraid of ghosts. He clattered the cutlery and kept on his heavy boots, something his mother hadn’t allowed, and a law his father had continued to obey out of habit. Mobius kept the stove burning throughout a long and hot summer. He didn’t sleep in their bed until winter came. Even then the windows remained open. Sparrows entered and fed upon the crumbs he left purposely upon the table. He kept his room unlocked, so that Carl might enter whenever he wanted.

Mobius set his head on the pillow and let the room absorb him. This had been his morning ritual for as long as he could remember. Even as a child he had sat quietly on this bed in the corner, watching the room that he knew so well, and which yet remained somehow unknowable, a frightening incursion of the mysterious adult world outside, into which his parents had once more disappeared. It was almost as though he were concealing himself, like a birdwatcher in his hide, for the purposes of observation. Mobius knew that if he were still and patient enough then the more secret aspects of the room might
become revealed, aspects he had come to revere. Morning light played across the few areas of polish left upon the boards. It was a mystery why some areas had been ground back to bare wood and others had maintained their original shine. And how had he not noticed, after all of these mornings, after all of these years, that the doorframe was painted a dark green? It was an interesting colour because at this exact moment it stood out against the whitewashed wall like the jade portal to some Oriental temple, and yet the doorway led only onto the infinitely dark hall.

The light animated the doorframe, creating the jade green anew, and the wooden door and floor and table came alive under its soft illumination.

The contemplation of ordinary things had long been Mobius’ prime recreation outside of his work. In the library he might stare for several minutes, transfixed by the tattered threads beneath the olive spine of an old edition. In the park he might find himself contemplating not the cropped trees or the ragged plants but the grooves and grains of the bench on which he was sprawled. In these moments a melancholic harmony existed between himself and the things of the world, so that the world seemed focussed upon him, and not the other way around. No art could ever replace the simple joy of a fallen leaf, so improbable in its perfection, or the mystery of a smudge on a window pane, or the hair of a stranger on the shoulder of his coat.

Mobius’ eye fell upon his humble wooden chair, old and rickety and yet lively with restraint. The curved back and moulding, and the thin and graceful legs seemed to contain all the movement that was necessary. The chair was not only sufficient to his needs but perfect in its own right. So too the cold and mischievous wind that entered the room and set about tempting his papers to
flutter and shift on the table. A single page heaved a little then levitated briefly before gliding to the floor. This only made Mobius settle more comfortably into his bed. His breathing had become deeper and more infrequent, and his heartbeats like the knock of a swell against the hull of a boat. On the edge of sleep, he cast his eyes a last time around the room, taking leave of the only world that refused to exist without him.

*          *          *

‘Mobius my brother, some sausage!!’

Gustav entered the room, holding the plump red sausage like a conductor dangling a lamp. It was filled to bursting and as long as his forearm.

‘And wine!’ he continued, introducing Carl from behind the turned door, holding the large green bottle in the same way his grandfather held the sausage.

‘Careful Carl, that is fresh from the barrel of the generous Herr Blatt.’

‘Vindigvein’ his grandson shouted, blushing suddenly for no apparent reason.

Mobius sat upright on the bed. His stockinged feet settled onto the boards like two newly launched boats. His eye leapt between the sausage and the wine, coming to rest finally on the bottle. He took the bottle from Carl, who was set to release it on the floor. He removed two glasses and a tin mug from the shelf behind the door, placed them on the table then cleared away some papers to make room for the sausage.
‘I’ve won a new contract, a twelve storied in Neukolln. Twelve times twenty-five, whatever that is, if I can get to them all. Some I might need to escape the building with a rope, from the top, if I have to.’

‘Wonderful news Gustav, and wonderful wine.’

Mobius hadn’t wasted any time but already had his mouth deep inside the mug, for a second time, and then a third, to confirm with his body his new intention for the afternoon.

‘Carl, the stove, if you will’, Gustav asked. ‘This pig is only hours dead. Blatt forewarned me earlier in the week. Shoulder, aniseed and chilli. A Latin recipe! I helped him get the mixture into its skin, because he was running so late. They were queuing around the corner! You should have seen their faces when I came out with it first. I had to carry it on the tram in my bare hands in case it split. I was more envied than a man with a beautiful wife!’

Carl had finished preparing the alcohol stove and Gustav knelt to finish the ritual, expertly scraping a match on the floor before showing it to Carl, whose eyes grew wide in awe and appreciation. Gustav dunked the match in the fumes and the stove came alight. He left Carl to begin again his mantra of praise.

‘Twelve times twenty-five, what is that? Anyway, it doesn’t matter; your father and I helped build that wretched building when we were young. It was my first job as a bricklayer. I thought I’d have a look at it in case it hadn’t been done, and it hadn’t. The owner trusts me to do a good job, just like last time. Most of the other buildings the same are rotting down. Concrete cancer! Cheap lime makes rubbish cement! Your father’s boss, for all his faults, at least never scrimped on materials. That slumlord remembered me that from all that time ago. Twelve times twenty five!’
‘Three hundred’ Mobius calculated.

‘You hear that Carl? Three hundred! Three hundred! We’ll have to get busy right away. I’ve got steel enough for fifty and lead for a hundred. The supplier will give me the rest on credit if I get the contract in writing. I might even ask for some money in advance, if that isn’t pushing it. Maybe, I might, if it isn’t. Maybe it is. You can’t be too careful, but he trusts me. Maybe I should trust him!’

The water in the frypan was simmering nicely. Mobius lifted the heavy sausage from the table and lowered it into the centre of the pan.

‘Three hundred! Your father would be proud! It was his idea you know. He could see the way things were heading! It was the same with the stencilled door numbers. But you know all this! As soon as people started stealing the metal ones he was right away with the idea to paint them on! Who’s going to steal a painted number? Remember? The same with the flags. Suddenly every party needed its own flag. That’s democracy! If you can keep up with it! It’s a young man’s game. I don’t have the energy! Now they’re talking about a thousand year Reich. That’s more like it! But fat chance, I say!’

Mobius turned the sausage over, levering it gently with his fingers, immersing one end and holding the other clear. Carl watched the process with an intense concentration. Later there might be the story of the sausage, the dance of the sausage or the song of the sausage. Meanwhile, his grandfather had returned next door, to begin organising his metals and tools. He would be up all night hammering steel plates around a spike, cutting lengths of lead so that he might start tomorrow.
Gustav reappeared with a bleeding hand. He had gashed his hand emptying a barrel of steel sharps, hoping to extend his store by discovering a piece he might be able to re-use. His skin was yellow, mottled and dry like old newspaper, and yet his blood emerged from the white slice in perfect red droplets. The sight made Mobius’ stomach tumble. Gustav hadn’t even noticed. He was thinking numbers.

Carl was thinking sausage. His mumbling had imperceptibly risen until now it achieved the pitch and volume of a kettle about to scream. Mobius looked, and yes, the sausage was ready. He emptied the water then hefted the sausage back into the pan.

They began to devour it immediately, gulping at the wine to cool their mouths. Carl gargled the wine and sang through the meat. Gustav’s lips smacked as he chewed and talked. He was telling Mobius about his hope that one day the flag holders would become compulsory. There was much talk of it. The Nazis were big on flags and had raised a lot of capital from their manufacture and sale. The danger of course was that were flag holders to be made compulsory then they might extend the monopoly over their flag to the flag holders as well. Then he would be in trouble. What did Mobius think about that?

Mobius nodded his head thoughtfully while Gustav continued. He could always undercut the monopoly. A man had to work and eat, didn’t he? He had to feed himself and his grandson, didn’t he? Those slumlords were rich because they were in bed with the government. They were crooks and gangsters who got away with it because they kept to themselves and knew who to pay. Perhaps he
could use tin instead of steel, to cut costs. That wouldn’t matter to them. Especially not if they were doing it because they had to!’

Gustav continued to worry at the idea that he might be made rich. This terrified him with the prospect of being made poor. He swung from one to the other as though appealing to rival magistrates, and thereby neglected his meal. Mobius endeavoured to keep pace with the spectre of his own hunger, which was fiercer even than that of the boy, whose great jaws sawed through the rubbery meat, who ate for the music and texture and taste of eating alone. His huge bulk was a mystery to everyone. Unlike the other children of the area, who had lived through the Inflation and then the Depression and so had failed properly to grow, who had remained as stunted and meagre as their parents and grandparents, Carl had grown until he stood among them like the prospect of better times, when food might be plentiful and children might grow to fantastic heights, just like in the folk tales.

Nobody quite knew what was wrong with Carl, except that he was partially deaf and hadn’t quite grown up as fast as his peers. He wasn’t able to keep up with the world around him, and yet he was handsome and strong, with clever blue eyes and a gentle fay smile. He walked like an athlete, loose in his joints and with a loping rhythm that enabled him to cover great distances without the least bit of effort. Girls and women admired him from afar, and it was only when he came closer that it was clear something was wrong – betrayed no doubt by his trousers hitched too high, or his stepping on the spot, or his curious mumbles and puzzled sighs.

And yet Carl was hugely useful to the children of the building, who dressed him like a modern Spartan in a toga and cardboard helmet, who had provided
him with a wooden sword so that he might lead them in formidable sorties against the children of the building opposite, leading their charge and covering their retreat, giggling and swatting at the scratching and biting defenders, whose mothers and fathers rained down garbage and the contents of chamber pots from the windows above, whose elder brothers even hunted for him on the streets, so that the great hero now clung to his grandfather in public like a chained dog to a pole.

Now that his meal had ceased to steam Gustav began to approach it in the same precise way he worked his metal. His wise fingers pried at weaknesses in the skin and opened the sausage up so that he might divide a piece sufficient to nourish him while not interfering with his thinking aloud. This talking to himself was a habit caused both by Carl’s desire for intercourse at all times and Gustav’s need to ambush his ideas with flurries of words from which might emerge the miraculous edifice of a solid plan. He had meant many things in his long life to many people. His yellowed whiskers hadn’t been touched since the death of his wife some twenty-five years ago. On the side of his neck was a red rash that had appeared the same day his only child and son had been killed in the last weeks of the war, the same day his daughter-in-law had vanished and left him with Carl.

To Carl, Gustav was simply everything that mattered. He was the prism into which all of the myriad refractions of sensation returned to their primary source; the voice of Gustav, the sight of him and smell, his firmness and tenderness and the taste of his hand when bitten, to awaken him, every morning at dawn. The old man and the youth who had remained a child shared the same sense of humour. They laughed at things others couldn’t see or hear. They
shared a love of the miracle of metal, of flame, of wine and sparrows. They walked long distances across the city without saying a word, hand in hand, carrying the treasure of cheese and bread until they couldn’t walk any more, sitting down to eat in a quiet side street, in the crowded atrium of an important building or waiting for the tram that would take them home, pleased and satisfied at having achieved their goal, which was simply to walk, and arrive, and eat and return. Both were liable at any moment to burst forth in song, and yet never together, the one always listening to the other before replying in kind.

To Mobius, Gustav represented the worldly opposite of his shy and distant father. Where Gustav spoke in enthusiastic Rococo flourishes, Mobius’ father had instead chosen his words carefully, applying his trade to the words he cemented one beside the other, slowly building his workmanlike sentences so that they might resist misunderstanding and memory. This was a feature both of his taciturn nature and a tactic to discourage his wife from translating what she felt she had heard into what she was sure he had said. His conversation therefore had the force of argument, and his voice a strangely liturgical tone. It was this aspect of his speaking that infuriated her most. If she were a village on fire then he was the sluggish river that flowed past her, calling her to join him but never willing to leave its banks.

Gustav on the other hand was permanently in flood. If Mobius’ father had held back from sharing stories and advice and thoughts and feelings then Gustav had been his foil. In front of his father he would regale Mobius with jokes and anecdotes and inspired suggestions that made him giddy with so much loosed language.
It was Gustav, not Mobius’ father, who had noticed Mobius’ disconsolation after his experience with Hannah, the policeman’s wife and mother of three. Mobius had thought himself recovered when he visited home, and yet it was there in his eyes like a dark varnish. Gustav had taken Mobius away from the others, on a mercy dash disguised as an errand to find asparagus. As they walked through the crowded market Mobius told Gustav everything. As he talked he realised there wasn’t another soul on the planet with whom he could share the story. His mother would listen carefully but would pity him, inevitably, for having inherited the shyness and capacity for mute suffering of her husband. She would blame herself and blame her husband. She would rather Mobius a criminal or a lout or even a sailor like her father than an unweaned, half-hearted man afraid of women. What mother, after all, doesn’t desire her son to be strong, defiant, independent even! She was sure to be ashamed of him.

Mobius couldn’t tell his father because his father would understand too well. He wouldn’t judge but simply listen, nodding grimly. Perhaps he might pack himself a pipe, or take up his knife and begin to whittle a piece of firewood, or even pour his son a schnapps, but forego one himself so that he might think. When Mobius finished his account his father would ponder the matter for some minutes before shrugging, patting his knee, pouring him another glass. What, after all, could be said about this aspect of human nature? And what could be done about a broken heart? Should he tell his son to toughen himself up? Could he tell his son that he had fallen for his mother in the same way, but been too weak to leave her once their love had faded? Perhaps ask Gustav. He might know what to do.
Gustav however couldn’t help laughing. He laughed loudly, snapping the asparagus stems at their base when the grocer wasn’t looking, stowing the remainder in a cloth bag to be weighed.

‘Ah my son, that is a tale to make an old man hopeful, and envious! I thought you young men were incapable of love! I thought you thought or I’d heard you thought that love was like God or the monarchy or nobility! An illusion, a spent force, a waste of time and words and feelings! Wonderful! So the young are human after all! Fabulous! So the famous Mobius scowl masks a delicate heart! Just like his father! I thought as much! I have an idea, then, to help you!’

As they returned to the building Gustav outlined his plan. ‘They say the heart is blind but that is not so! The heart can see but it has no patience in a young man! It darts about like a frightened rabbit looking for a burrow! If it isn’t careful it might lead you into the lair of a wolf! You must have patience. You must gather experience. You must learn to see with your heart. The right woman will come along and you will see her and you will know! Take it from me, I married too young without having learnt this lesson. Then I met Anni. My heart knew her immediately. That is why we are still together. And that is where we are going right away!’

Fortunately for Mobius’ parents who were waiting for their asparagus, Anni had a room just the other side of Oranienburgerstrasse, near the Great Synagogue. It was only a few minutes away. Mobius didn’t know anything about this Anni. Even Gustav’s son, even Mobius’ mother and father knew nothing of Anni. Gustav explained matter-of-factly that Anni was a prostitute, whom he had been seeing for some years now. ‘And yes, I was seeing her for
some years even while my wife, god bless her, was still alive. But what could I do? My love for Anni was stronger than my loyalty to my wife. But not my duty. I was always old fashioned in that regard. And the only reason we aren’t together now is because my son wouldn’t understand. He’s made out of the memory of his mother a figure of womanliness and better feelings. She is his guardian, more than myself. I wouldn’t want to change that. She can’t be replaced. I don’t blame him.’

Anni lived on the second floor of a red brick building in a room overlooking the street. Flowers in small painted pots stood on the windowsill and drowsed in the afternoon sun. Her one room was large and very clean. The bare walls were painted an unusual shade of lime, and her furniture, including her large bed, was lacquered black in the Asian style. If Anni’s room wasn’t what he had expected then neither was she, for precisely the opposite reason. She seemed a perfectly ordinary ‘middle-aged’ woman; plump, wary, powerful and vulnerable at the same time. She welcomed Gustav with a discreet kiss and held her blue-grey eyes on Mobius as his story was recited to her. Gustav didn’t embellish or hurry. The voice he used was respectful and quietly confident, as though he were talking to an elder or an expert, fully expecting to be understood, not expecting to be interrupted, aware obviously that Anni was a woman who knew all there was to know about men and so there was no point telling her anything but the truth of it. But as Anni looked into Mobius’ eyes, he got the feeling that she was reading him as much as she was listening to Gustav, learning more from her simple and frank observation than from the story he had brought her. This feeling was confirmed when, even before Gustav had finished speaking Anni sat herself at her table and scribbled something on a piece of
paper. She passed it to Gustav the moment he had finished talking. Gustav in turn passed the piece of paper to Mobius. On it was written an address, and a time. Mobius didn’t know what to say.

‘It isn’t my address, if that’s what you’re worried about,’ she added.

‘Of course not’ Mobius lied, staring bashfully at the paper.

‘I’m retired. Except for this fancy man.’

‘Fortunately for me’ said Gustav, passing her the bag of asparagus, with a wink to Mobius to let him know they’d buy more on the way home.

‘For us, my sweet, for us. Now…’ Anni received Gustav’s kiss then turned to Mobius. ‘Now, you will meet this woman. I know her. She is attractive, enough…And you will learn! And you will enjoy yourself! But! You cannot! You will not be able to fall in love with her! She will not allow it. It is impossible, I can assure you! Impossible! She will tell you so herself.’

At the marked time Mobius climbed down to the basement room and knocked on the door. He was dressed in his finest clothes, given to him of course by Flade, just that afternoon. He would sell them tomorrow. For the moment however the feel of the clean wool on his thighs made him uneasy. He twisted his neck inside the tight silk collar. What kind of woman was it exactly that Anni believed he couldn’t fall in love with? Was she cruel? Would she mock him? Was she so ugly that he would be revolted? Was she a child yet to develop or an unclean old hag? Terrible visions plagued Mobius as he waited. If marriage was like a hospital, as Luther had claimed, that cured one of lust, what kind of arrangement had Anni in mind that might cure him of his urgent and fertile longing? There was no woman on earth he could imagine that he couldn’t
love. He could love any woman, of that much he was sure! In this respect he felt like a young man running away to sea, ready to join any old outfit regardless of destination, cargo or reputation. But that wasn’t the point. Gustav and Anni were right. It wasn’t of love that he needed curing but unrequited love.

Mobius knocked on the door again, louder this time.

Her name was Beatrice, and despite himself Mobius couldn’t look away. The dank and mouldy doorway only intensified the glow of her amber hair, the youthful creaminess of her skin and the glint in her clever green eyes. She was barefoot and dressed in a faded cotton slip. Her faintly silhouetted body was wiry and graceful at once, like that of a dancer. Her pale lips parted as she smiled at him, revealing mischievously pointed teeth. With a simple inclination of her long neck she drew him inside.

In the dark and humble room Mobius stood before her outstretched hand. His first instinct was to grasp it but her upraised palm indicated something else altogether.

‘Of course, I’m sorry.’

Mobius passed her the amount suggested by Flade, who had also lent him the money. She took it and shook her head.

‘It’s not enough.’

‘Are you Spanish?’ he asked her.

‘Yes, but it’s not enough.’

In his heart Mobius felt relieved. Here was an opportunity to withdraw, and yet his hand was already seeking through his jacket and trousers. All he had was a few coins, barely enough for his tram fare home. Ashamed, he kept them wrapped in his fist. Beatrice gently pried open his fingers and took the coins.
‘Have you washed today?’

‘I’m sorry? Yes, of course.’

‘Please take off your clothes and wait there.’

The bed was small and misshapen. It wasn’t a bed he could sleep in, his legs were too long, but then again, he wasn’t there to sleep. Reminded, he began to undress. Beatrice was urinating loudly into a tin bucket next door, separated from him by a flimsy curtain. He could see her feet astride the bucket, and just the barest pale sickle of her backside, beneath the curtain. A cat mewed and butted against her legs. She finished and rose and walked further into the little room. He heard the scraping of a plate on the rough cement floor and the sound of milk sloshing into it. Again, he had to remind himself and continue to undress.

She returned moments later, shed of the slip and gliding across the floor towards him. She led him to the bed and although his first instinct was to sit and cover himself, she indicated with a delicate tug of his arm that he must in fact lie down. He swung his legs over and stretched them down the bed, his knees bent so that his feet mightn’t hang beyond. The anxiety he had felt only minutes before was gone. He was already erect, and although his erection appeared to him as always foolish and alien, he didn’t care. She was beside him, lubricating herself with something unseen. He placed a hand in the small of her back, and her skin was smooth and warm. He removed his hand and placed it against his right cheek, which was by contrast stubbled and cold. She turned and climbed over him, straddling his stomach, taking his hands and placing them on her breasts, which were small and pale and wired with thin blue veins.
His fingers rubbed her large dark nipples, as smooth and rubbery as the substance of her lips, which kissed his hands alternately. Her nipples fascinated him; he couldn’t take his eyes away. The soft badges of motherhood? Flowers in dark bloom? How could he approach them so that he might better understand? He tried to rise off the bed to taste them but she restrained him with a single hand on his chest. She rose above him and pushed harder still, so that he might settle, so that he couldn’t hurt her, because her eyes were shut and her face concentrated as she inched down upon him, wincing occasionally, breathing heavily and not from passion but apparent pain. Mobius felt immediately miserable, it was a deep and aching misery that caught in his throat, tender but sharp, a melancholic wonder that burned slowly in his loins and yet flamed wildly from his fingers and feet. She continued to rock above him, eyelids flinching at the base of every caress - and he was mistaken, it wasn’t pain but a fight within feeling; she was numb amidst the flames that leapt over her, licking at her hair and face, feeding from him and finding nothing of her on which to feed; she was porcelain, she was fireproof, she was an effigy of steel sinking deeper into the ashes as he flared and buckled and finally collapsed.

Mobius struggled to contain his resentment as he dressed, tugging on his clothes angrily, attempting to stifle his attempts at speech, at an explanation he himself didn’t understand. She waited patiently by the open door; one foot hooked on her other knee, her eyes avoiding Mobius’ own, which scoured her face for meaning. Now he had truly plumbed the depths of his pathetic manhood! Sentimental madness! Romantic blatherer! They say the antidote for
snakebite is the venom of the snake, but if self-contempt were the intended cure for his blind love then they were mistaken!

It was raining outside and Beatrice gripped his wrist as he tried to escape. He didn’t even have the strength to shrug her off! She lifted his chin with her fingers and looked into his eyes. What he saw there surprised him. Her eyes weren’t mocking, nor disappointed, and not at all angry.

‘It is OK. You are a good man. But what you want from me you cannot have.’

‘Yes’ Mobius agreed.

‘They are the rituals of intimacy you have seen. They are only the rituals of making love, nothing more. As for the other, what these rituals are arousing in you, you will have to wait for another, you understand?’

‘Yes’ said Mobius.

‘I see you are an educated man. In my country we say to perform the acts of faith and the rest will come, you understand?’

Mobius nodded. Was this what Anni had anticipated, when she said that he couldn’t love Beatrice? That if to travel in a country without maps was to guarantee becoming lost, she was to be his guide?

‘In the meantime I would like to meet you the first Wednesday of every month, at the same time. You agree?’

‘Yes, I agree.’

‘You are sure?’

‘Yes, I am sure.’

As he said this Beatrice leant up and kissed him on the cheek. It was a disguised gesture, the gesture of a stranger disguised as a friend, and this he
realised is what she would always remain. The realisation didn’t worry him, the way it might have. This was, after all, the way things were done. Appointments with strangers. Liaisons with friends. The hospitality of marriage. In short, the way things had always been done.

He strode through the rain and welcomed it on his face. He tasted it on his lips and tongue, and was surprised to discover that he was happy. The suit given to him by Flade soon became heavy with water. It swelled in its fibres and hung from him like an old saddle blanket. There was a tram but he passed it without noticing. He hadn’t the fare anyway, and it was only when he entered a café and ordered a brandy that he remembered, and laughed, and left again, leaving a puddled trail and curious stares behind him.

*   *   *

‘Vindigwiein!!’ Carl shouted in Mobius’ ear. Shocked out of his reverie and finding nothing in the boy’s red face but anger, Mobius looked to Gustav for explanation. He was staring at the doorway, where two young people in an identical grey uniform had entered the room, without permission, as though they expected no one at home. When they saw the gathering at the table they stopped and bowed politely. The younger of the two, a man with a harelip barely concealed beneath a downy red moustache, stepped before the other, a woman in her thirties with distinctly thinning hair, thick ankles beneath white hose and a leather briefcase tucked under her sturdy arm. She watched her partner admiringly as he stiffened, brought his hand behind his back, nodded to each of them in turn, cleared his throat and prepared to give speech.
‘I am Rudolph Sattler of the Reich Commission for the Scientific Registration of Hereditary and Constitutional Severe Disorders, and this is my colleague Frau Shutz from the Reich Department of Public Health and Hygiene, on loan from the Kaiser Wilhelm Society for the Advancement of Science. At your service.’

Mobius looked to Gustav, who was staring blankly at the two officials. Carl too was staring at Gustav, trying to decipher this new expression on the face of his normally unflappable grandfather.

‘I am Dr. Paul Mobius, this is my good friend Herr Gustav Diels and his grandson Herr Carl Diels.’

The young man raised both his hands in delight. ‘Wonderful. We have searched next door and not finding anyone at home left one summons. Frau Shutz, would you please do me the favour?’

Frau Shutz bowed slightly and passed the briefcase to her colleague, then departed next door. Mobius looked to Gustav expecting him to say something about their entering his room without permission, but a tormented gleam had entered his eyes. It was a look that Mobius didn’t recognise, although Carl knew it as the one that came over Gustav’s face when he pretended to stare at something in a shop window, when really he was tracking the approach of his grandson’s would-be assailants.

‘And this is Carl. Fabulous! May I?’

The young man didn’t wait for an answer but walked immediately towards them.

‘May you what?’
The man was already reaching towards Carl, for what purpose they couldn’t tell, because the tone of Gustav’s voice had cut him short.

‘It is alright, my friends, I’m sure he won’t bite me!’

The young man laughed nervously, but seeing that his joke wasn’t shared, looked towards Carl with a new apprehension, and withdrew his arm, tucking it quickly by his side.

‘I see. Well, in that case, to the matter at hand. Frau Shutz?’

The woman passed him the summons, a single typed paragraph on a thick white sheet.

‘The Reich Commission for the Scientific Registration of Hereditary and Constitutional Severe Disorders, by order of SS Reichsamtpleiter Dr Brack and Dr Ritter of SS Foundation for the Research into Hereditary Science and Reich Department of Public Health and Hygiene demand that one Carl Diels be presented forthwith for summary investigation before conveyance at a later date for intensive neurological and anthropological examination. Signed, Reichsamtpleiter Dr Brack. Tiergartenstrasse 4, Berlin Chancellory.’

The young man held up the piece of paper before Mobius.

‘Herr Doktor. I am sure you can read? Please confirm to your neighbour the contents of this summons. You may retrieve your glasses if necessary. I would ask you to sign on his behalf at the bottom of the page. I have a pen for this purpose.’

But as Mobius reached for the paper, with a whoop and screech Carl snatched it and jumped to his feet. He continued to jump on the spot, shaking the floorboards and bellowing excitedly. He so frightened the young man that he
fell against the table, spilling the glasses and ruining his suit in the pan of grease.

‘Frau Shutz, the briefcase!’ he screamed.

‘You have it Herr Sattler. You had it!’

The young man fell to his knees and scrambled for the briefcase, his head nudging around between Mobius’ legs, who slid the briefcase over towards his colleague. Throughout the performance she had continued to stand away by the door. She watched unconcerned as Carl bounded past her, out of the room and into the hall.

‘We must catch him!’ the young man cried, climbing from his knees to his feet.

‘That will not be necessary’ replied Gustav, righting the glasses calmly and relocating the frypan to the windowsill.

‘Carl will return shortly.’

Gustav picked up the paper Carl had flung into the air. He showed it to Mobius. In the middle of the page beside the signature of the Reichsamsleiter was a large red and black hakenkreuz. ‘The boy has a weakness for your flat-footed cross. There’s no need to chase him.’

Sure enough Carl returned, striding proudly through the door, marching as he had seen his younger fellows march, although his exaggerated movements of arm and leg suggested caricature. Around his neck was the scarf and toggle of the Hitlerjugend, wrested off an opponent on a raid across the street.

‘He means no harm, I assure you.’

Carl continued to march, swinging his arms and goosestepping wildly so that the young man had to keep on the hop. The woman on the other hand kept
to her wall, her eyes precise and impassive, following Carl back and forth across the room.

Finally she stood at ease, ran a hand through her sparse brown hair and stepped forward.

‘I have seen enough, Herr Sattler. Thankyou.’

‘Quite’ the young man agreed. He had only just discovered that the bottom of his suit jacket, and now his trousers, were drenched in fat and water. The stained hand that had made this discovery trembled before his face.

‘I have only one question for the gentlemen. In your opinion…do you have a cloth I might use? No? Thankyou. In your opinion, is this Carl Diels fit and capable to work?’

The young man awaited an answer, while Gustav raised a finger to point at Carl.

‘This Carl Diels?’

‘Yes, your…Grandson. Correct.’

‘Is that your intention? To teach my grandson how to work?’

‘It is good for him if he can work. It is better for him. I am only trying to help. Thankyou for your time.’

In the meantime Mobius had signed the paper. He passed it to the young man, who remembered too late the state of his fingers.

‘Frau Shutz, if you please.’

The woman took the page and folded it precisely. She then passed the young man her handkerchief, which he pressed into his fist.
‘No, use this, I insist.’ Gustav had managed to release the scarf from around Carl’s neck. He tossed the toggle out of the window and held the scarf there for the young man to take.

‘No, thankyou. This is a joke, I think. Good day to you all.’

The woman was already out the door. Startled to find himself alone, the young man hurried after her. Carl climbed onto the table and crawled to the window, to follow the journey of his toggle. Gustav held him by the waist so that he wouldn’t fall. Gustav’s face was sallow and determined. He put all of his weight into restraining the boy. Carl screamed at the sight of the two officials, beneath him in the court. The young man flinched and scurried faster, away from the scream that resounded after him, as Gustav coaxed Carl back from the window, and Mobius helped him from the table. The sky was beginning to darken. A damp wind slumped off the eaves opposite and glided into the room.
In ordinary circumstances, if Mobius had to cross the city he made sure to keep to the parks or the backstreets or the shaded canals. What he lost in shoe leather he thereby gained in peace of mind. Normally he avoided the main streets because open spaces made him feel vulnerable. It wasn’t the traffic or the crowds but an irrational fear of exposure to the skies, as if great iron taloned birds awaited to swoop down and take him, there on the coverless terrain of the Unter den Linden.

Today however he had taken the most direct route, walking straight down Friedrichstrasse before turning resolutely onto the wide street whose famous lime trees had been chopped down to make way for the statues of warrior heroes. The street was silent now but for the sad rustling of abandoned newspapers and signs ticking in the wind. The sometimes-keening sometimes crowing call of the ravens that had congregated over the pebbled median strip followed him as he hunched into his coat and hugged the great stone walls. The low grey clouds above threatened rain, and the earlier heat had dissipated to the extent that Mobius began to stride at his wintry pace, stiff and urgent, eyes straight ahead and head down. He turned into Wilhelmstrasse and immediately slowed. He had avoided this particular street for over a year - now he remembered why.

Every building on the street belonged to the Party. The flags were everywhere. Guards stared at him from the doorways, amused or solemn, each
could feel his discomfort as he moved unaccountably into the middle of the road.

* * *

The doorman of the Hotel Prinz Albrecht stood at his place above the highest marble step beside the statue of Hermes. He was roughly the same age as Mobius although he looked far older. The man’s moustache had been dyed purple-black, accentuating his waxy teeth. His cheeks had been incompetently rouged to camouflage by approximation his blue-red drinker’s nose. The uniform he wore was a size or so too small for him, perhaps to amuse the passing officers whom he saluted ceaselessly - like a wind-up toy, whirring and clicking and briskly saluting, modulating his Heil Hitler’s across the space before him so that each recipient felt individually bestowed.

Having received his directions Mobius waited in the hall. There were small seats provided of the type used by campers and photographers, three-legged and wooden, but he chose instead to stand. Before him passed a parade of bare-armed sandwich boys with squeaky trolleys, bowlegged SS officers in high-hats and jodhpur trousers, plump nattering secretaries and rabbity young clerks.

Mobius wedged himself as much as he could behind a bronze palm tree, casting his attention back upon the stools, which were inscribed with Runic sigils. The sigils were crudely carved, by design he supposed, to represent what he couldn’t imagine. The damn things were everywhere of late; on the front of trains, on the façade of buildings, on the toes of new shoes and even on a loaf of bread he had once bought. And yet nobody appeared to know what they meant.
When he asked the baker what the symbols represented he had received an icy stare. It was the customer behind him who had leant in and sneered ‘They sell. He doesn’t know either.’

Mobius noticed a small plaque on the wall behind the stools. It said ‘gifted to Reichsführer Himmler by the Leipzig Boys Choir, on the date of his birthday, 1933. Heil Hitler!’

Mobius heard a single cough at the end of the hall. The cough was sharp like a tap on the shoulder. An incredibly tall young man in an SS uniform stood framed in the open doorway, heels together. He was so thin that his tightly buckled jacket belt seemed to do laps around his waist. When he saluted the length of his outstretched arm suggested the kind of pole firemen use to knock cats out of trees.

‘Heil Hitler!’

The young man stooped more than bowed. Even so, his enormous hat tilted over his thin face and had to be quickly corrected. The thinness of his face and the largeness of the hat was the reason for his stiff movements, guessed Mobius. The poor boy must walk like those native women one sees in magazines, balancing gourds and buckets on their heads.

‘This way please. Herr Doktor.’

The doorway was empty now but for one long cantilevered leg, drawn quickly out of sight.

Flade’s ‘office’ on the third floor was so small that it made Mobius’ own library space seem generous. The office had obviously been some sort of storeroom. Three of its four walls were concealed floor to ceiling by unpainted
pine shelves, which were used now to store Flade’s papers. He had never been
the organised type and the papers were crammed into every tier in toppling piles
of loose leaf and folder, report and bulging file. In the fourth wall a dumb waiter
had been transformed into some kind of humidor. It contained ancient leather-
bound texts of every size and shape, ruthlessly wedged one against the other, as
well as a box of cigars pressed against the smudged glass. The desk at which
Flade sat was the only concession to his rank. It was round and made of steel
and black marble. Mobius recognised it as the card table that had previously
served in Flade’s winter apartment, positioned judiciously beside the bay
windows overlooking the Kurfurstendam. If Flade was entertaining at all hours
he certainly insisted on the whole world knowing about it.

‘You’re going up in the world.’

Flade laughed bitterly. It was nearly summer but his usual warm tan was
missing, instead his face was the colour of an old mop. His trademark
aquatically blonde hair was now the colour and texture of straw. His eyes were
red rimmed and watery. Was Flade too getting old? Was he actually being made
to work?

‘Good old Mobius! Cap in hand but never a nice word.’

‘You’d offer me a seat, but I suppose a box will do.’

‘Please. Of course.’

Mobius sat and steadied the sides of the box with his hands. He needn’t
have, because it too was full of books.

‘Do these people know there’s going to be a war?’

Mobius pointed behind him through the open doorway. The corridor was
filled with people laughing and stepping briskly as they returned from lunch.
Flade smiled quickly but didn’t reply. His wandering eyes found his delicate hands and rested thereupon. Slowly, he turned them palms up. Flade stared at the palms of his hands as though he were reading them. Mobius had never seen his friend so introspective! The Flade he had known had never been a secretive man, mainly because the act of telling was too central to his public personality. There were the usual things not said, of course, but that was a matter of taste and rank, of his discretionary status as a ‘gentleman’. For this reason alone many made the mistake of trusting him with their dirty secrets, taken in by his calculated charm and thereby pollinating the beautiful flower at the expense of neglecting the thorny plant. In fact Flade had little need for intimacy, despite his countless acquaintances, for the good reason that for him an acquaintance was little more than raw material - for diversion and information, like a newspaper or radio broadcast.

What was Flade afraid of then, telling or not telling?

He plucked at the fine white hairs on the back of his thumbs and sniffed occasionally. He ran his eyes over Mobius’ battered grey suit, shiny in places and threadbare in others, and nodded thoughtfully.

‘What size are you now? You’ve grown somewhat these last few years.

‘What about my friends?’

‘Yes. Although that is more difficult. A different department, I’m afraid. Very hush hush.

Flade didn’t have time to elucidate. His spine stiffened suddenly, and his guilty hands fell from the table. Trapped on his face was the expression a cat makes when confronted by a large dog.
‘Nothing should be difficult for a man of your calibre, Herr Professor Flade.’

Standing there with his hands in his pockets, leaning casually against the doorframe was a young man in a black doeskin SS uniform. His thin red lips managed a bitter and sardonic smile. His head was angled querulously in a harsh parody of flirtatiousness. His large eyes were clear and brown, his eyelashes long and black. His head was shaved high up its sides, and the remaining hair on top had been combed into a dark spine, an extended ridge of widow’s peak.

If the young man might once have been considered handsome in the traditional sense, even beautiful, then this potential had long since been ruined by his unpleasant character. His gastric complexion and venal air, and the cynical intelligence deep in his eyes suggested to Mobius that firstly the young man had no inhibitions, and secondly and most persistently, the recurrence of a word he hugely disliked, and therefore never used - the word ‘odious’.

This word seemed to emanate from the young man precisely because Mobius suspected he would be proud of it, just as he would be immune to the common insults directed at the soldier, relating to cowardice, dishonour, sexuality, perfidiousness. Wasn’t it this ability to turn negatives into positives, crimes into virtues, fears and resentments into policy and most of all, to invest the pointless deaths of millions of young men with a sacramental glory that explained the success of this regime? The young man had defeated the ability of language to shame him, and stood there inviolable, the new man of the New Order, proud and triumphant.
‘Doktor Mobius, may I introduce to you my superior officer and director of the Witch Special Work Unit, SS Sturmbannfuhrer Dr. Levin.’

Mobius looked at Flade and saw that he was on his feet, and was saluting, or had already saluted; he had no idea. There was an obviously pleading accent to his voice, however. It was there too in his eyes, with the barest edge of warning. But Mobius had no idea what was expected of him. The young man, the Major, the Doktor, the ‘odious’ one, but a young man nonetheless, who in a different age might have been the one to show Mobius respect, hadn’t moved from his slump against the doorframe. He had raised his overly groomed eyebrows in expectation, but that was all. In expectation of what? Mobius stood and bowed politely, but this only raised the Major’s eyebrows further. In fact his whole scalp lifted so sharply that his peaked hair was poised over his forehead like the blade of an axe.

‘Heil Hitler’ reminded Flade.

Mobius managed to bring his hand up in the salute of his generation. It would have to do.

‘Do not feel ashamed, Herr Doktor, that you are a civilian now. We can excuse a veteran many things. In fact, some of my people are not even party members. That is correct, is it not Doktor Flade?’

‘Yes, Doktor Levin. That is so.’

Out of delicacy, Mobius didn’t look at his friend, because the guilt in Flade’s voice was unmistakeable. This however only gave the ‘odious’ one the impression that Mobius too was part of the conspiracy. He winked and grinned cruelly.
‘You see, we even use our civilian titles. We are academics, after all, of one stripe or another…But enough of that. Let me begin by saying how pleasing it is to put a face to your name. You see, it is quite a coincidence your turning up here today.’

‘Is it?’ asked Flade, who was clearly surprised.

‘Yes, Dr. Flade, it is. But please don’t interrupt me! As I was saying, or about to say, Dr. Mobius’ work has been most influential upon my own…’

‘Has it?’ answered Mobius.

‘Yes, your earliest work on the witch trials - particularly your habilitation on the trial of Barbe Esslingen, the herbalist. Fascinating stuff. A work of great complexity! I have cited that work on many occasions! The characters of Master Brinkman, the torturer and executioner, and Bishop Binsfeld the persecutor, and Friedrich von Spee, the intellectual agitator who opposed the trials. The bureaucrats and scribes, the lawyers and judges, the witnesses and defendants - These are like people I know! I grew up with them in my formative years as a historian!

‘I see.’

‘If I had only known you were still alive!’

‘As you can see, I…’

‘Your catchcries influenced us all, no doubt about it! ‘Take up a problem, not a period!’ ‘Abandon the great and look at the common – make psychology your field of study!’ ‘Not events but collective mentalities!’ I followed your every word! But tell me, have you published anything lately?’

‘No, I’m afraid…’
Levin smirked, although his voice was sympathetic. ‘I see, well, that doesn’t surprise me in the least. All of our best thinkers, until recently, have been shut out by the liberal orthodoxy. Although that has changed. I don’t know if you are aware?’

‘I would be happy to tell the Major, however…I am interested to know what he…’

‘Of course, rude of me. That’s my youth. Don’t be put off by it. I am the youngest Doctorate this century out of Heidelberg, and the first since the Fuhrer came to power…’

Levin paused long enough to glare exultantly at Flade.

‘In fact I have played a significant part in reforming the history faculty there, and elsewhere, I might add…’

This time the pause was specifically for Mobius, but for what end he couldn’t say. Levin lurched self-consciously off the doorframe and puffed out his chest, waiting.

‘Yes’ Mobius replied, ‘Very good, I see.’

‘I like to think of myself as a humble disciple of Guido von List. I specialise in the area of heraldics. Although of course now, my duties, you see…’

‘Yes’ Mobius agreed.

‘You might have read my work in the Hammer?’

‘No, I’m afraid, my reading these days…

‘I understand. You’re old and set in your ways. I have copies.’

‘Ah, very good.’
‘I was the first to identify the sign of the earth spirit in the Rembrandt etching, “The Magician”. Are you aware of that work?’

‘Yes, I know the one.’

‘I was the first to translate the heraldic device contained within the etching. The quartered escutcheon charge per saltire and azure with twin orles in alternate gules, argent and sable…’

Levin paused and looked at his fingers, which continued to make curious shapes in the air. Mobius didn’t know what to say. Unnerved, he glanced at Flade, who was waiting patiently for Levin to resume.

‘Or was it twin orles within argent and sable? I forget. Anyway, I translated it as “I long for the illuminating Aryan salvation, wisdom and law, because the heavenly commandment issues from the darkness and blesses from the light.”

Mobius couldn’t help but feel ashamed on Flade’s behalf – Flade, whose obvious deflation of character since they last met must have something to do with Levin. Most disturbing of all however was the look of deadly naïveté in Levin’s eyes, a look that told Mobius that while Levin was used to laughing at others, he had somehow, improbably, avoided the ridicule due to him. His head was humbly inclined, as if expectant of approval and praise.

‘Fascinating. I see.’

‘It’s a matter, as List discovered, of discerning the Runic forms within the heraldic divisions. The ignorant, as always, are distracted by the pretty tints and shapes. We however as scholars, concentrate our analysis upon the dividing lines themselves. So the common, for example, pale sinister side bend sinister blazon corresponds exactly with the fa-rune, and interestingly, the swastika, or gibor-rune, can be read within the kinked pale, fess and bend blazons. Once this
is understood it is all a matter of hermeneutics, hermetic experience and hard, hard work.’

‘I see.’

Levin was still making the odd shapes with his hands, first one then another, as though he were entertaining a child.

‘You see?’

‘Yes. Very good.’

Flade, who had remained silent throughout, was now mimicking Levin’s pose of thoughtful satisfaction, unconsciously perhaps, with one arm behind his back and the other pressed upon his stomach, slowly rocking back and forth like a Bonaparte with wind.

‘And you, Herr Doktor? Do not shame me by letting stand the triumphs of a younger man. Dr. Flade was most effusive in his enthusiasm for your work habits generally, but not in his explication of your recent work. As I’m sure you’re aware, this is the tendency of his method in general. Say much, with the customary élan of his class, and yet say nothing of any practical use. He is a valued researcher, nonetheless.’

Flade’s complexion changed again, right before their eyes, to the colour of old beer. His Adam’s apple, the true barometer of his disgrace, plunged and bobbed in his throat.

Mobius was shocked at the sight of his friend’s humiliation. Flade, he knew, could flay the skin off of the ‘odious’ one’s back with a few choice words, and yet, for whatever reason, didn’t appear to be in a position to do so.

‘With all due respect, Herr Doktor Levin, as I’m sure you are aware, the true value of our work as historians is not always appreciated in our own
lifetime. Doktor Flade was once the foremost authority on witchcraft persecution in Westphalia and Bavaria, and yet…’

‘And yet, and yet, and yet…His methods were unsound, his interpretations were all wrong and his politics remain bourgeois and therefore outdated, redundant, an insult to clear thinking men everywhere.’

Levin lifted his fist and slammed it into the palm of his other hand, one more time, in exclamation.

‘If you say so’ Mobius agreed.

A flitter of panic passed across the younger man’s eyes, engulfed immediately by a glacial stare. Levin regarded the two old men at length. He knew that his stare was impenetrable, and that therefore he was safe. He knew this because he practiced daily in front of the mirror, letting narratives of choice revenge play themselves out behind his eyes while he regarded himself calmly. These thought-murder narratives had become more and more complex as he had aged. Some enemies were slain with his hands, others with his words. What hadn’t changed however was that he remained the hero of every story. He was always Just, even when he was ruthless. He protected the good women of his country, the deserving veterans, his street-fighting peers and his mentor and guide, Guido von List. Only the objects of his lusty anger had widened, perhaps because the world seemed recently full of bleeding hearts and polite old men, teasing sluts and jabbering foreigners, bossy mothers and filthy beggars, criminals in flash clothes and fathers who contented themselves with growing vegetables. Yes, he admitted it to himself - despite his deserved respect as a revered scholar, the Herr Doktor Mobius reminded him of his own father - ‘old green fingers’, a high-school history teacher with dirt under his nails and a
moth-eaten beard. The bastard was a pacifist and lifelong civilian. You couldn’t talk with him. He had an answer for everything. Even when he admitted he didn’t know something it was like that was a clever answer. Cunning! Always so quaintly reasonable. Try and see the good in people! That’s what he always said. And not only that, he sang happy songs in the morning, at dawn, like a stupid bird! Revolting, and people liked him, admired him even! He was smart enough, but it was the smart of ‘seeing the other fellow’s perspective’, of admitting what he didn’t know. What a tactic! How could you fight it? If only he had known then what he knew now, that there were some men in the world who didn’t need nice manners to restrain them. And that was the problem with history, wasn’t it? Too much backward looking! What was needed was visionaries, those who looked ahead, who cut through the Gordian knot of babble with the clean sword of the blood’s own revelation!

Yes, Levin stared long and hard, until he was fully sure he had stamped out the fire.

‘You attempt to patronise me Herr Doktor, from your position as an elder. However, if I appear unimpressed it is only because my generation does not deify the *logos* in the same way as yours. We are proud to call ourselves the Conservative Militants of the New School of History! We seek to return to the old beliefs, our traditions, the strong faiths! We choose to worship nature, and thereby what is natural. May the strong survive and the weak perish! May the faithful thrive and the doubters wither! We therefore place the heart before the head! Always! We trust in our traditions, in our leader and flag and army!’

Levin took his hand off his heart and wiped his eyes. His knees were still shaking with righteous anger. He swallowed noisily, and appeared about to
embark on another speech when Flade deftly intercepted him. ‘You are already aware, Dr. Levin, that Herr Dr. Mobius is the country’s foremost authority on the witchcraft persecutions! However, there is much of his work that remains unexamined by our own scholars. For example, I showed you one of Herr Dr. Mobius’ monographs, the one regarding Kepler?’

‘I remember.’

‘Well’, continued Flade, looking to Mobius for support, ‘not only was Kepler a famous astronomer, but he was also one of the most admired astrologers of his age! He was court astrologer to two Emperors, and to General Wallenstein as well!’

‘Really?’ sniffed Levin. ‘General Wallenstein eh? He is a great hero of mine, even if he did fight for the Catholics. I know that he saved the Holy Roman Empire from the Swedes, but I didn’t know that he was interested in the stars. I don’t mind admitting.’

‘And Kepler’s mother was a witch. She was nearly burned at the stake, like her aunt, the woman that raised her.’

‘Is that so? Is that so Doktor Mobius?’

Mobius nodded, reluctantly. If what Flade had said wasn’t quite the whole truth, he certainly wouldn’t repudiate him for the benefit of Levin. If this is the new generation, thought Mobius, God help us!

‘Of an even greater interest to you Doktor Levin, given your expertise in the field of hermeneutics, would certainly be Kepler’s final work, a work of fiction oddly enough entitled the Somnium, the Dream.’

‘And why might that be Herr Doktor? It does sound intriguing.’
‘Because, Herr Doktor, while the Somnium is ostensibly a work of ‘science’ within a work of fiction, of making an argument for the motion of the earth around the sun, by using the example of the movement of the moon around the earth, it is also the story of a young boy, Duracotus, who lived in Iceland, and I quote – *which the ancients called Thule!*’

‘Thule!? Did you say Thule?’

Levin seemed to grow vertically in a matter of seconds, and it was all due to that sword-crossed hair of his. Mobius had been watching him closely, listening to Flade in horror, coaxing the ‘odious’ one into some kind of gullible trance.

‘I am a member of the Thule society! List interpreted the Icelandic myths, the hidden wisdom!’

‘There is more, Herr Doktor. The story is a thinly disguised version of Kepler’s own life. For example, the boy, Duracotus, his mother was a witch. She raised spirits for the boy, so that he could travel to the moon, and meet its inhabitants, the *Levanians*.

‘Levanians? Levanians? Very like Lemurians, wouldn’t you say? Was Blavatsky, or List aware of this text?’

‘Most likely, Herr Doktor. Most likely. The coincidence is too great, wouldn’t you agree?’

‘Yes, I would say so, wouldn’t you, Doktor Mobius?’

Mobius was again taken by surprise. Flade had completely turned the tables on the poor fool. His voice, insidious and soothing as that of any Sultan’s eunuch, had cast its spell and left Levin so open to suggestion that it seemed Flade might now ask anything of his superior, a man who a moment ago was
tormenting him. In fact there was nothing more important to Levin than that Flade continue. That Mobius hadn’t answered his question had already escaped him.

‘Go on! Go on!’

‘It is a long and interesting story Herr Levin. But as you have repeatedly stressed, while such as I may only skate the surface of a text like this, it takes another kind of insight to get at the hermetic heart of things. Isn’t that so, Doktor Mobius?’

Mobius warned Flade with his eyes that he was beginning to overplay his hand. Flade nodded and smiled dismissively, suggesting that this perhaps was a daily event, this battle between the two of them. Either way, Mobius wanted no part of it.

‘Where is this Somnium, the original? Does it exist?’

‘Like most of Kepler’s original texts, the Russians have it, in St. Petersburg. It now belongs to the Russian Academy of Science.’

‘Monstrous! He was a German, was he not?’

‘I’m afraid no German, at the time, was generous enough to buy the collection. Czarina Catherine, on the other hand…’

‘That old whore! You know how she died, don’t you? With a horse’s cock in her womb! We’ll see about that!’

Levin paced the floor, his fist in his mouth. ‘Those damn reds! Have you been there Flade? Tell me you have.’

“I have, of course. And fortunately, the director is a personal friend of mine.’

‘Wonderful.’
Flade and Levin were both staring at Mobius, the one appraisingly, the other imploringly. Mobius looked from one to the other, confounded.

‘Wonderful. That’s that then. When an intellectual enthusiasm like this takes me there’s nothing can hold me back! You’ll see.’

Levin brought his heels together and raised his arm in a smart salute. He looked strangely excited, so that even the nastiness in his face had dissipated. All that was left was a stunned eagerness, a fixed and decapitated expression.

‘I look forward to meeting you again, Herr Doktor Mobius. Auf Wiedersehen!’

Levin bowed and turned briskly into the corridor, giving Flade the opportunity to retreat behind his desk, his hands raised in apology.

‘I’m sorry Mobius…’

‘What about my friends?’

‘I’ll look into it, but in the meantime I would advise them to remove themselves to somewhere discreet. Someone has clearly informed on the boy. It might be nothing, but you can’t be too careful these days! I’ll be in touch. There are things we need to talk about. I had no idea you were so respected by the younger generation. This is good news for all of us. Levin is very influential, you see.’

‘I noticed.’

Flade blushed greyly, and sniffed. He straightened his back and clasped his hands. ‘I know what I’m doing. Don’t worry about me.’

‘I’m sure you do. Thankyou for your help. But still, you don’t look well, if you don’t mind me saying.’
‘Thank you for your concern. However, I must, as I’m sure you appreciate... I’m rather busy.’

Mobius was caught somewhere between gratitude and dismay, as always when he had dealings with Flade. He left the office without acknowledging Flade’s perfunctory bow. It was mid-afternoon, and he was already tired. The tiredness was like a dry rot that started in his legs and rose achingly through the rest of him. It was over an hour’s walk to Frau Kunstler’s, even if he took the main streets!
Carl’s face was pressed to the window for so long Mobius wondered if it wasn’t harmful to his eyes. Carl faced directly ahead, looking neither to the left nor the right, neither to the future nor the past, his ticking eyes following the regular beat of the telegraph poles spaced evenly beside the track. Open fields and scattered farmhouses and canals full of sluggish brown water soon replaced the crowded streets and tightly massed buildings. The farmhouses were small and severe like minor fortifications, built during the Inflation and Depression, when most of the black market produce had been taken on raids into the countryside. Now the granaries and barns too far from the farmhouses had fallen into disrepair. Newer buildings had been constructed to secure the precious livestock and grain.

The farmhouses stood at the end of muddy avenues, mysterious and secretive, flanked by obligatory rows of poplars. Gustav told Mobius the story of his own father as a young man, fighting the French for Bismarck, on French soil in summer. They had a platoon of the enemy holed up in a farmhouse. No amount of mortar fire or sniping could dislodge them, because they were well stocked with the fruits of the land. Within the farmhouse could be heard the bellowing of a wounded cow and the round-the-clock crowing of a defiant rooster. Empty wine bottles were tossed from the broken windows onto the dusty earth. The smell of roasting goose tormented their empty stomachs and made them eager for attack. It was not far off being cooked, they estimated. The
lieutenant, however, ordered them to wait. He had already lost half of his platoon in a forest skirmish after taking an ‘initiative’. He could spare no more men, for his own sake as much as theirs. He was a young man from the minor nobility and therefore knew about tactics and career advancement in equal measure. He ordered the men to retreat beyond the periphery of the poplar-lined cul-de-sac and take their positions in the fields. He and two others returned down the track and set fire to the poplars closest to the road. The dry summer wind took the flames and passed them down the line. Each tree passed the flames to its neighbour, and before long the fire swept towards the farmhouse.

The French heard it coming; great crackling and roaring and fiercely destroying everything in its way. So that they wouldn’t be roasted the Frenchmen fled the house, carrying their chickens with them, the goose on a tray, the cow limping behind, a bottle of wine in each raised hand. After the French had been captured, and while the farmhouse burned, the two sides ate the goose. The cow was shot and butchered and laid to cook in the coals that were all that remained of a dray-cart. The rooster was kept alive and astutely gifted to the lieutenant’s superior as a symbolic trophy of the ‘battle’. His earlier ‘initiative’ was forgiven. His recent initiative was rewarded by being mentioned in the dispatches, and later in a Military college textbook. Of such stuff are legends made!

Gustav fell silent and joined Mobius and Carl in staring out of the window. Two large pink men were sitting in a muddy pond sharing a bottle of wine. They held it up to the passing train, and then were gone. The train entered an abandoned station. The name of the station had faded from the sign over the platform. The train slowed as if in respect. A rusted goods wagon stood alone,
waist deep in weeds. A lone man lifted his barely smoking pipe in desultory salute. He was dressed in rags except for a new railman’s cap. The train picked up speed and entered a silver birch forest. Carl’s eyes began to jerk in his head as he sought to capture every shimmering tree.

Gustav sighed and patted his old legs. Movement on this scale unsettled him, it made him want to talk, it made him want to tell stories, to help him forget that with every passing minute they were further and further away from home. He felt strangely numb, as though his feelings were unable to keep up with the train, as though the best part of him had been left behind, too heavy and old to make the journey. Mobius was with them, at least that was something. Mobius had been to S. many times, it was where he had travelled to research a monograph on Wallenstein. Gustav hadn’t known this, just as Mobius hadn’t known that Gustav’s younger sister, Hannelore, lived there in a cottage. Poor Hannelore, she didn’t know they were coming!

Gustav fingered the frayed end of his suit jacket and began to tell Mobius the story of how he had caught the eye of his wife, Kathe, as a young man. Mobius had heard this story many times but smiled from the outset. Gustav felt a sudden great tenderness towards his younger friend. There they were in the carriage, the three of them, three generations, like Grandfather, son and grandson, headed south across the country. Carl too knew this story and knelt to roll Gustav’s right trouser leg over his calf and shin. They all looked down at it, long and scored and grained like the leg of an old table.

‘Of course, I didn’t know that she was watching me. I kept at my daily rounds. I didn’t see the quiet girl at the flower stand, with her purple apron and red curls. How did I miss her? She was a girl surrounded by flowers! I don’t
know. I was young, I had my first job, I had documents to deliver, important
documents for important people. I got to know all the streets and all the
buildings. Every concierge and doorman in the city knew my name. I made
adjustments to my cycle so that it was faster, so the wheels were stronger on the
curbs. Every day I rode past and didn’t see her. But she was watching out for
me. She knew I passed that way every morning on the way to the depot and
every afternoon on the way home. She was admiring my calf muscle, you see, I
rolled up my right trouser leg, to protect it from the chain, just like this. This
very one!’

Gustav laid his old leg across the aisle so that they could wonder at what
remained of his once proud calf muscle, hanging thin and slack now like a wet
sheet on a clothesline.

‘Every day she watched me cycle past, my young strong calf muscle, it had
shape then! Like an onion on a stalk it was! It made her palms itch, she said,
every time she saw it! Then one day she was there! I lifted my head, I must have
sensed her, standing on the curb holding out a single rose. I didn’t have time to
think! I took it and kept riding, I turned my head but she was shy and had run
into her stall already. Then the next day the same thing. I took the flower, a
sunflower this time, and kept riding. I blew her a kiss though, and she saw it.
The next day I slowed as I approached. I got off my bicycle and wheeled it
towards her. Then I saw the purple apron, the red curls and the flowers around
her! Ah, it was a moment!

Gustav retrieved his leg and stood it next to the other, leaving the trouser
rolled up.

‘Isn’t Levin a Jewish name?’ he asked.
Mobius nodded. ‘I always thought so.’

‘They say the name is that which must be overcome.’

Mobius mumbled his agreement, and Gustav sighed and scratched his nose. He lit a cigarillo and passed the bottle to Carl, who pushed it away. The window had been opened for him, and the boy’s eyes were streaming with the dust and wind. The damp forest air that had filled the compartment only made them feel grimy now that the sweat of the city had dried.

The train whistled through another large city; Dresden perhaps - Mobius had let go the thread. He wasn’t laying down breadcrumbs either. He had accompanied Gustav only because he had been asked, because there was too much to carry, because Carl might become anxious and uncontrollable, and yet Carl was sleeping across his grandfather’s thighs, his large head rested upon the two bony slats, his mouth open and peaceful. The truth was that Mobius was glad to be leaving his work! For the first time in years he was grateful to feel the ebbing away of the underwater silence in which he lived. For the first time in years he felt the silken bandage of his concentration loosen and fall. In the same way that the momentum of the train carried them forward through the easy submission of the wind, so too he felt himself guided through the invisible resistance of his habits of silence, rolling on tracks towards whatever awaited them. He gave himself up to a hopeful lassitude, not caring where they were headed, knowing that the train had been there before!

Most of the other passengers appeared to be exhausted salesmen, sleeping in the suits they had worn that day, and would perhaps wear tomorrow. The conductor wandered up and down the aisles, asleep on his feet. The smells of
coffee and bread, sausages and stale beer pounced upon them when the door to
the noisy bistro was opened.

Gustav had been silent for some time, and unnaturally still. They both knew
that Carl’s position could be adjusted without waking him. The boy could sleep
through anything when he was tired, and especially now that he had been
overstimulated with too much seeing. Gustav didn’t speak because he didn’t
know what to say. What could he say? He could concentrate only upon what he
couldn’t say, shouldn’t say, what he really wanted to say. They had tried to take
Carl from him many times before, when the boy was an infant. They had tried to
force Carl to go to school, without success. Each time they had lost interest,
amidst all the confusion, as he had expected. This time would be no different, of
that he was sure. A short stay at Hannelore’s would see to it.

Gustav, who had been raised in an orphanage, would never let them take
Carl away. He wasn’t an educated man, but how much more direct that allowed
him to be. He had always been the one to argue with a policeman, a landlord, a
petty bureaucrat, a desk villain - his nature demanded it! He could be proud and
prickly when obstructed, and dangerous when cornered. He had always
sympathised with the criminal and the radical, despite himself. There were good
reasons why some people didn’t ‘fit in’, just as there were good reasons why
some of these people deserved punishment. Muss ist sein? Ja, ist muss sein. It
must be so! The greater the length of chain, the heavier it is to bear around one’s
neck! But they bore it, they bore it well. More than criminals and radicals he
admired the wanderers, the tramps, the homeless ones who slept in the forests
on the edge of towns, who worked when they wanted and proudly begged when
they needed food. Yes, he admired even the gypsy, even the immigrant! He
himself was only just discovering what it took to get up and leave, to pack quietly in the night and creep away. He was hiding in his own country! He had walked away from his work! If Hannelore wouldn’t take him in then how he would wander. There were primitives enough in this rounded world, those who still slept in the open and would appreciate his skills with wood and steel, who would likewise appreciate Carl for his strength and good nature. Hannelore had some funny ideas, but she had always put them up before. Surely this time would be no different.

Mobius lit a cigarillo and watched the smoke drawn evenly out of the window. The sight of Gustav’s fists upon his knees, balancing Carl’s great head on his forearms, his splayed ankles bare of socks and his pitiful old shoes scraping and jiggling on the linoleum floor made the otherwise silence in the carriage unbearable. Neither did the old man’s restless lips cease in movement. He continued to recite to himself in pace with the hasty track-track rhythm of the train, pitched headlong down a dark tunnel of words and stoking his anger with his tongue.
Hannelore’s cottage stood quietly in a dark street on the northern edge of S., a few kilometres from the train station. Mobius and Carl followed behind Gustav, who marched decisively ahead, taking frequent turns down muddy lanes and cutting through overgrown yards and empty parks. Every so often he paused to light his pipe, but just as they were about to join him he strode on ahead, stretching out the invisible elastic that kept them together, tugging them on at double the pace.

Carl, who imagined that Gustav navigated by the stars rather than the memory of his most recent visit, trained his eyes hopefully on the constellations that swirled in the black acres above them. On his back he carried the long steel box that contained all of Gustav’s tools. He grunted the song of his labour in time with his long, easy strides.

Mobius carried a wooden box full of tin sharps and the disassembled pieces of an ancient shotgun. It was with relief that he spied Gustav ahead, standing with his hands on his hips, and of course, that was it, standing before the house he had built. Bags of clothes lolled about at his feet, along with his hastily rolled Matilda blanket, hats pierced with a length of wire and an armful of jackets and coats. Around his waist he wore a canvas apron heavy with soil and the bulbs and plants he had been too sentimental to abandon. From his loins sprouted the chilled and trembling heads of petunias and daisies, and from his mouth hung the stained meerschaum pipe that spilled embers and ash when he coughed.
Gustav entered without knocking, while they waited in the street. Presently a light came on, and then another upstairs. Gustav ushered them in with a wave of his pipe, standing beside the moon coloured face of Hannelore, holding a candle that illuminated her smile.

Carl fell asleep at the table, amidst a half-chewed mouthful of pancake, as only he was able to do. In the meantime Hannelore washed Gustav’s arms in the sink, planting quick kisses over his gruff face. Neither of them spoke a word. It was almost as if she with her sleep interrupted, and they with their desperate need for sleep were already dreaming, she afraid to awake and they afraid to sleep, because the dream was a such pleasant one.

*          *          *

It was the measure of the comfort in the attic that when Mobius awoke he neither knew nor cared where he was. If was almost as if the golden intensity of the room was a barometer for the glow he felt emerging from his lungs, as though he himself had filled the room with light. The quilt that hugged his body to the mattress made him feel as though he had been smuggled out of sleep and into the room, into its fragile heat and tender fabric, into its warm colours and feminine scents.

It was this latter thing that made him close his eyes once again, as he had done on several occasions since dawn, and which every time had drawn him back into brighter dreaming. The scent was strongest where he lay his head, in the softness of the feather pillow, and in the quiet folds of the eiderdown. The
scent flowed out of his nostrils and into the room, filling the attic with an airy fragrance; the warm breath of early spring.

Mobius rolled onto his side and let his eyes wander over the mustard coloured walls, finding silent depths and shallow washes where the undercoat showed through, suggesting the movement of waves over a sandy beach. Supple columns of oak rose from floor to ceiling, while across the slanted ceiling were the beams that Gustav had laid, resembling the pale ribs of a stately wooden boat. Mobius imagined Gustav seated on the beams, the room open to the summer sky, his canvas apron filled not with soil and flowers but with hammer and claw, and bolts and spikes and a spirit level, a sailor astride an unlikely vessel, waves lapping at his feet, his pipe smoke rising and falling in the gentle swell.

The sounds of conversation and the smell of fresh bread finally broke through the surface, as though Mobius’ floating body had run aground. Despite his hunger, an onset of shyness made him hesitate before climbing out of bed. The implacable routine that lead him day after day to step from his bed into his clothes, from his room into the streets, then the brisk walk to his desk at the library now revealed to him the full extent of his disorientation, there at the edge of his bed, one leg hooked over the other, trying to tie a shoelace.

Mobius stood before the mirror and dabbed at his eyes to clear them of sleep. He pulled at the skin over his cheekbones and opened his jaws as wide as possible. He tugged at the lobes of his ears and ran his hands through his hair. He buttoned his shirt and straightened his collar. Now he was ready!
Downstairs in the kitchen there was coffee on the stove and warm bread on
the windowsill. A platter of butter beneath a red gauze and a can of apricot jam
waited beside the bread. Mobius sat at the table and began to eat. The coffee
was cheap and bitter, but its humid airs sharpened his senses and brought
strength to his tired body. He strolled throughout the house whistling and
touching the furniture, dipping his mouth to the mug and raising his eyes to find
one more interesting detail, one more faded photograph and one more view onto
the world outside.

He stepped into the garden and smoked a cigarette. The sunlight was so
bright in the garden that for a moment he was blinded. When he opened his eyes
the flowers and shrubs and vegetables were glazed red. He closed his eyes again
and lifted his face to the sun. Immediately his mind was cleared of everything
but the burned images of the garden at his feet. The mug slipped from his
fingers and landed in a flower bed. The casket of sunlight and heat closed
around him, and his bones hung loose in their joints. His whole being seemed
concentrated in the single point of fire that blazed down on the crown of his
head. He wasn’t aware of his sitting, or his beginning to doze, until a cloud
passed before the sun and he was thrust out into the cold.

Without the sun to bury him in its warmth Mobius was unable to keep still.
The rosy blush that disguised the land evaporated away, revealing a patchwork
of fields and a dark green forest, a chalky street and a ditch filled with weeds.
Borne on a slight breeze, he first heard, then saw his friends returning from one
of the fields, Gustav and Carl carrying a basket between them, while Hannelore
pulled a cart filled with vegetables. Mobius shook the grass from his trousers
and returned to the house.
Now he understood what he hadn’t before, what is was about the house that made him feel giddy. There were no books in the house and even the radio that stood in the hallway was broken, and was used instead as a table for knick-knacks. The loudspeaker at the corner was too distant to be heard clearly, so that the public broadcasts of the propagandists, so insidious in the city were in the small town reduced to their proper insignificance. Beyond the loudspeaker on the corner were open fields planted with cabbage and hemp. The pole on which the loudspeaker had been hung leaned comically over the ditch filled with weeds. The speaker itself had been badly dented by the constant pelting it received at the hands of the rascal urchins who wrestled and smoked in the empty barn across the road. Some of the older children were brewing something in there that smelt like silage but which he supposed to be cider. The clandestine nature of this project ensured their silence during the day. The only sounds on the street came after dark, when lovers crept into the barn; lighting candles and murmuring faintly, and when the old man next door washed himself outdoors in a large wine barrel. He repeatedly sang ‘The boy sat by the fountain’ as he went at his back and arms with a Flemish sponge.

Right from the first morning, as Mobius sat aside and watched, Gustav had set about ‘fixing the place up’, tarring the roof and patching the walls, mending the kitchen table and laying new floorboards in the attic room. He hunted out his materials in the barn across the road, and in the shed where Hannelore hung her sausages and pickled her cabbages. Carl followed him everywhere, blocking
the shed doorway with his huge frame, drawing from the old man a fusillade of abuse that sent him straight back to the kitchen table. At the kitchen table Carl peeled and diced for Hannelore, watching closely as she assembled the ingredients to bake her rabbit pies, a dish new to Carl and Mobius as well.

Gradually however Gustav began to settle. He slept more and later. He rubbed his sister’s shoulders when she was tired. He found he had a new appetite for sitting quietly at the stove, watching Carl watching Hannelore, toasting his bare feet and smoking his pipe. The four of them went on long walks together, and discovered a stream that might contain fish. Gustav tried his hand at fishing but was unable to keep Carl away from the water. The boy couldn’t restrain himself from throwing stones into the stream; it was as though he wanted to dam it with pebbles. Gustav then discovered a new distraction, in the form of Grethe Harp, a friend of Hannelore’s, one of the many women who gathered in the evenings around the newly mended table to sew and natter, just as they had in the middle ages. Gustav waited on the women with an obvious enthusiasm, he poured lemon tea and served hotcakes, he smartened up his hair with a wet comb, he washed his shoes and cleaned under his nails. He walked Grethe home one night and didn’t reappear until dawn. He slept throughout the morning with a distant smile on his otherwise exhausted face. When he awoke he marched Carl straight across the road and delivered him up to the wrestling boys. Carl returned hours later with a bruised cheek and a swollen hand and an excited breathy epistle of the day’s events. From then on he was across the road from morning until evening, swaggering home covered in cobwebs and sawdust, caught up in the shared construction of another secretive project.
Only one year separated Hannelore from Gustav, and yet her flammable complexion and bright brown eyes, her ripe figure and rich moist smells, her pudding soft skin and honey coloured hair, but most of all her comically pitched voice, all of this created the impression of a much younger woman. Unlike Gustav, she hadn’t begun to wither. The constant self-assured smile and generous easy movements were a contrast to Gustav’s inspired lunging and collapsing into chairs. He was a man used to darting amongst human obstacles, she a woman come to terms with the silence at night and the unhurried pleasures of companionship.

It was to this latter thing that Mobius tried to adapt himself. He tried, and yet the crude and hospitable openness of Hannelore’s friends was a challenge to his measured ways. The society of these women was immediate and intimate, incisive and open-ended in a way that was encouraging but elusive. He tried to keep pace but felt like a man trying to catch a moving tram, chasing after it and leaping onto the running board of conversation just in time for it to halt at the next station, and disembark its passengers. Which is not to say that the women were uninterested in him. It was just that he needed a little help, according to Hannelore. The following day she scrubbed his back and washed his clothes, while Gustav trimmed his hair in the garden beneath the apple tree. It was as he lathered the back of Mobius’ neck that Gustav finally admitted, not only the reason behind all this scrubbing and grooming, but also why Gustav had asked Mobius to accompany him to S. in the first place. He hadn’t really needed Mobius’ help with Carl on the train, he hadn’t really needed an extra pair of hands. All he wanted was for Mobius to get away from those books for awhile! Mobius laughed, but wouldn’t admit to being grateful that he had been
deceived. He even felt compelled to protest – none of the countless matches Frau Kunstler had foisted upon him had come to anything, and anyway, he teased - what was the point when he had to return to Berlin in a few days? Gustav had leaned down beside Mobius and placed the cut-throat at his jugular.

‘You’re not going anywhere’ he whispered.

Mobius had little choice but to acquiesce and enjoy the shampoo and shave. It was after all Hannelore’s idea that he ‘clean himself up a little’, because ‘you’re a handsome man behind all that’ and ‘just a bit of pruning will make a world of difference.’

When he was finished Gustav showed him the mirror, smirking proudly at his work, and it was true - the sun on Mobius’ face had removed his sallow complexion, the skin on his face felt tight, tanned and warm to the touch. He looked and felt younger than he had in years!

*          *          *

Only a few hours later he was introduced to a new woman amongst them, a tall and graceful presence with large hands and piercing black eyes. Her name was Monika, and the first thing she said to him, upon hearing that he was a professor was - ‘Ach, you hide it well!’

Mobius had raised his eyebrows and looked to Gustav, but Gustav was seated on the same chair as Grethe Harp, teaching her the intricacies of a card game. Their hips were flush together, and their hands were joined by the crook of a little finger. There was a comely stupidity in their eyes! Mobius had no choice but to look to where Monika was waiting. He made some small talk to
distract himself from the very thing that had thrown him only minutes before...the scent, it was hers!

The whole thing had gotten off to a bad start as far as he was concerned, when, upon being introduced to Monika, Hannelore had stated rather loudly, rather obviously that the bed in which Mobius slept was where Monika usually slept, when she drank too much on her visits. Hannelore then took it upon herself to apologise publicly, for what she hadn’t before – the fact that the sheets in the bed were unchanged, because she hadn’t had time when they arrived. ‘Well, where am I to sleep tonight then?’ Monika had asked, her eyes on Mobius, her hands on her stomach. Mobius had blushed, of course, hot to the roots of his hair, visible to all, and yet it wasn’t the widow’s comment but the memory of her scent, and the image of his lips and nostrils deep within the aromatic pillow, and the warm quilt hugging his body.

They were seated beside one another at the table. A tremendous energy seemed to press against Mobius from her direction. She was unlike the other women in this respect. The others, including Grethe Harp, Mobius had to admit, reminded him of the peasant women in Bruegel’s paintings, their bodies plump and bloodless, their faces grinning and eager, but cruel in a way that he couldn’t define. Perhaps it was their eyes, that grazed slowly over his face and body when they addressed him. Perhaps it was the somewhat forced sincerity he detected in their voices when they were called upon to be concerned. It was only the presence of Monika, the widow, that had changed everything. It was she with her forthrightness that made them seem false, even as they smiled and joked. How very alone they all were! How caring and gentle when they spoke and touched one another, but how competitive and desolate during the silences
that fell between each word and gesture, in the burning looks at a friend’s turned head, in the desperate flattery and calling for attention.

Monika unsettled him in an entirely different way. It wasn’t only her thighs that demanded his attention, straining beneath a thick woollen skirt. Nor was it the disturbing pricks of heat in the palms of his hands; hands that desired so much to touch her. It wasn’t only that his whole body felt galvanised by her presence. The physical pressure that radiated from her as she waited for him to respond was nothing compared to the incitement of her deep smoker’s voice, nor the dark eyes that contained a fierce and cunning humour. Beyond this she was as much a mystery to Mobius as was her power over him. The strong bridge of her nose, her strident black eyebrows and thoughtful lips were nothing more than clues. Even her hair, blue-black and shoulder length, low-toned and restless, even her hair seemed to know more about him than he could ever know of her. All he knew was her scent, her smell, whose fragrant essence had inhabited his dreams. And yet it was enough! Without thinking he passed her his cigarette, and she accepted it without thought, as though it were the satisfactory answer to a question she hadn’t needed to ask.

‘What interesting eyes you have!’ she said quietly, as though to him alone. This of course only encouraged the interest of the others, who immediately abandoned their conversations in the name of an eager connoisseurship, as though his eyes hadn’t been there all along but were recently brought in on a platter and set before them. Mobius was forced to turn to Monika, as he supposed was her intention. He shrugged and smiled. He even felt like a child set upon his mother’s knee, before a group of her tactfully admiring friends.
Monika took his hand and leaned closer. For a moment he thought she was going to kiss him, until she saw this immediately, in her way, and released him.

‘Like those of my late husband…’

‘Was your husband a teacher as well?’ Mobius asked, now that their eyes were locked together, now that her eyes were clearly asking him a question - even as she paused to answer his own.

‘No, he was a painter, the poor soul.’

There was another long silence. This made the women avert their eyes, although Monika’s expression hadn’t changed. She even smiled when Mobius nodded his head respectfully, as though he hadn’t just caught on to the significance of the word *late*. ‘I see, I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be’ she replied. ‘It was a long time ago. A long time.’

‘And you?’ Mobius followed, his voice a mix of hope and deference. ‘How did you come to be…your accent?’

‘I’m from Nuremberg, yes. I was posted here as a schoolteacher, and I’m still here. Although I no longer teach officially. I provide tuition, I teach the piano, I get by. And I have my small inheritance, thanks to my father. He was a barrister, in Kassel, until the war.’

‘You have after all Rocinante to keep on the road, despite everything’ reminded Hannelore cheerfully.

‘Yes, despite everything, I still have my car. Although I’ve had to become somewhat of a mechanic, of late. Do you know your way around beneath a bonnet, Dr Mobius?’

This time the sudsy laughter of the women was encouraging, and his blushing wasn’t quite as fierce. He toasted the women with a raised glass.
The bottle on the table was now empty. Mobius drained his glass twice, just to make sure. Monika watched this and laughed. ‘We share one talent I see. Now, however, I’m quite drunk. And seeing as my cosy billet has been given to another, I shall have to fly…which reminds me. Dr Mobius, would you care to accompany me on a drive tomorrow? I would be happy to guide you around.’

‘Yes’ Mobius agreed, a little taken by surprise.

‘We could make a day of it. And you would be doing me a favour. Can you drive? I have a bad ankle, and after some short distance it…’

‘Yes, although…’

‘Well then!’

Monika rose from her chair and kissed her friends, and Gustav, and even Carl, who was asleep by the stove, draped across the sink.

‘Dear boy, he’s exhausted.’

Mobius found himself waiting for her in the hall. He had to press himself against the doorframe to allow her past. She was even taller than he remembered. She moved like a siren at the prow of a ship, cutting gracefully above the waves. He followed her until they reached the front door, where the coats were piled on the radio that did for a table. She rummaged in the pile until she found what she was looking for; a red woollen coat that reached almost to her feet. She passed it to him and he slipped it over her shoulders.

‘Tomorrow then?’ she reminded.

‘Yes, tomorrow.’

‘Please don’t walk me to my car. It’s raining, and it’s always embarrassing when it doesn’t start right away.’
She was wrong, the car did start right away, settling immediately into its purr of tappets, while Mobius stared at the closed door. His palms were sweating, and his stomach felt both hollow and crowded. He shook his head and laughed! Even at his age he could be surprised!

*          *          *

Mobius leant over the windscreen and fussed at the wiper that refused to work. He had already tried to fix it and failed, but now he was working just so that he could watch her. Monika was approaching across the drive that led to the farmhouse where she had bought some cheese and butter. The wind tugged at her dress and gathered in her hair. She was smiling as she stepped carefully over the sodden verge, making small leaps from clod to clod. Mobius watched her with an attentiveness that recorded her every movement, her every expression and response to his admiration.

‘Is it fixed?’

‘Ah, no…I was distracted.’

Monika gave him that look again, the look that didn’t let him know but said that she knew, and that this pleased her. She climbed inside the car and clapped her muddy shoes through the window. Mobius took his place beside her and started Rocinante. ‘First time again! She likes you!’

Mobius leant across the front seat and kissed her as the car began to roll. Monika smiled and put her naked feet up on the console, to warm them by the heater. She returned to the story she had left off when they had stopped at the farm. It was the story of her days as an actress with a small company, the
‘Sausage Factory’, touring Italy and the Balkans before the director had died of a heart attack, in Sarajevo.

Mobius tried hard to listen but was having difficulty. As soon as he took his eyes from her, his mind threw up an image of her to fill the empty place. Despite their afternoon, despite their making love in the cloister garden, on a picnic blanket beneath the dry castle walls, the most miraculous and natural of things, the image that stayed with him of its own accord was the image he had ‘taken’ the previous evening, unwittingly, as she turned to him at the front door. At that moment her hair had spilled around her shoulder, isolating and framing her face, and although her eyes hadn’t quite found his own, and her lips hadn’t quite created a smile…

‘Oops, here comes the rain.’

‘I’d better slow down.’

‘Yes, what’s the rush?’

She ran her hands through his hair and found his neck, rubbing where the spine dove into the hard muscle beneath his skull. Her fingers worked at the muscle and made his scalp tingle.

‘Are you tired?’

‘I could drive all night.’

‘There’s a thought.’

She laughed and he put his hand in her lap, caressing her thigh. This easy intimacy had been evident right from the beginning, right from the moment he had greeted her that morning. Both of them were aware that if they needed one thing, it was to be touched, and to be allowed to touch. But that this flirtation
had led from one thing to the other beneath the castle walls had clearly surprised them.

And yet the chill air on their naked feet had been arousing. The two bottles of wine and the fact that they were already in an embrace meant that there was no distance to cover. The ground beneath them made it hard to get comfortable, and so they continued to move and adjust the momentum already theirs, and each time they moved or adjusted they found themselves reaching for more, kissing for longer and holding on until finally…

Then they had lain there, and slept.

‘What a pity, we’re almost there.’

The rain-blurred lights of S. were just ahead, and Mobius had to take his hand from her lap to turn the heavy steering down the gravel road that skirted the town.

‘Did you know there were two SS officers, driving a staff car along a road like this at night? Suddenly they ran over a dog that had strayed in front of them. The junior officer carried the dead animal over to the farmhouse but returned minutes later with an armful of wine, cheese and bread. The senior officer asked him ‘What’s that all about?’ and the junior officer replied, ‘When they opened the door I said ‘Heil Hitler! The dog is dead! And they gave me all this!’

Mobius squeezed Monika’s thigh, pleased at the thrill of danger in her voice - even more evidence of her trust. After this it was easy for them to remain in silence for the minutes it took to reach the edge of town.
Mobius awoke to the smell of rain and the sound of laughter downstairs. He listened until he could be sure that it wasn’t Monika’s voice! The window to his room was wide open and a thin spray of rain had advanced across the carpet and boards. Low clouds rolled across the sky, and it was dark enough for him to have overslept.

There was a stranger at the breakfast table, a young soldier in the brown uniform of the SA. His wind-annealed eyes stared at Mobius with an obvious distaste. A dried trail of mucous led from both nostrils down into his red moustache, which resembled a livid rash. The boy sniffed loudly, and licked at his lips. ‘You Mobius?’ he asked rudely. He didn’t get out of his seat but merely winched up an arm and presented Mobius with a small manila envelope. The envelope was wet in one corner, and unaddressed. Mobius took the envelope and turned it in his hands. He wanted to ask the boy how he had found him, but didn’t want to alarm Hannelore, who like Gustav was watching him eagerly. Mobius opened the envelope and extracted a money order, a brand new Reichschecken payable to himself, and substantial to the amount of 200RM. It was signed by Flade, and countersigned by Levin. There was nothing else in the envelope. He held it open and shook it over the table to make sure.

At the sight of the cheque the young soldier gave Mobius an unctuous smile. Hannelore, who didn’t appear to find it strange that a soldier might appear at her breakfast table with a message for her guest, continued to prepare her breakfast. Gustav instead continued to stare malevolently at the young man,
who had climbed to his feet and was scuffing his boots on the floor, mounting his heavy overcoat onto his thin shoulders. He drank down the last of his coffee and grunted his thanks.

‘You sure you don’t want another coffee? It’s still raining outside’ Hannelore asked. The soldier shook his head and took out a tin canister, from which he produced a bent cigarette butt. He straightened it out, lit it and bowed, then without another word disappeared into the hall, slamming the front door behind him.

Even after he had left the kitchen still smelt like damp wool and stale tobacco.

‘He was quite a nice boy, once I’d put some food in his stomach’ said Hannelore defensively. ‘He even sung us some songs.’

‘If you can call them that,’ replied Gustav, clearly annoyed. ‘They were all about the same thing, going camping and fighting.’

‘You forget Gustav, young boys need to belong to some kind of organisation, it gives them something to do, and some friends to do it with.’

Hannelore and Gustav started on their breakfast, avoiding one another’s eyes. Hannelore ate her boiled egg fastidiously, peering into the shell and scraping out every last trace of membrane. Gustav instead attacked his own egg with an unusual ferocity, as though he were digging a trench. Mobius took the opportunity to fold the cheque and put it in his pocket. If Flade was going to resume his patronage, this time from a distance, Mobius certainly wasn’t about to complain. He had never needed the money more than now!

‘They have the same groups in the city, believe me. Even the same songs…’
‘Well, young men have such sweet voices. If only Carl would…’

‘He’s not joining in with those thugs. It would end badly.’

Gustav smiled at Mobius and poured him a coffee. He scratched his arm and looked closely at the burnished skin, waiting impatiently for the argument to continue.

‘He wouldn’t have to join in all the activities. Maybe he could just sing with them, when they march. His voice is so deep.’

‘Forget it. Never.’

Gustav had finished his egg and was now cleaning his pipe, while Hannelore oiled her bread tins, in preparation for the afternoon rise. A sugar syrup was cooling on the bench, for ladling over some oats.

‘He misses out on so much…’

‘They want to take him away!’

‘Now you’re being silly.

‘If the burden is too great, sister…’

Hannelore snorted and departed immediately for the garden. Mobius was startled to see Gustav pull a face at her back. He didn’t quite know how to respond. The ancient Gustav had been completely betrayed, replaced by a boy of about six. Gustav smiled bitterly at Mobius by way of explanation.

‘she thinks she’s my mother.’

‘I hope I haven’t outstayed my welcome.’

‘How can you say that after seeing her happiness last night? In any case, she would tell you if you had.’

‘Or she might tell you. And you might refuse to tell me.’

‘It’s not that.’
Gustav wadded his pipe. He was an old man once again, which was just as well. This had nothing to do with the keeping up of appearances but rather with the simple fact that Gustav’s expression had actually managed to alarm him. Again Mobius was reminded of the Famed Jongleur.

Gustav’s hand trembled as he hid behind a flame. A shroud of smoke completed the disguise, until he was ready. ‘It’s certainly not you. But like I said, Han has some strange ideas.’

‘Shall we walk then? I can’t just sit here. Not today. Where’s Carl?’

Gustav shrugged impatiently. ‘You’re right, let’s walk to the river. On the way back we can pull up some vegetables.’

*  *  *

It was only around the kitchen table that night that Mobius felt the first stirrings of unease. All of the women were there except Monika, who was late. Her absence was reinforced by Mobius’ fidgeting and obvious nerves. He couldn’t seem to remember any of their names, which didn’t appear to surprise them. There was no flirting now. Mobius pretended to listen and tried to be polite but all he was really listening for was the sound of Monika’s car. He was aware of the women’s vague concern as being a matter of protectiveness, rather than jealousy or outright disapproval. Clearly, they seemed to be saying, there was so much he didn’t yet know, and they certainly weren’t going to be the ones to tell him.

Monika let herself in, and before Mobius had a chance to join her in the hallway she was amongst them, taking a seat next to Hannelore. She smiled at
Mobius and accepted a drink, but proceeded immediately to make small-talk with the redhead beside him, who compensated by raising her voice to an unnecessary volume, effectively shutting him out. This seemed to amuse one or two of the others, who were making stabs at conversation, whilst listening attentively. Gustav packed himself a pipe and smoked. Grethe Harp coughed and spluttered and waved the smoke away. Carl crooned at the moon through the open window and the man next door washed himself in his barrel and sang ‘The boy sat next to the fountain’.

In the soft candlelight around the table the small-talk had given way to silence. Mobius realised that Monika was smiling at him grimly, waiting for some kind of response. ‘I said, shall we go for a drive?’

* * *

‘Just like my dog and my cat, my beloved husband was mine.’

Mobius squeezed Monika’s hands. The tears welled once more in her eyes, and once more didn’t fall. She sniffed, and this sufficed to contain them.

‘You’re such a strange one, as was he, but now…I don’t know.’

Neither did Mobius. This calamity, for that is what he feared it had become, had been precipitated by the mere admission that he hadn’t enough money to pay for their coffee, and their cake. He had neglected to cash the cheque! He admitted this frankly enough, because he wasn’t ashamed, and yet…What would she think of him if she knew that, if not for Flade’s gift, he didn’t even have the fare to return to the city? And that his miserable pension rarely lasted more than the first half of every month, so that like the difference between day
and night he existed for the latter part of every month on black bread and the cheapest schnapps?

To make him feel ashamed wasn’t her intention, however. Neither did she seem more than vaguely disappointed in him. It was her suggestion, after all, that they leave the others at the house, the ‘coven’ as she called them affectionately, and drive into town. There was Rocinante parked across from them, just the other side of the window. She looked at her car repeatedly, and appeared relieved whenever she did so.

‘What is it Monika? Please, I’m not used to this.’

‘Yesterday, these last years…’

‘Do you regret what happened yesterday?’

‘You misunderstand. All of those years, I’m sorry, I normally don’t lack for words…Things have been brought to the surface, too fast perhaps.’

‘I understand.’

‘Do you? Do you really?’

The accusation was unmistakable. A formidable sharpness appeared within the clouded eyes.

‘Yes, I believe I do. My own feelings, it has perhaps been longer for me...’

Monika blinked, and her eyes were relieved of their challenge. ‘I enjoyed yesterday so much, and yet, last night when I dreamt, I couldn’t seem to stop crying. Nobody could stop me. I wanted to cry, I suppose, but at the same time I couldn’t have stopped even if I wanted to. The kind of crying I’ve never been able to manage. The kind that makes one want to hide, to curl up and hide. The kind of crying that searches out and finds every terrible sound. And nobody could stop me. Nobody could help me...It was a kind of foreboding...’
‘Perhaps it was...as you suggested before.’

‘I just don’t know if I want to be with you. I have a life.’

This was the calamity, and even though he had been expecting it, even though he had spent every minute of the day preparing himself to hear it, consumed with happiness but without daring to hope, it still cut right through him and left him breathless, deflated, mortally wounded.

‘It was never my intention to force things. After all, we have known each other for only…’

‘But to think that you want me...I can’t explain it.’

‘I’ll return to Berlin tomorrow. I understand.’

‘No! You don’t understand. And you mustn’t return!’

The tears were back in her eyes again, which nevertheless shined brightly.

‘You idiot!’

Mobius leaned around the table, as though if he didn’t kiss her at that moment he might vanish, right into the sound of her voice. ‘Don’t you laugh at us, young man!’ Monika shouted at the waiter. ‘Don’t you laugh at us!’
By the time Mobius had awoken it had all been decided. He had been dreaming of crawling on his hands and knees through spiders webs in the darkness, and so was grateful when Carl tore away the curtain and let in the morning sun. Mobius clambered from his bed to replace the curtain rod on its hoist. In so doing he found himself exposed to the party gathered in the garden below. Monika was there with Hannelore and Gustav, sitting quietly on a garden bench drinking coffee.

Mobius replaced the curtain and sat on his bed. No matter how hard he tried he couldn’t convince Carl to stop packing his things into the canvas duffle-bag that was his only souvenir of the war. There wasn’t much to pack, but enough to guarantee a losing battle with Carl gathering the small mound of shoes and damp socks, his vest and jacket, and woollen trousers, and plunging them into the bag. The boy was resolute and excited, clearly acting under orders. Mobius didn’t even have time to object when Carl took up the duffle-bag, swept away the battered suit that was airing on a hatstand, thudded out into the hall and down the stairs.

‘But what am I to wear Carl? You’ve left me nothing!’

Carl merely roared and continued on his way.

‘There is only one way to find out’ was the first thing Monika said to him once he was dressed and downstairs. She allowed a candid smile to break through her determination. She had reached a decision, and wasn’t going to
stand for any refusal. Mobius was well aware that he must quietly continue the performance of the willing hostage, as expected. That this was in accordance with his passive tendencies had of course been taken into account.

Monika was dressed in a sleeveless cashmere blouse and matching grey woollen trousers, and beside her, Mobius’ shabby suit and disgraceful boots seemed more than ever a disguise that might betray her. He buttoned up his waistcoat and clasped his hands at his belt, accepting an amused wink from Gustav and a tender, brow brushing and cheek pinching from Hannelore. She was wildly pleased, which made it even harder for Monika to maintain her calm. Only Carl misunderstood, and burst into tears, and tried to get Gustav to block the door, and when that failed did so himself. His grave face didn’t commune well with his trembling lips and flooding eyes. He was clearly about to scream. Mobius rushed to him and embraced him, only just managing to keep the scream at bay. It emerged instead as a rook’s long exhausted groan. Carl appeared happy enough with the compromise, and took up Mobius’ bag and mashed it into as small a parcel as possible, then ran out the door.

‘I’m sorry about that, but when I build myself up to something I like to get it over quickly.’ Monika placed her hand squarely in his lap and squeezed with her fingers, then withdrew it to start Rocinante, then replaced it, then removed it to change gears.

‘Not at all. It feels like a…’

‘A kidnap?’

‘An adventure.’

Monika smiled. ‘It will certainly be that.’
The car pulled away from the house and lurched dangerously over a railway sleeper hidden in the grass by the ditch. ‘Oh dear. Never mind.’

Rocinante struggled against her weight until she found the thin macadamised line that hadn’t been eaten up by the years. Once Rocinante was in her stride Monika replaced her hand in Mobius’ lap, but withdrew it again to hit the horn, which sounded like a Chinese gong. ‘For good luck’ she said, and hit it again to frighten some boys raking at a puppy under a tree.

The unpainted, cement-grey house stood out from its prim and brightly coloured neighbours. With a small forecourt brushed over with lime, and a potholed driveway that lead into a precarious shed, seemingly afloat upon a drifting hedge, Monika’s single concession to her neighbours obvious love of gardening appeared to be a dusty grapevine roped onto a bowed frame. A rooster strutted up to greet the car, puffing out its chest and staring malevolently. ‘The tyrant. I don’t know what to do about him. He attacks me when I’m at my washing.’

‘He looks hungry.’

‘Yes, I suppose he does.’

Monika climbed from the car and scuffed her muddy heels on the running board.

‘Hannelore’s garden is a good example of what I mean. An excuse for adults to play in the mud.’

‘Who lives next door?’

‘The petitioner, you’ll meet her soon enough, if she isn’t watching you already.’
Mobius looked over at the lace curtains closest to them and was sure he saw them tremble. The immaculate stone cottage rose above garden beds afire with every colour. Tight reins of the greenest grass held the gardens together, winding closely around espaliered trees and sculpted shrubs.

‘If they could talk they would scream’ he said, indicating the apple trees closest to the boundary, strapped and staked and pruned almost to the ground. Each tree was however laden with fruit.

‘Yes, that would account for their taste, so far as I am told.’

Quite happy to take sides against the invisible petitioner, Mobius laughed as he took up his duffle-bag, and threw it cheerfully over his shoulder. Almost as though Monika had read his mind, however, she added casually ‘the petitioner was once a very dear friend.’

‘Until?’

‘Her husband died, her children ran away, and I was somehow to blame.’

‘I see. And on the other side?’

‘The Jensens. Whose husband has not died, and whose children have not run away, more’s the pity for her.’

After a moment of hesitation at the front door Monika pushed on inside. Two rooms and a staircase branched off a long central corridor that led towards what he presumed was the kitchen. A distant warmth radiated from the room, and he could hear the choking of an overfilled stove, and whistling in the pipes above them. The empty corridor had been scoured clean. The walls were still damp from washing and the wooden floorboards betrayed wide swathes of newly dried dust.
Mobius followed Monika as she strode past the empty rooms. Without even looking he could smell that the rooms were never used, were newly exposed to fresh air, and that the stale must hadn’t given any ground overnight.

‘I practically live in this room. Come, it’s warmer.’

Mobius put down his bag on the kitchen table, where it seemed rather too obvious, and so took it up again and put it at his feet. He felt, and looked, like a billeted old soldier. Monika watched him and took a deep breath. She closed her eyes and took an even deeper breath. Mobius waited for the pronouncement that she had put off at the front door.

‘Dear Paul, no, that won’t do. May I call you Mobius? I noticed that Gustav…’

‘Yes, call me that if you prefer. If you call me Paul, if you call me dear Paul in particular, you’ll sound like my mother.’

‘Well…’

‘You were going to say?’

‘Yes, I was.’ Monika came a step closer, square on, and sighed. ‘I understand that your awkwardness is a kind of etiquette…and it is quite charming in its own way. Oh, I’m so nervous, imagine if we hadn’t, the other day…’

‘Yes, I’m glad that we did.’

‘And, that my own lack of etiquette is a kind of awkwardness. However, I want us to be…’

‘I understand.’

It was Mobius who removed the final step between them, taking Monika’s head in his hands, and kissing her quietly and confidently on her forehead, her
nose, her mouth. She remained stiff in his embrace, until he released his pressure, and she placed her head upon his shoulder. He steadied himself, and they rocked together.

‘Dear man. It’s just that, as I imagine you can appreciate, I’ve been so resigned to my lot, this empty house, Rocinante, my friends, my routines, the rooster…’

She chuckled and squeezed his ribs, and kissed him on the neck.

‘That pimp, without a harem.’

‘Yes, that would describe him, precisely.’

Monika lifted herself up and looked at him strangely. There was a faint glaze of affection in her eyes, but also something else, something that surprised him.

‘Now, what would you like to do?’

‘I would like to take a bath.’

She grinned slyly, and shrugged. ‘I hoped you were going to say that. The boiler, as you can hear, is dangerously hot.’

With curtains tied back and windows wide open, Monika’s bedroom on the second floor caught the full afternoon sun. She was thoroughly asleep, her face pale with dreams, her eyelids flickering. Mobius lay next to her, one leg slung over the duvet and taking the sun on his flank, back and shoulders. Mobius got the distinct impression that she was a regular daytime sleeper, simply because of the routine that Monika had followed prefatory to sleep. As he had lain there, she had descended back down the stairs and fed the furnace, locked the front and back doors, opened the kitchen and bedroom windows, then returned naked
to her bed, all the while practically asleep. In fact she even seemed surprised to find him there on her return, although she did her best not to show it. She kissed him gently on the cheek, and then, with the determination of an explorer, dragged herself onto her side of the bed, and yet like a tide soon regained the central area.

The brightness of the room was accentuated by the canary yellow walls, painted the same colour as the only other room Monika inhabited; the kitchen. The colour was designed to ward away gloom, something she had admitted when she referred to her ‘dark moods’, and when Mobius had remarked upon the lack of pictures hung in the rooms, and indeed throughout the whole house. ‘A wall should speak for itself’ had been her reply, and there was nothing Mobius could say to that.

He ran a finger down her forearm, and rested it in the crook of her palm, which was dry. This woman who was a piano teacher, but kept no music in the house, this woman who painted her walls yellow, but slept throughout the day, this woman whose diet consisted, as far as he could tell, of biscuits, cigarettes and cognac, lay beside him and slept soundly, wheezing out an E note from somewhere deep in her chest.

The voices of the afternoon arose from the land and entered the window on the warm breeze; the sounds of chopping wood, a lowing steer from the farmland nearby, pigeons scratching on the roof and the tinny snore of a backyard water pump. He even thought he heard children singing, then the clear sounds of a marching drum. He turned instead to the things within the room; the sauna yellow walls that contrasted everything, magnified everything, the old wooden dresser, drawers open and weeping a shirt and a single sock, the
wardrobe stuffed with primary coloured dresses and suit jackets, whose door was unhinged and stood alongside, whose shelves were aslant beneath a crammed weight of scarves and hats, gloves and capes, and the shoes parked beneath the window’s edge, in strict formation, but nevertheless a little splayed, a little unlaced, a little dusty.

The cognac they had drunk and the sun in his eyes had given him a headache. He withdrew his hand from her and rubbed his neck, high up beneath his skull. His feet tingled in response, as though his sluggish blood was returning. Blood returned too to that place still damp from their lovemaking. She had been exhausted, and although tender it had been over quickly, she taking his hands off her breasts and belly, drawing him onto her, looking him squarely in the eyes. Although they were as eager as they had been at the castle, there was none of the same humour, and even less of the sport; it was a tired subsidence and swell, on the edge of sleep, a communication of the eyes as much as the undercurrent that gripped them. ‘What would that waiter think if he saw us now’, Mobius had wanted to say, but had stopped himself, and in any case Monika had closed his lips with her own. They rocked back and forth, becoming slower rather than faster, until, with a barely perceptible movement, he had run aground, and she had smiled, closed her eyes, and launched off into sleep.

Mobius had just shut his eyes when there was a sudden scrabbling on the tiles beneath the window. It sounded as though someone might have tossed a stone onto the roof, but moments later the rooster appeared, standing astride the window frame, ridiculously bowlegged and puffy, shoulders jerking and comb
aroused. The rooster glared at him maliciously, rapidly opening and closing its beak, threatening perhaps to crow, but then just as suddenly it slipped and fell, clattering back down over the roof and squawking to the ground.

Even this little performance didn’t awaken Monika. Mobius dressed quietly, shutting the door behind him.

He sat on the running board of the car and smoked a cigarette, one of Monika’s. In his bare feet and vest, his trousers rolled above his ankles, he felt as though he belonged to the car and the dusty drive, and the warm sunshine in particular. He couldn’t remember the last time the sun had touched him on his naked arms. He consciously relaxed his shoulders, and let go of his stomach. He drowsed and slumped, just like an old dog. He flicked away his cigarette and closed his eyes.

‘Good afternoon, Herr…?’

Mobius opened his eyes and looked around, but couldn’t locate the owner of the voice that was intimate, and yet hidden.

‘I’m right here.’

And so she was, a little old lady on her hands and knees, crouched inside the nearest apple tree. She was no more than four or five feet away, and the cigarette that he had tossed burned in the mulch by her gloved hands. She gathered up some sand and buried it.

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t see you there.’

‘Aphids, it is. This time of year.’

She stood up, as much as she could, which wasn’t a great deal. Her curved spine showed clearly through the thin material of her checked shirt. She winced as she rocked on her hips and stretched her legs. Even with her thin grey hair
and watery brown eyes, Mobius could tell that she had once been a beautiful woman.

‘Would you like some apples, Herr…? ’

‘Mobius. Well, I…’

‘Please help yourself. I’m afraid if I get down again, I mightn’t…’

‘Yes, of course.’

Mobius pulled at an apple that looked ripe but whose stem wouldn’t break. He twisted and pulled harder until the tree shook.

‘Are you from the city then?’

‘You can tell…’ answered Mobius, still working at the apple.

‘It isn’t that. It’s your answers to my questions. We’re right here, in the middle of what you probably refer to as ‘nowhere’, no-one is around, and yet you don’t really want to talk.’

‘Thankyou for the apple…’

‘See what I mean? Are you visiting Frau Phelps?’

There was no guile in her voice as she passed him several more apples. ‘I can go on asking you questions, or you could tell me for yourself, without my having to.’

Mobius threw up his hands and surrendered. This gesture seemed to please the old woman, who was barely taller than his waist, and she collected more apples and dropped them into his vest, out of which she made a basket with his hands. As Mobius talked they collected rapidly, he telling her whatever he thought she might want to know, and she replying with apples.

She listened politely until he was finished.
He looked across at her then, wondering how many more apples he could carry, and saw pass over her face a grimace, or was it a moment of fear?

Mobius turned to follow her gaze and saw Monika, standing at the window behind them, her face hidden but her sleep swollen belly and large slack breasts in full sunlight, thighs astride and revealing her nakedness, her thick black V, which she scratched, before turning into the darkness.

The old woman smirked. ‘Better get back, Herr Dr. Mobius. Talking out of school, I’m afraid.’

‘I’m sure you exaggerate, Frau…?’

But the old woman cackled and squeezed his hands, and to his horror took advantage of him by reaching beneath his outstretched vest and stroking his naked belly. She laughed even more at his response, which was to grunt in alarm. ‘I can smell her on you.’ Then she wandered off into her garden, having forgotten about him already.

It was the look in Monika’s eyes that made him finally understand. She was astride him and grinding with her hips. The sensation of her rough hair on his belly was both abrasive and pleasant. Her grip on him was relentless, she sawed across his thighs without ever for a moment relaxing the great smooth pressure that felt like rungs on a ladder, the sensation of both washboard and wringer. This cost her a great deal of effort, and her jaw was tightly clenched. Her eyes however bored into his own, until it became finally clear that what mattered to her most of all was not his love but his loyalty.
He had tried to manage her but she was inconsolable. Seeking to allay her suspicions he had said the worst thing possible - that the old woman, what was her name? Had seemed like a nice woman.

‘She didn’t tell you her name? What did you tell her? I want to know!’

Monika was in such a state that she’d tipped out all of the apples into the garbage. Darkness was falling as the old house awakened, creaking like an old boat, negotiating in its timbers the rapidly approaching cool. Then she had taken him by the hand and led him upstairs!

Monika was laughing at herself now, seated at the kitchen table downing glass after glass of brandy, while Mobius gulped and tried to keep pace. He was desperate, in fact, to keep pace. From next door, on the other side, came the sound of a wailing child above the unmistakable sounds of a beating. A skirmishing row appeared at the margins of the child’s wailing, the hoarse shouting and bitter escalations of a man and woman at close quarters, spreading wildly from room to room until the child was silent and the fight spilled outside.

The chill evening air appeared to aid in the combustion and soon the shouting was a single sound, cyclonic and incomprehensible, rousing the neighbourhood dogs and even the rooster, whose curdled bugling introduced the heavy wet sounds of slaps and punches, then sobs and pleading, a slamming door and a resumption of the child’s cries. The rooster entered through the open back door and strutted before them, proud and enraged, overcoming itself in their presence, clipping its spurs on the wooden floor before hobbling down the hall like a tired old nightwatchman returning to his bed.
‘Their children call me a witch’ said Monika, who was immaculately calm. Mobius on the other hand was rattled, his heart was thumping and his hands were shaking; the usual indices of violence.

‘Do they?’ he replied, ironing out his voice. ‘Whatever for?’

‘I’m told they compose songs about me, that they have even performed in class.’

Monika had put aside the bottle and was leaning into him, her chair drawn up to his own, rubbing her hands over his thighs. A sparkle of mischief remained of her earlier laughter, however, and her voice was sweet and low.

‘It’s about this time I usually…’

Monika curled her body and put her head in his lap, her eyes glinting out of the shadows beneath the table. Mobius stroked her hair and removed a lock from her forehead. Her scalp was hot and damp, but her forehead was as cold as the night air that swept through the open door. He leant down and embraced the hardness of her head, turning her neck as much as he dared, so that now he was able to kiss her breasts, then her neck, then finally her mouth, drawing in her breath, replacing it with his own. With their lips still joined he murmured ‘I doubt they’ll be expecting us.’

‘Oh, I’m sure they’ll be expecting us. But let’s disappoint them, shall we, at least for awhile?’
It was only a short walk into town but Monika insisted on driving. In fact, she insisted on *his* driving, even after last night, when he had clipped the brick post-box as he had turned into the drive. The car was undamaged but the pillar was dangerously askew.

‘Hopefully a brat will grapple it down upon itself.’

It was a painfully bright morning, and as he drove the sun split prismatically over his hands through one of the many cracks in the windscreen. His head was clearing, but large full clouds of silence still pressed upon those barely conscious parts of him so that his movements, and his responses, were automatic. Monika was no different, and hid behind a scarf, and a pair of the largest and darkest glasses he had ever seen. She was lacing up her shoes as they drove, with some difficulty because of the rugged track.

Now it was coming back to him - how Monika had pushed him forward, trophy-like into every conversation, daring her friends to take an interest. How Hannelore had flirted with him openly, according to some strange law that he wasn’t privy to, and how the others, even the sullen redhead, had eventually come around. Gustav was as attentive as ever, although his attentions had shifted from Grethe Harp onto the redhead, a Frau Dolzschen whose husband had also been killed in the war. Carl had soothed the forsaken Grethe Harp by not letting her go. She stayed on his lap and accepted his nuzzles, murmurs and kisses, and although she drank more than usual gave no other sign of disappointment. They played cards long into the night, and Monika rarely left.
his side, and when she did, either to empty an ashtray or feed the stove, Mobius couldn’t take his eyes from her, and neither could the others, he felt.

They agreed that as soon as the money order was cashed, they would breakfast at the café, then get the business of shopping over before taking a picnic into the country.

The cashier at the bank was as diplomatic as the occasion would allow. Cash transactions would soon be forbidden, he revealed, according to a recent edict, to certain members of the community, and all of them would soon need a card that attested to their, how should he say it, ‘purity’ of background. The cashier leant forward and whispered confidentially, that there was a new computational machine, he had heard, which even as they spoke was sorting through the genealogies of every citizen, back two or three generations, he couldn’t remember, a machine that would catch any ‘cheats’.

‘But surely they will cheat because of the card, not the other way around’ Monika had replied, to which the cashier, a young man with a moustache the colour of rust, already bald and pinched in the shoulders, had merely pouted and shrugged. Why bother with a woman who didn’t seem to appreciate the currency of information that made his position amongst his friends and family unassailable? Who after all knew more than he that the old adage, a country is only as stable as its currency, applied also to every individual and every account, so that every transaction represented a whispered secret that only he was able to hear? The gentleman before him, for example, although he looked slovenly and poor, must certainly be a man of some importance. To trade such a beautiful Reichschecken for such a measly sum, a Reichschecken stamped and signed by a Sturmbannfuhrer of the SS no less, that he would shortly facsimile
for his own collection, seemed somehow unfair. He therefore included with the
cash his most obsequious smile, careful not to show his bad teeth, but with as
much knowingness as his eyes could muster. Was the gentleman a spy, an
informer, a cadre about town? There were some secrets that even he couldn’t
decipher. He made a mental note of the gentleman, however, and left it at that,
for now.

They took one of the three outside tables that fronted the café. The young
waiter hadn’t forgotten Monika’s admonition and served them with the bare
minimum of politeness, that is, until he saw the cash fumbled out of Mobius’
pocket. Mobius picked it up off the pavement, grateful for the lack of wind, and
realising that it wouldn’t do to stuff it in his sock, put it back in exactly the same
pocket, which was unfortunately holed.

‘Just relax’ Monika advised him, when the waiter had gone.

‘You can tell?’ he asked hopefully.

‘Of course I can tell.’

The short walk from the bank to the café had seemed an eternity. He wasn’t
sure if it was because of the money in his pocket, more money than he had had
in his possession for many years, or rather the fact that he was so securely held
by Monika. A great weight of self-consciousness had come over him, a terrible
anxiety that even affected his ability to walk. Whenever they approached a
pedestrian or group of people gathered on the pavement he involuntarily made
to cross the road, to avoid their eyes he supposed, but was guided by Monika’s
grip on his forearm. To avoid people whenever possible, to avoid their eyes in
particular, was a practice that had become so habitual to Mobius that only now,
suffering the mostly empty streets and therefore the curiosity of the locals, was
he able to appreciate why he rarely left the anonymity afforded by the city, other than to pursue a limited research, during which time, of course, he was too single-minded to notice something as irrelevant as his shyness. After all, he had strayed dangerously far from his daily rituals of application and contemplation. If he was now more aware than ever that this old life of quiet virtue afforded little in the way of happiness, compared to his present state, at least in the slow movement of hand upon page and drift into thought he had always been able to garner a measure of understanding, and thereby an enduring pleasure of sorts. That this delicate pleasure, combined of recognition and discovery, was able to shield him from the eyes that he didn’t see, and the propaganda that he didn’t hear, and the shame that he rarely felt, if this vital nourishment had been abandoned for the sake of the immediacies of touch, and of feeling, and of all the many things about himself that he didn’t understand, and the overwhelming forces of a world he didn’t appear to comprehend, then either way he must learn to pay attention, he must try to understand, because without understanding he was nothing.

A blonde Labrador pup passed from table to table accepting the affection of the customers, and he was glad when it paused beneath him, and he was able to stroke its head and shoulders, and pat its silky coat. After a length of time the dog decided to leave him and move on, and finding nothing in the way of encouragement from Monika, it returned to its master to beg.

She thought him an eccentric, he realised, and that this was to his advantage.

They finished their ham-egg and roll breakfast and set off to find the drapers. Monika had accepted his suggestion that he buy himself something
more suitable for the country with an enigmatic smile. She appeared impressed by his ability to make a living out of his research, and although this was Mobius’ opportunity to point out to her that the most recent payment was exceptional, he had not taken it. Several times throughout the morning she had asked him what he was working on, and what he had written up until now, and where she might find more of his work to read. That she had shown no interest up until that morning, other than the ‘you hide it well’ comment, which still troubled his vanity if he were honest enough to admit it, didn’t seem to matter. Perhaps it might even motivate him to greater things, as a replacement for the external encouragement he had lost at the death of his father. With his loyalty, and her strength, who knew how long they might last, what they might achieve and how happily they might live! A terrific optimism, a vital energy flooded through him, and he knew at that moment that he was in love with Monika, and that if she would have him, he with his strange ways and she with her own, then they might endure whatever life threw at them. He took her hand and held it tightly as they crossed the empty road.

The cobbled street didn’t disturb him. He walked at his ease along the duckboard and pavement. His reflection in the shop windows didn’t make him anxious. When passers-by stared, and yes, even whispered, it didn’t matter to him either. Monika was oblivious to them in any case, and although he couldn’t quite abandon his sensitivity to their being there, in the public street, as though it were something unusual, with a little difficulty he was able to turn his attention away from himself and onto Monika. She appeared indifferent to the old church and town hall, the spotless streets and empty squares, and the ugly flags that flew there. Her method was imperious and calculating, she was
prepared for anything. He had begun to wonder, it was true, how much of the persecution she claimed to suffer was of her own creation, if not of her own making, but as he watched her and the reactions of others to her polite requests and subtle demands, there was clearly something to it. This voyeuristic measurement of Monika’s place in her world didn’t trouble him, after all, it was part of his new awakening. Many of the people she greeted appeared uneasy, and many she ignored seemed purposely hostile. An old woman and her dog turned pointedly from them and pretended to gaze within a shop window, but Mobius could see that she was secretly watching them pass. On one occasion a wolfish laugh burst from a group of young men and women, who disappeared quickly into a doorway when he turned. Monika appeared unconcerned, although she clearly must have heard it. Her face never lost its strange and fragile smile, nor the distant, unfocussed joy in her eyes. Her voice as she wooed him from shop to shop, and street to street, was tender and warm. She was looking for something, something for him, and this seemed to occupy all of her attention.

Mobius on the other hand couldn’t help but notice. It took some degree of concentration, and therefore guilt, because he felt after all that he should follow Monika’s lead, and yet the cleanliness of the town, the vast emptiness that seemed to thrive in the neat houseproud streets, the spotless shopfront windows and their perfect arrangements, the polished cars and the well-groomed dogs, the immaculate flowerbeds and carefully sculpted trees, all of this management worked to foreground what he had failed to notice in the city. The flags were ubiquitous and larger than was necessary, and the artfully printed cards that refused service to Jews, and that greeted them at the entrances to the majority of
shops, were incongruous precisely because of their signalling discretion and tact, as though it were a service provided to reduce offence. The newly built war memorial, a pagan obelisk inscribed with the words ‘a soldier’s blood is sacred’, was tied with pretty bows and laced with fresh flowers, in the same way that one might adorn a shrine, except that there was a photograph of the Fuhrer at its centre, rather than the virgin. In the lending library window was a statue of Hermann, the hero of the Teutoborg forest, rather than the usual bust of Goethe. This same statue was also to be found in the window of the sheet music shop, and the art shop, and the bakers. Clustered outside the bakers were a group of uniformed Hitlerjugend, eating cream cakes and blocking the pavement. The boys were all in their early teens, with the same peaked egg-white haircut and angry little eyes. Mobius was wary of them, their arms and legs were bruised and scratched, they had clearly been on an ‘exercise’. Their little tongues darted into their cakes and dug out cotton balls of cream that clung to their lips. Despite this they were intimidating, it was in their posture, poised and coiled like one long snake ready to strike. When they refused to budge for her Monika marched right through them, and Mobius collected their elbows and grunts of alarm. Cream on their noses and cheeks, they waited for their leader, a tallish blonde boy who pretended to give chase, and Mobius couldn’t help it, he felt his heels quicken and his heart race. ‘Dirty Jew!’ the boy shouted after them. ‘Nach Palestina!’

Monika laughed. ‘I’m not, if that’s what you’re thinking.’

‘Not what?’

‘A Jew, of course. Although here we are. Herr Fleischer, one of the few who remain.’
Herr Fleischer, the tailor whose shop clearly doubled as his front room, was busy at his machine. He leapt to his feet at the blast of light and clanging bell that announced them into the darkness, but his obvious alarm faded once he recognised Monika. ‘Frau Phelps’ he said, with little enthusiasm, but a great deal of relief. ‘What a pleasure.’ Fleischer was standing absolutely still, yet was able to give an impression of swiftness and dexterity. His closely cropped head and jug ears were sallow and damp but his clever blue eyes easily pierced the gloom.

‘How are you…?’

‘Quiet, and getting quieter’ he answered peremptorily, his attention having fallen already upon Mobius’ suit. ‘My God. I haven’t worn a suit like that for a decade.’

‘Herr Fleischer was also an actor. You must forgive him his…’

‘Forgive me nothing. Just give me something to do.’

Fleischer moved one step towards them, then resumed his original expression of eager impoliteness.

‘We have one hundred RM for you to work with. How soon can you…?’

‘I see it is rather an emergency.’

‘We’ve had the tour’ interjected Mobius. ‘But…’

‘So I am your last resort.’

‘Far from it, Herr Fleischer. That we would end up here was all part of the plan.’

‘I’m not sure I like the way you say end up here.’

Monika frowned. ‘That doesn’t concern me in the least. But having seen the rest, Herr Dr. Mobius will no doubt appreciate your work even more.'
‘Compared to these fools? I bring more than technique and style to this Saxon backwater. That is why they want to get rid of me.’

‘They want to get rid of you, Herr Fleischer, because you are a Jew.’

Monika pulled her coat about her, and shrugged. ‘Now, I have one or two things to attend to. Mobius, I leave you in capable hands.’

With that Monika was gone, out into the sunlight.

‘Herr Doktor, eh? I never would have guessed. Not with such a suit.’

Mobius smiled patiently. ‘This is my best suit.’

‘You have more than one?’

‘No.’

Fleischer peeled off the jacket, exaggerating his care lest it fall into threads. He then began paring away Mobius’ trousers, in preparation for the inside leg.

‘Are you good with your fists, Herr Doktor?’

‘No, in fact terrible.’

‘That’s fine then. I can tell you two have just met. You must have a million questions. Fire away!’

Mobius thought about it while Fleischer went about his business, which he knew well enough to save himself the trouble of asking Mobius exactly what kind of suit he wanted. This was something that Fleischer had clearly decided for himself.

‘Let me help. Do you have rivals for her? Absolutely not. Have I slept with Monika? No. That is not why she is in disgrace. Why is she in disgrace? Who can say? It is one of the mysteries of village life.’

‘I know one or two things about the mysteries of village life.’

‘Then get out while you can. They only pretend to be civilised.’
The disdain in Fleischer’s voice was unmistakable.

‘By that you are trying, I gather, to convince yourself.’

‘Where would I go? In the city there are thousands of tailors, and even more out-of-work actors.’

Fleischer had Mobius by the seat of his trousers, and was tugging. Mobius tried to keep his feet as Fleischer buffeted and yanked, prodded and gripped.

‘I have a confession. I’m a terrible tailor.’

‘I trust you.’

‘You trust Frau Phelps. Trust is foolish in such times. There, all done.’

Fleischer dashed to his machine and withdrew a pad and pencil from a drawer beneath. With a flurry he wrote down Mobius’ measurements. ‘Are you on the way up, or on the way down?’

‘Pardon?’

‘Are you getting richer, or are you getting poorer? I wouldn’t trust Frau Phelps to feed you properly. I walked past her garden once. So? Do I make allowances?’

‘No, I’m happy as I am.’

‘So you should be. Pleased to meet you. Call me Heinrich.’

Mobius took the wiry hand into his own. ‘Mobius. Pleased to meet you.’

In the dark room Mobius towered over Fleischer, who had begun to jiggle his foot. ‘Well then…’

‘When might I…?’

‘Last year you would’ve waited a month, maybe more. This year, a few days?’
Across the road was a jewellers, and Mobius, still blinded by the midday sun, cast himself across the street towards it. He would glance at it in passing, on his way to the little park opposite.

Monika was waiting for him, luxuriating within a cloud of smoke, smiling secretively. Had she been watching him?

‘An interesting man.’

‘Yes, a terrible tailor, but an interesting man. I took you to him for that reason. He’s what passes for an intellectual in this town.’

‘Do you see him socially?’

‘No, like most bachelors his age, he prefers the company of other men. They play whist at a lokal on the main street, where they talk exclusively, according to my sources, about women.’

Mobius chuckled. ‘You know that I love you, don’t you?’

Monika tamped down her cigarette with a precise twist of her toe, then kissed him quickly on the cheek.

‘Yes, I know.’

‘And that you can depend on me.’

Monika took his hands and held them to her face. Her eyes were very clear.

‘You said it yourself Paul. It shall be an adventure...’

‘It’s just that...It’s important for me to tell you.’

Monika took his hand. ‘I understand. I’m glad that you told me. But now, I have something to show you!’

The drive was longer than he expected, but after an hour of turning onto smaller and smaller roads, an hour of fence lines and farmland and wildflowers
in ditches, during which time they ate their lunch of apples, cheese and pickles, Monika slicing and feeding him as he drove, the farmland parted and gave way to a thick forest, a spruce plantation overrun by silvery birch, eerily dark and suddenly cold. The tentative road began to wind through the fungous gloom, humped with roots and sprayed with needles and fallen sticks, the watchful trees pressing towards them, syncopating the tired engine drone and introducing a wariness to Mobius’ driving. Reading his mind, Monika lit him a cigarette, and left him both hands for the wheel.

‘We’re nearly there. It’s just a track, so get ready.’

‘The enchanted forest’ Mobius murmured. ‘Yet I feel somehow put upon.’

‘It can make the hackles rise. Why some people have always lived here.’

Monika didn’t elaborate, but was looking to the forest, one hand on his forearm, and ready to direct him.

The track ended in a glade whose fringes were marked by trees left where they had fallen, beside the stumps where they once stood. This gave the impression that the clearing was recent, although the house’s slate roof was laden with ancient green-red moss. The glade belonged to Monika, who had bought it cheaply from some Wends moving back to the Spreewald.

At one stage, Monika said, she had tried living out here, but had found it too lonely, even for her. The ‘coven’ came to pick mushrooms when in season, and to picnic, but otherwise the house stood empty.

As soon as Mobius cut the engine they were consumed by an intense silence. The air was so fresh that his cigarette seemed to burn faster. The damp, pine-needle carpet squelched as they approached the house. A long wall of
stacked firewood ended at the open front doors, beside a basket full of kindling, and a roughly hewn rocking chair that still smelt of dog. Above the front doors hung an icon painted onto wood, of a saint that he didn’t recognise. Mobius peered closer to read the inscription, faded and scratched.

‘Can you read it?’

‘Only the humble…something understand humility. Yes, I can.’

Mobius followed Monika into the ground floor of the house, a stable built according to the custom. The staircase that led to the second floor rose above a stall for a horse and a water trough for pigs. The smell of cow manure and straw was sharp enough to make him cough. This awoke a goose sleeping in the stalls, who roused herself and waddled shyly towards them. ‘Have you run away again Gretchen?’

The goose began to taste Mobius’ trousers, fondly stapling the seam with precise little bites, looking up at him trustingly. When he made to move, it followed him without letting go. By this time it had worked its way up inside his inner leg, and when he tried to brush it off, it transferred its tender bite to his fingers, forcing him to bend down. ‘She wants you to scratch her chest.’

Mobius did so dutifully, and the goose released him, threw back its long neck and wheezed in delight.

‘She belongs to a neighbour, but runs off to God knows where.’

Upstairs the simple wooden furniture and unlined walls, unpolished floorboards and lack of a ceiling gave the impression of a shepherd’s mountain hut, provisional and bare, whose centre of gravity was the cold black stove that dominated the room. The only other concessions to comfort included a small bookshelf, and a shrine of a sort he had never encountered; with a triptych
Catholic virgin and some blackened candle stubs amidst a kitchen shelf full of preserves and pickles, and an enormous ham curing on a hook, above a large demijohn containing a clear spirit.

‘It feels like a hideout.’

‘It used to be their summer place, when the animals came to feed on the wild shoots. Would you like a glass?’

‘Yes, it’s certainly cold enough.’

Mobius accepted a glass of the fiery spirit, a schnapps so harsh it reminded him of Frau Kunstler’s cousin, Marty from Tegel. ‘I certainly couldn’t find my way back from here...’

Monika leant closer and blindfolded him with her fingers, which smelt of schnapps and dust, and the shroud of her own particular smell, at once floral and smoky. He could feel her warm breath against his neck, and her tightly closed eyelids at his jawline, and the pressure of her forehead against his ear. She didn’t remove her hands from his eyes, and nor did Mobius move to take them away. It would all be alright, he felt, as long as he didn’t look, and she didn’t let him see.
‘Not now!’ Mobius groaned as he saw the car in Hannelore’s drive. It was a sleek black staff car, twin flags glistening in the rain and dark, half-hidden in the bushes. Mobius pulled in behind it, and cut the engine.

‘What is it?’

‘You’ll see.’

As Mobius opened the front door he was greeted by a hoot of laughter, as familiar as it was unwelcome, a laugh so out of place that his reluctance was replaced by anger, a change of gear that propelled him down the hall and into the kitchen.

‘What are you doing here?’ he shouted at Flade. ‘This isn’t right!’

Flade played out the stunned silence for all it was worth. Finally he winked at Hannelore. His mouth creased gently into a pout, which then became an aggrieved smile. He shrugged, casting his eyes around the table, gathering up support.

‘You see, I told you.’

Mobius was shocked to realise that far from being wary of Flade, his friends were not only thoroughly charmed, but had been for some time. Even Gustav’s face was red with drink and laughter. A magnum of Krug already hosted a burning candle, and another was open beside it in a silver bucket filled with ice. A caterer’s doily on a wooden board was smudged with cream and crumbs. Carl was smoking a cigar that looked large even in his enormous hands. He inhaled deeply, then eased out the smoke, watching amazed as it rose above
him in a blue-grey cloud. He called to it with the fingers of his other hand, trying to lure it back down.

‘I’m not sure why you’re late Mobius, but we had to start without you.’

‘Congratulations!’ shouted Hannelore, shrill and overheated, hilariously drunk. She tried to rise but stood on Gustav’s foot, who pulled her harshly back into her seat. She didn’t appear to mind this, in fact screeched with laughter. Gustav too chuckled as he rubbed his foot, mumbling something incoherent.

‘What are you doing here? What are you talking about?’

‘You see! You see! You see! You…see?’ pointed out Flade to everyone present. This brought forth a torrent of laughter and table banging and wheezing that ended only when Monika appeared at Mobius’ shoulder.

‘You see…’ sniggered Gustav, peering into his mug, shaking his head as though to clear his ears of water. ‘It’s a celebration.’

Flade rose from his seat and bowed to Monika, smiling graciously.

‘Flade, this is Monika.’

Flade bowed once more, taking Monika’s hand. ‘Frau…?’

‘Monika will do’ she answered him, her voice swerving round at Mobius.

‘You two are friends?’

‘Yes…friends, and more. Flade is my…dark angel.’

‘He’s certainly dressed for the occasion.’

‘And your first reader. Your publisher. Your benefactor. Your…admirer.’

Flade had been stung by Monika’s reference to his uniform, uncharacteristically so, and brushed his sleeve. Even more unusual was that he hadn’t considered his last words, and they waited there to be accepted, a painful clutter in the air.
'Yes, all of those things too.'

Flade put a hand on Mobius’ shoulder, but that left the other, the one that he might have used to touch Monika, who was right there beside him, hesitant and obvious. It hung there like a broken wing.

‘Look what I have for you!’

Albert – could it be? Emerged from the dark garden carrying Mobius’ favourite stool. He was dressed in the black woollen uniform, with black leather boots and even a pistol strapped to his waist. He put down the stool and stepped between Monika and Flade, then embraced Mobius, and led him back to his seat. Mobius sat, and the seat duly snored.

‘You see!’ Albert cried to the others at the table. ‘It always does that for him!’

Albert’s arrival had immediately removed any traces of awkwardness, and Monika allowed Flade to pour her a champagne. Albert sat next to Mobius and retrieved his cigar from Carl, who bellowed for it back. Albert returned it and asked Flade for another. Gustav and Hannelore grinned drunkenly, trying to follow the noisy conversation in the small room. This left Monika no alternative but to listen to Flade, who was trying to redeem himself with gossip straight from the city.

‘It’s a great job Uncle! We’ve relocated to a castle in the country. The view from my room is tremendous. And I get to drive all over the place!’

‘Does your mother approve of all this?’

‘Yes, it was her idea. She told Dr. Flade where you might be on the condition…’
‘That’s kind of her. What exactly is your…relationship with Professor Flade?’

Albert laughed. ‘I’m his chauffeur. Why…what did you think?’

‘I don’t know what to think. I’m not really sure what’s going on.’

‘Ah, yes, me and my big mouth. Professor…?’

Flade had clearly been listening and waiting for an opportunity to cut in. He leaned across the table and filled everyone’s mugs, cups and glasses. Carl drank his down right away but the others waited for Flade to speak. He stood up and raised his glass.

‘When I met this man in the university library I could see immediately why he was reading History. I had seen him skulking about the lecture theatres, I could see that he was penniless and hungry, and so I took him for a meal. He was grateful but suspicious. I got the impression that he hadn’t spoken to anyone for weeks. Because he was so quiet, and busy eating his soup, I told him all about myself, my family, my families’ roots in the land. What I intended to achieve. What I liked, what I disliked. But this man here, when it was his turn, told me nothing about himself. Do you understand? History matters to a man without history…’

Flade raised his glass so high that his jacket rode above his waist. Never mind, the others plunged their lips to their cups, mugs and glasses, except that Flade hadn’t finished. He considered his friend warmly. ‘Say something Mobius. Tell them something!’

Mobius shifted uncomfortably in his seat. ‘It sounds like an obituary.’

‘Ah, modesty! Of course you haven’t told them anything about yourself! Quite natural from the man whose first book was published even before he had
finished his habilitation! “The Trial of Barbe Esslingen” - a study of that watershed when the Enlightenment finally reached our own benighted country. A time when people were beginning to think for themselves, when the power of the church was waning, when the power of the state was being questioned. And yet unemployment and poverty were on the increase! Conservative intellectuals rallied together fearing anarchy and godlessness. Books were burned! Thinkers, lawyers and clergymen reformers were intimidated, arrested and murdered! The false dawn of an enlightened tolerance was swept away in a few short years. A new ruthlessness spread to the people – the people, with their age old enmities, fears, miseries and superstitions! A surge of witchcraft persecutions began. The enemy within! And one trial in particular, a trial like any other, the trial of Barbe Esslingen, an ordinary old peasant woman in an ordinary Rhinish village.’

‘Please Flade. You make it sound like a bad novel.’

‘On the contrary! It was a perfect lesson of how history is always with us, as the same tendencies and conditions and personalities are always with us! Of how a culture tolerates contradiction but only until a certain point! Of how persecution can only happen with the blessing of both the people and their leaders, never one without the other! How easily fear is turned into hate, and hate into murder!’

‘Please Flade, you’re exhausting us.’

‘You see what I mean about modesty! I broke this man’s heart once, and what was his response? To write one of the best and most original treatises on love in the Western world that one could possibly hope for. In his own time, outside of his studies! His sources were controversial – Montaigne, Rousseau,
Constant, Voltaire – Frenchmen all, a fact that alone guaranteed he would never find a publisher! ‘Love the other for her own sake! Not for the sake of one’s own desire.’ That was political for its time! What were its implications? To love what is. Forget the love of nations, of race, of Gods and ideals and abstractions! Forget the martial virtues of obedience and unthinking loyalty! Forget the political creeds that make of us instruments and means to ends, in the service of economic ideals. Every time we stray towards the love of abstraction it is to avoid our responsibilities to others, to real others - to what is real. Look closely, think clearly, love what is – Revolutionary, yes, yes, all of that – But what am I saying? What am I saying about Dr. Mobius, whose heart had been broken by a mere policeman’s wife? I am saying again - Love matters to one without love!’

Flade gulped at his drink to wet his lips before finally arriving at the toast. ‘To Dr. Mobius! And Frau…Monika! Who have made something from nothing!’

The others murmured and drank what was left in their cups, mugs and glasses. Mobius’ glass had been empty for some time. Gustav filled it silently, not meeting his eyes. Even if he, and the others, with the exception of Monika, hadn’t quite understood what the visitor had been saying, it was clear in Flade’s feverish voice and inflamed eyes that he was overwrought and on the edge of something. Neither had the incongruity of a man in the black uniform spouting on about freedom and love been lost on them.

‘I didn’t know you were a political’ suggested Hannelore, cautiously reaching for the bottle. ‘I didn’t know you were a Christ figure either’ smirked Monika. But Flade wasn’t having any of it. He leaned right into the middle of the table, and his handsome face, usually so undisturbed by thought was
wracked by frustration at the stream of words that rushed to his mouth. ‘No…No, neither of those things. You misunderstand. This man, did you know? I was a censor in the war, but he…he was a machine-gunner, he…he has killed many hundreds, perhaps thousands of men. Did you know that?’

‘Now you go too far Flade. That’s enough. There’s no need to bring that up.’

But Flade wasn’t listening. ‘He wrote to me, just before we lost contact – “Up they come, up the mountain, the Frenchmen, in their red smocks and blue overcoats, up through the snow. They can see the chipped rock where we have practised. They don’t stand a chance. You can imagine their faces. But up they come. Day after day - the order is given…”’

‘That’s enough Flade!’ Mobius rose to his feet and dashed Flade’s glass from his hand. He pushed back his chair and stormed outside, into the cold dark garden and strawberry patch, catching his throat on a clothesline.

Flade grinned sheepishly. ‘Yes, perhaps we need to talk alone. Excuse us.’

Mobius, his eyes adjusted to the darkness, saw Flade coming, inching forward with his hands and feet, peering blindly about like a mole.

‘Over here’ Mobius called from the garden bench.

‘Mobius, Levin is interested in offering you a position, on my recommendation of course!

Flade braced himself on Mobius’ shoulder and found his place, then slid closer. He whispered confidentially – ‘Your experience, the mystery of your disappearance, even your humble beginnings…they all suit the socialist purpose.’
‘What’s wrong with you? Why are you so frantic?’

Flade laughed. ‘Bremner, Gottlieb, Hansen, Raab…they have all climbed aboard. It’ll be just like the old days.’

‘But Bremner is a doctrinaire Marxist. And Gottlieb a social democrat. Raab, I heard he was shot. How could they? And answer my question!’

Flade was silent, and in the kitchen Mobius could hear Gustav begin to sing, and Albert too, and Carl beating the table.

‘I am afraid…I am afraid, they will brook no refusal. Not from you. Particularly since the others were willing. And I, I was sent here to make you understand that.’

‘What will happen if I refuse?’

‘Nothing will happen?’

‘What will happen?’

‘You take these things too seriously.’

‘You’re still not telling me everything.’

Flade built up his courage by clenching and unclenching his fists, and rubbing them over his thighs. ‘There are the opportunities the position provides, not to mention the salary. A place can be found, for two…If that is what you want.’

Mobius stood and wiped the seat of his trousers. ‘She will never agree.’

Flade laughed bitterly. _There_ was the old Flade, in that laugh, Mobius realised, the one that he had been waiting for. ‘You should be grateful Levin doesn’t know what I know! I know what you’ve been writing…Nothing but rubbish for a decade!’

‘You had no right!’
‘You go to your desk and you read but all you have is notes! Notes! You haven’t written anything!’

‘You’re not the one to judge!’ Mobius shouted.

‘Do you have any idea how pathetic that sounds? Reading! Reading! All day reading! What do you hope to find, what are you looking for?’

‘I had to start again…’

‘Why? What do you think happened to your vile medieval world? Do you honestly think it went away, even for a moment? The best men our age can hope for is a safe seat somewhere out of the way. Better the devil you know, Mobius!’

‘You want to destroy me…’

Flade slapped his thigh and snarled up at the sky. ‘What is left to destroy? What is left of the Mobius I used to know?’

‘You have lost some kind of battle Flade, I understand that, however…’

‘Don’t you humour me! You rat! I know all about you. I know where you were all those years…I know your secret.’

Mobius felt his knees bow, and his stomach tumble. A bright, distant but rapidly approaching point of light struck him in the forehead, setting off a great red flare that lifted him off his feet and flung him at Flade. They wrestled, and tumbled, and clung together like cats, rolling in the strawberries and mauling one another with fingers and elbows and knuckles. Even when Mobius got the upper hand and pinned Flade to the side of the shed, head locked and wheezing for breath, he was still able to sneer – ‘That’s better. That’s more like it. That’s what I mean!’
‘Don’t you threaten me’ Mobius hissed, even as his rage subsided, leaving him shaken and breathless.

‘The individual is *always defeated Mobius. You know it better than anyone. The genie is best out of the bottle.’

‘Then you don’t understand. You don’t understand at all.’

A tall shadow flitted across the moon. Monika didn’t look back as she slammed the door. Only moments later they heard the clanks and shudders of Rocinante coming alive. Mobius climbed to his feet, and took Flade’s hand, hoisting him from the ground. They shook the dirt and leaves from one another. Men our age, thought Mobius. What does that mean? We are all like children.
Mobius saw the faint kitchen light through the pebbled glass of the front door, which was ajar. His apologetic footsteps in the echoing hall seemed a fitting reminder that he had been forced to walk. His boots sounded weary with the distance and the lateness of the hour. Despite this, he entered the kitchen with his face set and his hands in his pockets.

Monika was awake and waiting for him. She poured him a drink to distract from her guilty smile. ‘I’m sorry I did that to you. I really am. Are you angry with me?’

Mobius slid into his seat with his hands still in his pockets. He considered her question but decided to ignore it. He had made up his mind to tell her everything.

Without pause, Mobius described his years in the ‘home’ for veterans. He had never told anyone else, other than his father and Gustav. He told her about the breakdown; the fits, the paralysis, the blindness. The words were already there, or had been, for many years. Perhaps that is what he had thought about during those long years; how he would explain himself. He didn’t know; he couldn’t remember. He had been blind and strapped to a bed for much of it. A bitter soporific had made it impossible for him to think clearly, or even remember, so that the four years now seemed to him one long dream that he couldn’t interpret, or escape, and not because it had been erased but because it was itself the erasure.

‘You’re shaking. Look, your hands…’
Mobius looked, and yes, his fingers were trembling again, and his heart was beating faster. She hadn’t asked him what had caused the breakdown, and he hadn’t volunteered. Now he answered it with his body. He let the anger flood through him and the tremors follow the course of his limbs. Hadn’t he, like everyone else, rushed to war? Ecstatic, enthusiastic, flushed with a recklessness that came with the flinging aside of caution and care? Like everyone else! He couldn’t think of a single voice to be heard then against the clamour for war. All of them, the artists, the writers, the academics, the politicians and priests, the undertakers and taxi-drivers, the teachers and children, the socialists and conservatives and monarchists and democrats, all of them were for the great adventure! And what a great adventure it was! The blood, the filth, the mud and guts and bones! The gas, the poison, the murderous shelling and flares! The bloodthirsty swine who egged them all on, and the cowards like himself who just wanted to survive! What a dupe! What a fool! What a betrayal of his own self-image! He had sat in his trench night after night swearing that forevermore he would always judge them, and himself - against that one terrible betrayal. From that time on anyone who spoke to him of a belief or a conviction or even a desire would be judged against those egg-heads who had thrown it all away, up into the air with their hats as they applauded the troops who marched off to war. Seated on a corpse in a trench in the mud. That was where the unexamined life led one! Sticking a bayonet in the belly of a perfect stranger for no good reason was where trust and enthusiasm and respect for traditions got you! It was murder to put faith in the flag and the ghouls and nincompoops who hoisted it around! The heroes were the worst of all; they didn’t know what they were doing because what they did didn’t matter! They fought as though they were
naked, invisible in their nakedness. It wasn’t about killing but about dying! It wasn’t about going but about coming back! It was all topsy-turvy and every way round about. It was about heroism and sacrifice and unthinking obedience. It was about allowing oneself to be used, manipulated, told what to do...Oh, the joys of the slave! That was the point of it all!

It had become clear to him in the mountains, even though it was too late. His mind was stretched - his nerves were gone. He began to shake and gabble. They trained him for the machine-gun, where he wouldn’t have to run, where his arms shook as he fired and his legs jangled and his jabbering couldn’t be heard. This was their idea of a joke. They were up in the mountains, where their guns could shoot further than the naked eye could see. The wind up high was silky and playful despite the cold. Hundreds of crows rose on the great plumes of air before them, rising and falling at will, starkly black against the deep white snow, cawing with pleasure and grace. They on the other hand waited for the enemy to come at them from below, up along the valley that the machines covered perfectly. The machines were aimed in combination to create a corridor through which nothing could pass. Every day they tested their guns on this death space, pouring bullets into the zone so that a storm of powdery snow rose high into the air. Nothing larger than a rabbit could survive in the ‘Kaiser’s Crack’.

One day they were preparing for the regular morning drill of cleaning snow from the Kaiser’s Crack, when, as though the enemy too were part of this exercise, they began to appear out of the forest in one struggling mass, wading through the snow, defined on either side by the slope of the valley walls. There were hundreds of them, trudging upwards in their motley of blue and khaki
greatcoats, then more again, still breaking from the forest in a great wave, forced to converge once the narrow climb began, a whole French battalion, without covering fire, or artillery support.

The Captain stood alone to their rear, thigh-deep in the snow, his handgun pointed to the sky. It was a heroic pose, of the kind enshrined in stone. The tail of the French column reached the death space. The Captain fired a single shot into the air. A snatch of song reached them on the wind, from below, then Mobius’ finger plunged on the trigger and all sound was lost to the machine. A young private fed the machine its ‘pea pod’ and the machine sorted bullets from belt and poured them down into the valley. Mobius fired with his eyes closed. The longed-for numbness soon spread from his fingers to his shuddering arms, then to his jolting neck and head, nodding in dumb affirmation. The machine hacked at his ears and filled his lungs with a steam of snow and burnt powder. His eyes were clenched so tightly that the glare when he opened them sent a sharp pain deep into his head.

The order had come to cease firing. Less than two minutes had passed. They were knee deep in spent shells. Melted snow ran in pale blue rivulets down into their nest. They wiped the steam from their field glasses and peered over the valley. Mobius didn’t say anything, although he looked for a long time. When he finally turned to the others they couldn’t hear him. The ringing in their ears filled the entire sky.

Behind them the Captain finished scribbling a message, using his young batman’s helmet as support. It was this boy’s job to wait behind the line until the firing was finished. The Captain opened the boy’s coat and gently guided out a carrier pigeon from beneath the warm armpit. It was a speckled white, and
still limply asleep. The message was attached to one of the bright pink feet and fixed with a thin lead clasp. The boy blew onto the pigeon’s face to revive it. It came awake slowly as he talked to it, whispering in its ear and smoothing its plump chest. The Captain stood away, turned from them and urinated into the snow. The boy kissed the pigeon one last time and flung it into the air. It flew past them and out over the valley, circling widely before finally gathering speed on the wind and rising back above them, its wings barely beating, swooping over their heads and gliding down, over the other side of the ridge.
12.

Instead of going to Hannelore’s house they remained throughout the afternoon and early evening by the stove. They ate scrambled eggs and fish straight from the can. Every now and then they referred to a bottle of wine like a shy third person at the table, until it was finished and Monika took from a cupboard another of her inexhaustible supply of cheap brandy. This noisy friend brought out all of her stories and even encouraged her at one point to act out a scene from Fontane. Mobius was cast in the role of a bourgeois father pleading with his daughter to spurn the affections of the importunate solicitor that he was required to play as well. Monika knew her lines by heart, but he had to manage with reading in between, much to her amusement. The young wheedler was finally exposed, and only when their respective self-deceptions had fallen away was he rewarded with a kiss. It was a long, ironic final act kiss, moist and fishy flavoured, that continued long after the curtain had fallen.

This role play more than anything else removed the last traces of his agitation. The brandy and the smoke, the heat from the stove and the scorching yellow walls had all worked to evaporate the turbulent spirits invoked by Flade. The door was open now, it was safe to come out - she had accepted him. Monika worked on her word puzzles, and he read the copy of Grimmelhausen discovered in the empty room off the hall, the boneyard as she called it – ‘Let the dead bury the dead!’
He read and laughed and she gave him her peculiar smile, the knowing one, because she knew the book well; it had been her husband’s favourite. The book and his eyeglasses were all that had been returned to her after his death at Ypres. Mobius had taken Nietzsche and Voltaire’s ‘Candide’ with him to the front, the latter a present from Flade – ‘This is the best of all possible worlds, isn’t it? We are guided by our instincts and all our instincts are good! And yet…’ – He had kept the books for two years until everything was lost in the midst of a rapid retreat. Grimmelhausen too, he could see now, would have been an equally salutary friend.

There had been no more mention of Flade other than Monika’s acceptance, or admission that he was ‘quite handsome’, something she had said abruptly after a long period of silence, as if she had searched and searched for something redeeming about his friend and that was all she could find. Mobius had merely grunted, then returned to his book. This was taken as a jealous tease, inspiring her to leave her puzzle and arrive in his lap. She was heavy and square and he was forced to acknowledge her weight even as his eyes scurried to finish the last sentence of a paragraph. When he looked up she bit his ear and held on fiercely. He was forced to respond by pinching her stomach, and in twisting free she released him, but only so far as to sling another leg over his lap, so that she was now astride him, and all of his vision. He expected at that moment that she would suggest they visit the others but he was wrong, instead she kissed him gently, surprisingly gently given the playful look in her eyes, a look that gave way gradually to something more considered, something more direct as she let him see her desire.
They sat in the barren garden and soaked up the morning heat, reflected off the baked mud earth and walls of the old shed. The sun was pale and diffuse in the sky but in the garden it gathered over them, and tamped their movements back to a compressed and submarine echo. Anaesthetised by the sun, conversation pointless, they sat in easy silence, sipping at their coffee and staring at their feet. Ours is a nocturnal language, thought Mobius. Then – she grinds her teeth so badly! Then – She is the kind of woman a man must really love, otherwise…

Mobius closed his eyes and let the red glaze come over his eyelids. His skin was hot to the touch, he imagined it was her skin, his body was loose and heavy, he imagined it was her body, and the memory of falling asleep beside her for the first time in the darkness, Monika actually asleep in the darkness, loose and heavy, not stiff and composed, no longer under the restraint of wakefulness, and her thoughts, her memories, her ideas of what was happening to her, the strange man in her bed…

He opened his eyes and she was looking at him, smirking faintly, exhaling on her cigarette with that barely amused smile that meant she was reading him, waiting for him to look down at his lap. He did so, and smiled, but didn’t laugh, only closed his eyes once more and pictured her there, the morning sun streaming through the open window, she pretending to be asleep as he slowly helped himself into a position where he might enter her, although her breathing had changed, had in fact stopped altogether for a few seconds, then resumed as he placed a hand on her belly, climbed onto an elbow, and began to blow on her neck, waiting for her to turn.

‘The sun shines, and things begin to grow!’
Her words were so reverberating out of the intimate distance that he let his head fall back even further, so that now his face was directly open to the sun, his eyes clamped shut beneath the hot red blaze, his mouth open and pale neck exposed, his arms raised in supplication and welcome, waiting for her to come to him.

Instead there were pounding footsteps on the gravel drive! Mobius opened his eyes but in his blindness could see nothing other than the tall dark shape of Monika floating from her chair, a looming shadow and flaming corona, hands on her hips and sturdy legs planted in defiance. He turned to see the rooster, a fireball bounding past them to the back of the yard, followed by thrown stones and childish laughter. From around the corner and out of the brightness came the young SA soldier, marching imperiously, his black boots trailing clouds of dust. He twisted his cuffs to free his hands, stamped his boots together, then waited reluctantly for the two accomplices to join him, mimicking his stamping in their bare feet, looking to his salute with an eager admiration. The two Jensen boys were barely younger, but without the uniform, as they seemed well aware, they may as well have been naked. The soldier ignored them and took an envelope from inside his jacket. The two boys stared at it with an awed expression, but flinched when Monika pointed at them. ‘You two! Get! I’ve told you before! I’ll thrash you myself if your father doesn’t!’

The elder of the two boys, with a skullcap of oily black hair and a mulish face that produced an ugly mulish laugh, put his hands on his hips and thrust them towards her. His younger brother, with the same buck teeth and pimpled skin made to imitate his brother but was also the first to flee as Monika stepped
threateningly towards them, pointing down the drive. ‘Get! I said! You revolting little creatures! And you, what do you want?’

The two boys had retreated but weren’t going to leave without witnessing the handover of the envelope. They waited, ready to run on sprinters’ legs, smirking and excited and afraid. The SA soldier complied by stalking defiantly towards Mobius and passing him the envelope. ‘My orders are to give this to you. And to see that you open it.’

The soldier stood with his back to Monika, and waited. His red moustache twitched and his eyes darted over his shoulders to where she was keeping an eye on the two boys. The idea that he might be attacked by the mad old woman was clearly foremost in his mind; his right hand never left the strap of a small billy club, just in case.

It was an invitation to an academic seminar, to be held at Wewelsburg Castle in Westphalia, embossed in black letters on a gold card, and another Reichschecken to the same value, signed again by Flade.

‘If that is all, then you may leave’ Mobius said to the soldier.

‘Heil Hitler!’ replied the boy, who didn’t move.

‘Tell him! Tell him!’ shouted the brothers on the drive.


‘Tell him! Tell him!’ shouted the brothers, encouraged by the curiosity in her voice.

‘Silence! Idiots! Or I’ll crack your skulls!’ bellowed the boy. He then sucked in his stomach and loudly swallowed. He twisted his neck in his collar, and swallowed again. The sneer had vanished, and so had the anger; his eyes were moist. ‘When I went around the other place, I found him. Your father is
dead! I’m sorry. The old woman told me where to find you. They…He was good to me! I’m sorry…”

The soldier bowed and left without another word. The two brothers fell in beside him like chastened dogs. Mobius didn’t realise, seconds must have passed, suddenly he was on his feet, watching them leave. They had reached the front gate. The soldier had taken out his club to discourage them from following him any further. He turned away and they waited, then followed at a discreet distance. Not in this way, thought Mobius, not now, and not in this way! Steadied by Monika, he stumbled towards the old car. He leaned on the bonnet and let the grief rise through him, powerless against the images of Gustav’s dead face, the same fright and pain he had seen on the face of his father. Monika had returned with the keys, and the bonnet beneath his fingers cranked and whirred alive. He was aware of the old woman next door, watching from her garden. He was aware of the growing heat beneath his fingers. He was aware of the sun on his head and shoulders, and the reflection from the windscreen. It was the first sob that took him by surprise, so sudden that he gasped as it hit his stomach, arching his back as it passed through his chest, forcing him over as though he were going to be sick, draining out of him until he gasped again and drew it all back inside.
Gustav was laid beneath a towel in the garden. Hannelore hadn’t the strength to move him, and although the young soldier had offered, she had refused. Mobius knelt over his friend and removed the towel. The old man’s face was fixed in a grimace of pain. His teeth were gritted and his eyes clenched shut. Strangely, there were wet tears on his face.

‘Was anybody with him?’ Mobius asked.

Hannelore sniffled and shook her head. Monika comforted her with an incomprehensible murmur. Mobius pried out the remains of the tomato Gustav had been carrying in his hand. The red-green globe had been crushed, and seeds and a thin juice glistened between his fingers.

Just like his heart, thought Mobius.

He cradled Gustav in his arms and climbed to his feet. The old man was surprisingly light; a cocoon of skin and bones.

Mobius laid Gustav on a mattress in the kitchen, stretching out his childish limbs, rubbing at his jaw to smooth away the grimace. Now Gustav looked peaceful, and at rest.

Mobius stood and went to Monika, who held him at his waist, as Hannelore stripped Gustav naked, and bathed him with warm water. She had fresh clothes ready on the kitchen table, and his boots beneath. All the while she spoke to him, little endearments and sighs of pity, kissing his hands, stroking his hair, rubbing his fingers between her hands to warm them.
It was awkward getting Gustav dressed - Mobius had to hoist him beneath the armpits, then keep him propped up with a knee as Hannelore and Monika struggled with the trousers and socks, boots and belt, undershirt and thick woollen shirt. When they had him down on the mattress Mobius placed Gustav’s Meerschaum pipe in his shirt pocket, and buttoned it. Hannelore wet his old comb with the missing teeth and slicked his hair back. Instead of putting the comb in the pocket with the pipe, however, she shuffled over to the garbage, pressed down on the foot-lever and dropped it in. She brushed her hands on her dress, and dabbed at her tears with her knuckles.

Then they sat at the kitchen table, to drink a schnapps and wait for Carl.

Hannelore didn’t want to be alone with her brother. She wouldn’t allow Mobius to go and find Carl, especially after Monika had left to ‘make arrangements’. Death was in the room with them, she claimed. For Mobius however, the sight of his old friend laid out at their feet, the sunlight playing across the darkening head and high collar, resembling a withered bouquet in a toppled old vase, the sight of his friend reminded Mobius not of death as a living thing but rather a void or silence that would never again be filled. Even as Gustav was beginning to rot, to decay like a damp old log underfoot, Mobius began to fill the empty place with all of the images, all of the thought-feelings of Gustav that he could gather, restoring Gustav to himself in such a way that he might never be forgotten. This memorialisation was something he had learned to do in the war, knowing that often no-one else was aware, or cared about the newly dead more than he, at that moment, whose families might not know for weeks, or ever know.
Hannelore lit another candle, and appeared to be praying. Once again Mobius climbed from his chair and knelt beside his friend. Once again he took hold of the dried old fingers with their scars and calluses, and brought them to his lips. Gustav, and his father, and the dozens of other young men whose names he would never forget and whose faces, voices, movements and laughter were alive within him, were alive in a way that Hannelore’s God could never be. Alive, that is, until he too was dead.

But when Hannelore reached across the table and took his hands, and bowed her head and began to pray out loud, a psalm he was unfamiliar with – he bowed his own and pretended to join her. The words were soothing, a paean to death amidst the sweet sadness of life. The sun was still shining outside, just as it had when Gustav was alive, just as it sometimes had in the trenches. Sparrows chirruped around the bird bath. The flowers in the garden nodded on their dazed and drunken heads.

Hannelore’s businesslike voice, attempting to recall each prayer by heart but mistaking certain words, and continuing over others that she had forgotten – Mobius found it strangely affecting. He was a listener, not a believer, and yet the tears in his eyes were hopeful. What, after all, was there to understand about Gustav’s death, and indeed life?

Hannelore’s voice continued its patter of loving grief, her eyes closed and head bowed, clasping him in her chalky hands. The open door to the garden brought them the smells of honeysuckle and jasmine, of pine sap and sawdust, of manure and rotting leaves. The light shone on the face of the dead man at their feet, one of whose bootlaces had become mysteriously undone, whose
hands had become claws, whose scaling parchment skin seemed about to dry and peel away, to blow away on the breeze.

Mobius looked at the face of his old friend. The ear that had been partially bitten off in a fight, like that of an old dog. The sunken eye and hollow mouth, sightless and silent. The liver-spotted skin, the red rash and whiskers, the oily hair and its unusual double crown, the yellow wings over his ears, grey and white and long over his scalp, flowing like grass at the bottom of a stream.

‘Praise be to God’ Hannelore said. She opened her eyes and smiled at him. ‘I haven’t done that for a very long time’ Hannelore laughed. ‘Although I don’t think brother would approve. A few words from the Kaiser perhaps! But then, I realised when I was speaking, if it was me who went first, well…I would just have to go along with his wishes, God forbid!’

‘Yes, I can imagine.’ Mobius rubbed her hands. After the feel of Gustav’s cold, stiff fingers, which lingered on his own like an odd taste, he didn’t want to release her.

‘Paul, what am I going to do with Carl?’

Mobius looked down at her hands, protected in his own like a flame. This was something that Gustav had talked about, with him at least. He had always said, ‘if anything happens, my sister will care for him. She never had a child, you see.’ But there was worry in Hannelore’s voice, and something else too – resignation.

‘We had an agreement’ Mobius said, before he could stop himself. ‘That I would care for Carl if anything happened.’

Hannelore didn’t dispute this, although now he had said it, he realised that he might have expected her to. Instead she sighed, and her closed eyes couldn’t
hold back the tears any longer. ‘I’m sorry, but it would be impossible for me…Not with Carl.’

‘I see’ Mobius said somewhat firmly.

‘I told Gustav he was too old, that Carl would be the death of him.’

‘I didn’t know that.’

‘It didn’t make any difference.’

Hannelore was silent, and Mobius could tell that she was planning very carefully what to say next. It took her several attempts to begin, to try to meet his eyes, and each time she had to look away.

‘Paul, you cannot have Carl. He doesn’t belong to you, or to any of us. With Gustav, it was different. There was blood between them. But you cannot have him. It wouldn’t be right.’

She was ashamed of herself, he could tell, the faint blush had become a red stain, but there was determination in her voice, and beneath that – anger. Yes, she was angry with Gustav. Angry with Carl. Angry with him, too.

‘What do you propose? You’re aware of what Gustav wanted…’

‘You’re lying to me. The boy is better off, with others of his…kind.’

The audacity of what she had said seemed to stun Hannelore. Her face was burning, and her hands were sweating. Still he didn’t let them go – the two small fists in his tightening grip. She was having great difficulty not looking in her brother’s direction, she had even turned somewhat towards the wall. Mobius had to pull gently on her hands, to get her to look at him. When she did, reluctantly, her eyes were surprisingly fierce. Mobius let go of her hands immediately. There it was again, that look.
‘I’m trying to help you!’ she hissed. ‘I will make the choice for you, so that you don’t have to choose between them. Because mark my words, Monika will not allow it! She won’t understand your eagerness for the boy. Neither do I! She deserves happiness. And you, you’re not getting any younger either. What happens when you die?’

Mobius didn’t answer her. The truth was…

‘Who will care for him when we are all dead?’

The truth was that he understood Hannelore better than he liked to admit. After all, he had never given the possibility of looking after Carl much thought. He cared for the boy he had known since birth, and yet…

Gustav lay there in silent reproach. Was there such a thing as being true to his memory? And if so, didn’t this involve being true to his wishes? But Gustav’s wishes for Carl had involved Hannelore, not Mobius. Gustav had been clear about that, but had been even more emphatic that Carl would never be taken from him. The stories of the orphanage that he had suffered in, a childhood that Hannelore had presumably shared, had reinforced this determination. But Carl had been taken from him! Death had taken Carl from him! Hannelore was right.

‘I think we should talk about this in the garden.’

This was Monika, not Hannelore. Mobius had no idea how long she had been standing there in the doorway, listening. Now she glided across the room and kissed Hannelore’s neck, and cheek. She hugged her friend’s shoulders, indicating to Mobius that he should leave. He took a glass of schnapps up into Gustav’s room, and sat amongst his things; the box of ancient wooden tools, tools so odd looking! Tools whose purpose he had never been able to decipher.
And the hessian bags rolled neatly into cylinders, bags he hadn’t thrown away, but fixed with twine, just in case. And the spare pipes, placed carefully in an empty bookshelf like objets d’art. And his shaving mug and mirror, and brush and razor. His pail of water and towel, still damp. The photograph of his wife and son, posed stiffly against a backdrop of factory brick. The walking stick that contained a thin sword, that always slept beside him.

Mobius could hear the two women in the garden below. He strained to hear their words but all he could hear were tones that like streamers fluttered away on the breeze. He finished his schnapps with a long slow draw then climbed back down to the kitchen. Carl had come in while they were gone. The boy was asleep on the floor beside Gustav, cuddled up to his side, one large arm draped across the lifeless chest, wheezing in his ear. Mobius could see that the boy was soundly asleep. His eyes were rolled back into his head. Mobius didn’t dare wake him.
It was Hannelore’s wish to be buried in the forest, beside the place Monika had reserved for herself. Monika even admitted to Mobius that in her loneliness she had bought the land with this in mind. She had selected an area of ground beneath an ivy covered oak - the haunted tree, she called it, because nothing would grow beneath it. In fact she had even marked off the boundaries of her gravesite with wooden stakes.

She had confided with Hannelore her wish to be buried there, and Hannelore had asked immediately to join her - Frau Dolschen and Grethe Harp too.

But Gustav would be the first of them in the ground. The paperwork had been taken care of, a priest had been paid for, and a rough menhir of stone had been bought from a local farmer. Flowers were not necessary in the forest, not in summer, and nor was there any call for music. There was only the matter of the digging.

Mobius put down the shovel and took a mouthful of red wine. He had dug many graves, although it had been a while. It was the old complaint at the front – join the army and learn a career; they would always have careers to go back to.

The grave was easy to dig in the loamy soil, although the handle of the shovel was rotten. The grave was chest deep, not far to go, just a little lie down, a good place to get forty winks, out of sight of the Rottenfuhrer!
He took up the shovel and began to dig. His shoulders, unused to bearing any kind of weight, were tight and painful. His arms and thighs ached. What was he doing down there? A man of his rank, an assistant Professor? But of course they were right, he was unfit to be an officer, he had no idea about how to fight a war, he was a teacher, not an officer - better off following orders with the rest of them!

Mobius raked the bottom of the grave with his shovel. He smoothed it down and made it level, then he hoisted himself out. It was a strange thing, no doubt about it. He was drunk, but even through the drunkenness and pain his muscles felt strong, his back sturdy, his hands somehow better for the work. It was a strange thing to dig the grave of his friend, to displace all of that earth, to sit beside the stone that he had rolled over from the car, and yet to feel younger, younger and therefore more alive than when he had begun!

He had drunk too much of the wine, a thin raspberry tasting wine that he had found in the house. The others would be coming soon, and he had to get ready. He returned to the house to get ready, and feed the stove. The smell of the roasting leg of pork prepared by Monika, so that all he had had to do was place it in the oven, wafted across the clearing and made his stomach churn with hunger. Laid out on the table where they would eat later that afternoon was a supper of fruit and pickled cabbage, of cheese and fresh bread, of butter and blood sausage, of onion potatoes and milk veal. On top of the stove simmering nicely was the water for his bucket shower. He ladled it into a large basin and staggered down the stairs. In one of the horse stalls he stripped and stood in the hay, and when the temperature was right began to slop the water over his head and shoulders, pouring it down his belly, rubbing it over his back and buttocks.
The hot water glittered in the semi-darkness and made his skin blush. His hair held the hot water like a sponge, he gathered it and squeezed it over his shoulders. He soaped himself then began the whole process again, finishing by upending the basin over his head, then returning quickly to the warmth of the stove.

He dried himself with an old cloth and began to dress. His new suit, rushed to him that morning, fitted perfectly. He wiped his shoes of dust, shoes given to him by Monika, presumably those of her late husband, that were precisely his size. He combed his hair and blew his nose. He lit a cigarette and drank a glass of water, ignoring the demijohn of schnapps, then giving in and pouring himself a small glass. He put his feet up and leaned back on the bench. He closed his eyes and waited, for Gustav and Monika, for Hannelore and Carl.

Particularly for Carl.

All through the day he had been waiting for Carl, it was why he had drunk so much, it was why he had dug the grave without resting, despite his fatigue. They had taken it in turns watching over Gustav during the night, he and Hannelore, never leaving him for an instant. The house was haunted but not by the ghost of Gustav. Despite the soporific given to him by Monika, enough to down a horse the pharmacist had said, Carl awoke every few hours and blundered about the corridors, up and down the stairs, looking for his Grandfather. For some reason Hannelore wanted the two kept separate, she eventually blocked the stairwell with a table so that the boy was trapped on the upper floor, a sleepwalker moping around the rooms, shaking the doorhandles and tapping the walls, moaning and falling asleep, waking and shouting his Grandfather’s name, becoming more and more agitated, kicking at the doors and
rattling the windows, beginning that call of his that could ‘wake a corpse’, Gustav had always said, except that it couldn’t, and Gustav continued despite the noise to lay there undisturbed and dead. Mobius tried to console Carl, but it was no good, he kept screeching and dragging himself around, and finally Hannelore relented and Mobius guided the boy downstairs where he ceased his fit and fell immediately asleep. Mobius put a blanket over them both, frightened of what the day would bring, when the first clods of earth would fall over Gustav’s coffin and Carl would have to know. They would have to show him, they had all agreed, he would have to see, to know for sure.

It was even worse than Mobius had expected. Without Gustav to control him, Hannelore was actually afraid of Carl, she avoided his eyes and wept whenever she was in the same room. She shrank from his friendly swipes and turned her shoulders against him. The look of revulsion on her face when he tried to touch her was unmistakable, she was afraid and revolted, she couldn’t seem to help it. At the breakfast table that morning she had slammed down his plate of bread and jam, a single slice that wouldn’t go anywhere near satisfying his appetite. Carl’s shoulders sank and his head drooped mournfully. He picked at the slice of bread and delivered it to his mouth in sullen, secretive movements, like a resentful dog at its bowl. This was too much for Mobius. He stroked Carl’s shoulders and patted his neck, something that had always been Gustav’s way of cheering him up. But this only made Carl turn to him and ask hopefully ‘Deggs?’

‘No Eggs!’ Hannelore shouted, leaning over them both and glaring, daring them to respond. It was then that Monika had slapped the table. She was as
exhausted as the rest of them. Dark bruises of fatigue lay under her eyes, which were red and dry. ‘That’s enough Hann! Give the boy eggs if he wants eggs!’

Hannelore had turned to the sink and wrung her hands, sobbing and spluttering. Carl sank down even lower in his chair and began to moan pitifully. Monika got up from her seat and hugged Hannelore, then took two eggs from a bowl by the window.

Mobius had cracked the eggs at the stove, before Carl took over, stirring the eggs and singing the song of the eggs, although his heart wasn’t in it. He ate them straight from the pan, making a mess on the floor. Mobius wiped up the mess while Carl washed his hands in the sink. Hannelore and Monika stood away from them, in front of Gustav, guarding him and waiting for them to finish.

Then Carl had put on his old hat and disappeared across the road to the abandoned barn. There were no other children there at that hour. Hannelore returned to her cooking whilst Monika and Mobius carried things to the waiting Rocinante. When the car was packed and Mobius was ready to leave, to get there early and dig the grave, armed only with a badly drawn map, he had gone across the road to say goodbye to Carl. He had found the boy alone, huddled in a corner, crying and singing, kissing his own hands, opened out into the shape of a face, a great white face held up before him.

*          *          *

Mobius heard the truck as it turned into the clearing. He brushed his hair with his fingers and went out to meet them. It was an old farmer’s truck, with
the coffin strapped to the tray. In the cabin of the truck sat Monika, the young priest, who was driving, and Hannelore. Carl and Grethe Harp, and Frau Dolzschen rode in a small car that parked alongside.

They all got out and stretched their legs. Mobius kissed Monika and Hannelore, and was introduced to the young priest, a Herr Fripp from the nearby town of P. He had an eager intelligent face that contrasted a little too much with the sadness of the mourners around him. He looked around the clearing and at the old house with a curious excitement. His tawny hair and bright green eyes only increased the impression. His robes were draped over his left arm, crooked to hold the cardboard box that contained his bible and vial of holy water. He shook Mobius’ hand and apologised for the delay. They had had to pass via the constabulary and council offices to have the, err…body certified.

Mobius backed the truck over to the grave while the others took a drink on the veranda of the house. Carl rode beside him, quiet and unusually still. He could imagine Frau Dolzschen and Grethe Harp telling Carl what had happened, and what was about to happen, as though he might understand. They were well-meaning but Carl wasn’t a child and their words wouldn’t prepare him for what was about to happen. Carl had never been able to comprehend the future! If Carl was silent and reduced to stillness it was only because he had interpreted their grief in his own way, not out of mimicry but because of instinct. Mobius reached over and stroked Carl’s hair, which had been combed within an inch of its life. He murmured something that meant nothing but which Carl recognised and responded to with a little groan of shared feeling. Mobius messed his hair a little, and pinched Carl’s cheek. The boy smiled, and clicked his tongue, and indicated with his hurt eyes the coffin on the tray behind them. Now Mobius
understood - of course, Carl had seen Gustav put in the box. He had seen the box nailed shut. He had seen the grief. Somewhere, at some time, Carl, who had the expressions of a child but the experience of a young man, had been to a funeral before.

Once Gustav was lowered into the ground, slid from the tray over planks and helped by Carl and the priest; the others gathered around the grave. The sun was overhead, and only a few feet away the forest waited in dark silence. The clearing however was full of the busy movement of sparrows and larks, and a family of squirrels played about the drive. The goose waddled over from the house and joined them at the grave, walking between them and tasting their skirts and trousers, cuffs and shoelaces. Grethe Harp and Frau Dolzsehen began to weep on cue as Fripp opened the bible and began to read. Mobius held Monika’s hand and put his arm around Carl. Only Hannelore appeared to listen to the priest, murmuring in response to his every declamation and gesture of praise. His face was wide open and glowing with faith, he praised God and his son Jesus for their gift of love, for their comfort in this time of sadness, for their care and concern. ‘The house of my father has many rooms…’ Mobius let his mind drift away from the words of praise devoted not to their friend but to the ‘Lord God Our Father, who watches over us and protects us from evil.’ He glanced at the people beside him, huddled together at the edge of a hole in the ground, at the edge of a forest that circled around them, silhouettes squinting in the sunlight and trying to balance on the uneven earth, the merest patch of earth on which nothing grew, each of them peering at one another now and trying bravely to smile, embarrassed by the words of the priest and his growing excitement, a young priest who was trying his hardest to remember his lines,
pleased to be of some use, looking at them and beaming, seeing nothing in their faces but the reflection of himself and his unashamed love of God.

The priest crossed himself and bowed his head. He removed the lid from his vial of water and tipped some of it onto the coffin. He invited the others to do the same. Each of them, even Carl, leant over the hole and tipped out a little of the water, and when it was his turn Mobius could see that the sides of the grave had begun to collapse, that the coffin was already partially buried, and his feet at the edge spilled more earth down onto Gustav, and his heart was sick with missing Gustav, and tears spilled from his eyes as he quickly passed the water back to the priest.

It doesn’t matter, Mobius thought to himself, as the priest began his final prayers. It doesn’t matter that I don’t care what will happen after my death. It doesn’t matter that I don’t understand, and that death has no meaning for me!

He looked down at the coffin and felt a surge of joy amidst the sadness. It wasn’t because of what the priest was saying, it wasn’t that death could be ‘defeated’…Rather, Mobius was picturing Gustav’s face as he remembered it, wary and yet always ready to laugh, on guard and yet unguarded, with sharp eyes and a false-toothed grin. This brought an immediate smile to Mobius’ face, a smile mistaken by the young priest as a sign of agreement, and encouragement, of the triumph of life over death, so that he raised his voice and his arms even higher, and began himself to smile knowingly!
Several times Mobius awoke during the night, crept down the stairs and looked into the room off the hall. Every time he was surprised to find Carl still asleep on the mattress, his feet hanging over the edge, his arms thrown over his face and blanket slipped to the floor. In fact the more he checked on Carl and the more often he found the boy sleeping soundly, the more surprised he became. Carl hadn’t run away, he wasn’t upset, he was still sleeping! Mobius replaced the blanket over him, then stood away again. He climbed the stairs and returned to his bed. That Monika too should be fast asleep on Carl’s first night was equally surprising. It was she who had tucked Carl into bed, turned off the light and wished him goodnight, as though she had done this every evening! Her manner was polite, matter-of-fact, confident as always. Mobius had waited in the hall for the inevitable wail of alarm, but instead listened amazed as Carl whispered contentedly to himself, singing a little, tracing the wall with his fingers.

The fact that they were both able to sleep so peacefully made sleep impossible for Mobius. He had never wanted a family, that was true, and certainly not since the war. At some stage, at some time that he couldn’t recall, giving up on a family life and not wanting it had become the same thing. Or perhaps it was the other way around? Nothing had been said. Monika had simply accepted Carl into her house. It was up to Mobius to show her how it could work.
In the summer night’s warmth, he lay on his back and placed his hands on his belly, full of food and wine. The little sips of air he took did nothing to disturb the warm mound in his hands. His feet felt distant and his shoulders were aslant in the softness of the bed. Monika continued to sleep peacefully beside him. There was no grinding of her teeth tonight, or kicking of her legs, or groaning or sighing. She had spent most of the night beside Hannelore, just as Mobius had spent most of his time with Carl. This was not so much a matter of keeping them apart, although that is how it had felt, but of trying to placate the memory of Gustav, who lay in the ground not twenty metres from where they dined and drank. Carl had behaved himself against all expectations, not once did he become angry or frustrated at the solemnity of that decorous ‘last supper’, as Monika called it, when each of the women was unusually restrained, and not because of Gustav, Mobius suspected, but because of the presence of the young priest. Fripp had in fact become quite drunk, eating little but drinking a great deal, secretly encouraged by the women. If at one stage Mobius had suspected Hannelore was talking quietly to the priest about the appropriate care of the infirm, leading him perhaps towards a discussion of the situation vis-à-vis Carl, it turned out that he was mistaken, and that they were actually talking about Fripp’s mother, who lived with him and was cared for by him. Quick to stave off an inevitable lecture about the importance of Christian duty, Hannelore had spoken for all of the women when she said that his mother was indeed fortunate to be cared for by such a handsome young man. Fripp’s conceited blush might have put an end to this line of talk, except that Hannelore had glanced at Mobius and said, rather too obviously ‘it takes a special kind of person. I suppose it shocks you that I, as a woman, would find such a thing impossible. My own
husband, who died of the Spanish flu, often used to joke - too often for it to be funny, that he dreaded ever getting sick around me, that being in my care would bring out the worst rather than the best in me, and soon mean the end for him.’

The priest smiled, and patted her hand. ‘I’m sure you exaggerate. Mothers, as everyone knows…’

‘I never had a mother, I wouldn’t know.’

‘But surely, when your husband was sick, at the end…’

‘He died in a hospital.’

The priest nodded drunkenly, weighing up his words. But it was Mobius who spoke next. ‘Perhaps you prefer the convenience of leaving the caring up to God?’

‘That’s very easy for you to say, isn’t it?’

‘It’s something Gustav might have said.’

Hannelore banged her glass on the table. ‘How dare you put words into my brother’s mouth. He was…’

‘…He was a special man. Indeed he was…”

These last words, spoken by the priest, someone who had never met Gustav, made even Hannelore turn her attention towards him. He looked around at them and smiled sheepishly. ‘From what you have told me, of course. May I propose another toast, to your dear brother, and friend!’

Their glasses were topped and raised. In the time it took to gulp down the sweet red wine the argument was conveniently laid aside. Frau Dolzschen began again to sob, somewhat to the annoyance of Grethe Harp, who picked at another slice of meat. Monika took the opportunity to seat a new candle on top of a
dwindling stub, and light it. She hadn’t, Mobius couldn’t help noticing, taken either of their sides.

The sun was beginning to rise, and Mobius waited for the inevitable call of the rooster. He was sure that Monika kept the rooster for the purpose of annoying her neighbours, and sure enough, as soon as the light began to grey it roused itself and crowed, baying out a vicious fanfare and waiting for a response - the same thing every morning, then began again at double the volume, gathering about its brood of nothing.

Immediately there was a clattering downstairs. Mobius dressed quickly and went to investigate. He found Carl climbed upon the kitchen sink, peering out of the windows, wiping steam with the curtains, muttering and pressing his nose against the glass.

‘Good morning Carl!’

Carl turned and his eyes were filled with wonderment. ‘Doooor!’ he shouted.

Mobius opened the back door and let him out. In his bare feet Carl stepped tenderly over the dewy ground, walking on his toes, headed for the back fence. Mobius watched him through the window as he filled the kettle. Carl was flushing the rooster out of some weeds with great flaps of his arms. The rooster capered around Carl in a flanking manoeuvre that was clearly designed to provoke a charge. When this failed to work, the rooster raised his wings and shivered furiously, lifted his throat and crowed. Carl sat down immediately and crossed his legs. Outwitted, the rooster warily approached, hoping perhaps for some food. Carl attempted to stroke the rooster’s back, crooning and rocking,
stretching out his legs. The rooster promptly sat in his lap, and allowed itself to be touched.

‘Well, well. I expected he’d wring the thing’s neck.’

‘He will if it pecks him.’

Monika put her arms around Mobius and kissed his cheek. ‘I live in hope.’

After breakfast they walked into town, to pay Fleischer for the suit and to buy Carl a new pair of shoes. On a whim they also took him to the barbers, where his hair was ‘fixed up’ and his face shaved for the first time. Carl watched himself proudly in the mirror as the cut-throat scraped away the dark rind that had begun to appear on his chin over the previous few months. With his hair oiled and face powdered, with comfortable shoes on his feet and taken down trousers, belted at his hips rather than pulled around his waist, Carl looked like any other handsome young man his age. This simple thing made Mobius feel uncomfortable, although he kept it to himself, particularly as Carl seemed so taken with the barber, who chatted to him throughout and showed him all of the tools of his trade. He showed Carl how he waxed his great moustache and trimmed his greying whiskers, but quite firmly drew the line at allowing Carl a turn himself. He laughed in exasperation as Carl pulled up his trousers once again, revealing his ankles and over-tightening his belt. He shrugged good-naturedly at Mobius and Monika who had watched the whole procedure, then refused to be paid. ‘I have a brother who’s a bit simple. Although he’s old enough to be my father. He lives with me and my wife at the back of the shop. I can introduce them if you want.’

‘No, thankyou, some other time.’
The barber shrugged as Monika led Carl from the shop, a little too quickly. In the street she paused a few shops down. ‘Don’t ask me to explain,’ she pleaded. ‘I couldn’t tell you anyway.’

Mobius had already decided not to press Monika about Carl unless it was absolutely necessary. ‘Now then, a walk.’

‘Yes. I understand that wearing them out is the key to everything.’

Mobius smiled, although there it was again, for the second time that morning – just the hint of it in her voice - the day as something to get through, to endure.

‘We can walk along the river then back through the forest. That should do the trick.’

‘That’s rather a long way, isn’t it? My ankle…’

‘Of course, I forgot. Perhaps if Carl and I?’

‘Yes, maybe that’s better.’

Monika squeezed Carl’s forearm and pecked Mobius on the cheek. She walked off quickly, self-consciously, changing her purse from hand to hand, not looking back as she took the first turn available. All the while Carl pulled insistently on Mobius’ sleeve and tried to lead him back to the barbers. Mobius put his arm around Carl’s shoulder, managing to distract him by pointing towards an approaching truck filled with soldiers from the nearby garrison.

In the bank the young man accepted the money order with an obsequious smile. He greeted Mobius like an old and valued customer, taking the money order and bowing politely. It was only when he greeted Carl that his manner changed. At first Carl didn’t notice the young man’s greeting, he was too busy staring at his reflection in the polished chestnut wall. He tugged his trousers lower, then hoisted them up again. He twisted at the tail of his belt and pulled at
the buckle until it was skewed off-centre. Satisfied, he began to scrape his fingers slowly over his jaw, inclining his head and wiping his fingers on his sleeve. By the time Carl realised he had been spoken to, and turned, an almost animal terror had come into the teller’s eyes, masked immediately by an indignant stare, as though he had been made a fool of, as though he had been conned into talking with an ape! Rescued by routine he slipped the Reichschecken into a brass drawer. From another drawer he removed four crisp notes, which he passed to Mobius. All the while he kept his shoulder turned against Carl, his neck cricked, his eyes outraged, his teeth bared.

‘Is something the matter?’ Mobius asked him.

The teller’s knuckles were white against the dark wooden bureau. He coughed to clear his throat. ‘This is a business premises’ he said weakly.

‘Meaning?’ asked Mobius, who knew exactly what the teller meant, by simply translating ‘business premises’ for ‘temple’.

‘Meaning…I have work to do. Excuse me.’

With that the teller buried his head in a pile of paperwork that he managed to dig from the bottom of another drawer. So desperate were his mental calculations that he chewed his lips as he counted. Mobius looked around the foyer of the bank and saw that they were alone.

It took three hours to reach the first stray trees where the river met the forest. Mobius should have known better, he realised, than to have set out with any particular destination in mind. He couldn’t help but be frustrated when, for the hundredth time, Carl had run off the path and down to the riverbank. Carl couldn’t swim, and it was dangerous for him to wade amongst the shallows with
the main of the wide green current passing only metres away. It was also
dangerous for him to approach the dogs of strangers without care, and several
times Mobius had had to intervene. In his direct way Carl frightened the dogs of
the middle-aged matrons who promenaded in twos and threes towards them.
Carl either captured their dogs and stroked them enthusiastically, or his hand
was snapped at, or the dog howled and strained at its leash. Several times Carl
had gotten too far ahead of Mobius and when he rounded the next corner the
boy was gone. In a panic Mobius looked to the river, but there was no trace of
Carl there. The boy had ducked off into one of the houses along the path, and
Mobius had to retrieve him from the backyards and gardens, and in one case a
smoking shed that he’d entered and shut the door behind him. In every case the
owners, who might excuse such behaviour from an infant, glared at Mobius
unforgivingly, as though he were at fault. On one occasion Carl even joined a
group of young picnickers who had set up a luncheon on a blanket by the path.
At least this time one of the young women offered Carl a glass of soda, which
he drank down immediately. The young men however were uneasy. ‘He should
be wearing a hat’ one of them accused. ‘His nose is burned.’

It was a mere thirty minute walk, but when after three hours they finally
reached the forest Mobius was already exhausted. At this rate they wouldn’t be
home until nightfall. He forced Carl to sit beside him while he smoked a
cigarette. He stroked Carl’s hair whilst trying to calm him. Mobius had never
taken the boy for a walk on his own, that was true, but he had been on many
‘expeditions’ with Gustav, as they were called. He couldn’t remember Gustav
ever having to chastise, or berate, or restrain the boy on a single occasion. There
were certain things that Gustav had been unable to stop Carl from doing, such
as throwing rocks into the river, or picking flowers from private gardens - to be sure, but then Carl had never actually tried to enter the water on those occasions either.

Mobius opened the bag of roasted chestnuts he had brought for their lunch. He should have opened the bag at the river, but out of stubbornness had waited until they reached the forest. Why? Because he had decided *a priori* that that is where they should eat the chestnuts, at such and such a time! Now it was too late - Carl had lost his appetite and Mobius, who never liked chestnuts in the first place, was forced to put them away again.

Mobius watched Carl as he prepared a place to sleep. There was no point trying to stop him, there was nothing to be done. Mobius took off his jacket and placed it over the boy’s shoulders. Carl moaned with pleasure and was immediately asleep, his head upon Mobius’ boots, his hand thrust down into his trousers. A married couple turned along the path and looked at Mobius suspiciously. Were they drunks? Vagrants? Lovers? Had the old man murdered the younger? Was he waiting for a chance to bury him, or worse? The husband took his wife by the hand and whispered something in her ear. Their pace increased, taking them out of the dappled light and into the glare of the open pasture that escorted the river away from the forest. When they reached the first gate that separated field from forest, the husband opened the gate to allow his wife through, looking nervously over his shoulder before shutting the gate carefully behind him.

Mobius laughed at their backs. Go ahead and shut the gate properly! Make sure the gate is shut! Or the forest might get out!
He lit another cigarette. It was a beautiful summer’s day, warm even in the forest, and yet he was reminded of the teller in the bank; his buttoned down features and conceited, formal manner – his clothes, the way he stamped the cheque, his rigid posture – It was his fear that was dangerous, far more than the object of his fear!

Mobius was beginning to understand Gustav’s wilfulness. After all, didn’t such irrational hatred call for an equal tenacity, in response, an equally fierce love?

Mobius couldn’t imagine, under any circumstance, Gustav letting harm befall Carl. He would rather die than let Carl come to harm because, it was simple, how could he live with himself if he were to betray Carl? His heart would break, he would die of shame.

Mobius partially closed his eyes. The mottled sun was warm on his face. There was no sound; not even the wind blew. The beech that loomed over him was a stark but ghostly presence. An enormous oak beside the path, encircled with vines and covered with a shimmering green moss was both vivid and unreal in a way that was alarming. Here was direct experience, powerful and clear. But here was also nothingness and dream – in the solitary play of the senses. And yet he also felt the beginning of something, the growing of roots perhaps, or like the weight of Carl on his feet, sending out tender feelers, blind but reaching out, finding and taking hold. The forest around him suggested so much and yet was impenetrable in a way that he didn’t fully understand. The feel of bark beneath his fingers, the sharp smell of the turned earth at his feet, the soft air and embrace of silence - he could hold it in his hands, breathe it
deeply, listen to its silence, and yet it remained somehow beyond his senses, beyond his reach.

It had taken him many years to rebuild, but slowly, painfully, drawing his strength from application and quiet reflection...And yet, all that time, perhaps he had been looking in the wrong place.

Mobius replaced the jacket over Carl’s shoulders. The boy had rolled over and now his face was on the damp ground, his lips pressed to the soil. Mobius lifted Carl’s head and wrapped it with a sleeve, then replaced it on the ground. The boy remained asleep, hugging to the earth, his legs curled against his chest.
It was sometime before dawn when Mobius fell asleep. When he awoke, it was to the sound of banging on the front door. He looked out of the bedroom window and found the sky black with clouds. He dressed and climbed down the stairs, where the sound of the banging was magnified even more by the corridor walls. As he reached the front door he turned and saw Monika in the kitchen, calmly pouring herself a glass of coffee. Just as calmly she smiled at him, and returned to her word puzzle.

As he opened the front door, the policeman who had been banging stepped back and grunted. The effort had brought a great deal of blood to his face. He replaced his truncheon in one swift movement, then gritted his teeth and bowed. ‘I could tell someone was inside’ he accused. ‘Fresh coffee…’

‘What is the problem?’ Mobius asked tiredly. ‘I was asleep.’

This admission itself was enough to make the policeman suspicious. He narrowed his eyes disapprovingly. ‘I’m sorry, however, there is a matter which I believe you might be able to assist me with. You see, there has been a disturbance!’

The policeman let the word linger deliberately. He was a young man with a frosty blond moustache and widely set brown eyes. In the light rain that was falling his face glistened like sausage casings. He licked then pursed his lips. ‘This way if you please.’

Mobius followed the policeman, who once off the step walked with an officious dignity, trying to mask a rather obvious limp. It was then that Mobius
noticed the petitioner at one fence, standing innocently beneath a blue umbrella, and the entire Jensen family at the other fence, heads bare and slick with rain. The father leaned back on his heels with boldly folded arms. His large belly was wrapped with a wide leather belt, and he was dressed in the brown SA uniform, but with rubber boots and a napkin still wedged into his collar. He sneered openly, and the expression was duplicated on the faces of his sons. His wife however peered vacantly through her one available eye - the other was closed and purple-black.

The policeman tapped the roof of the car and his colleague climbed out, an older man with a cauliflower beard and bloodshot eyes. He ignored Mobius and straightened his jacket for self-inspection. Mobius was guided to the window of the darkened back seat. On the seat was Carl, legs trussed and arms tied, with a black bag over his head. Mobius was immediately outraged; he rounded on the policeman who, clearly expecting such a reaction stood out of arms reach, hands on his hips, and smiled. ‘Don’t be alarmed. With the suspect a bag is official procedure…Just like with lost birds – it calms them.’

‘Birdbrains’ chuckled his colleague.

‘Now!’ suggested the policeman, looking smugly at Mobius’ bare feet, ignoring his clenched fists, ‘I shall need to see some identification. Right away please.’

Mobius looked over at the petitioner, who had followed the fence to come alongside. She wouldn’t meet his eyes but was trying to see inside the car. Mobius looked over at the Jensens, who hadn’t moved at all, but stood huddled together like the subject of an anthropologist’s photograph, ‘The German peasant *circa* 1870’, poor and resentful, mute with the toxic pleasure of
* * * * *

It was Monika who talked the policemen into letting Carl go. Mobius’ papers were in order, but Carl not only didn’t have any identification, he was also unregistered with the local council, according to by-law such-and-such, which the policeman read off a page clipped to a wooden board, meaning that enquiries would have to be made, birth certificates produced and new papers drawn up. The ‘disturbance’ that had occurred when the policemen had tried to force the bag over Carl’s head turned out to be far less serious than the crime of being unidentified, unregistered and therefore unknown. In the town of S., it was a crime to be unknown. Wasn’t Mobius aware of this? Hadn’t he heard about the raft of new laws passed over the previous three months relating to the need for awareness of strangers, blow-ins, spies and saboteurs? In the city, one could well imagine how the authorities might fail to notice such an obvious misdemeanour, however…

If it had not been for the fact that the older policeman with the cauliflower beard and hay feverish eyes was clearly smitten by Monika, who was well known to them because of the ceaseless complaints of the petitioner, Carl might never have been returned to Mobius’ care. This man, who swaggered around the kitchen rubbing his hands and holding in his stomach, who stroked his beard with thoughtful little caresses, rarely taking his eyes off Monika’s breasts and disingenuously praising her brandy coffee, was clearly put out to hear that she
had taken in a ‘friend’ from the city, especially a man who slept in of a morning whilst others were hard at work, a parasite no doubt, taking advantage of her vulnerability and loneliness! He took every opportunity to interrogate Mobius’ motives for coming to S., even when his younger colleague tried to return the discussion back towards the problem of what was to be done with Carl – a minor admittedly, but one without papers of any stripe, and therefore an issue of some importance! He explained all this to Mobius patiently, as though he were talking to a simpleton. One couldn’t just move to S. off one’s own bat! There were procedures to be followed, rules to be obeyed, departments that had to be approached in an orderly fashion. Why, just last week they had had to confine to the new camp outside town a family of gypsies who had straggled over from Poland, claiming ignorance of the new laws, without papers of any kind! Were they invited? Who said they could come? What diseases did they bring with them? Were they really gypsies in any case? Perhaps they were Bolsheviks in disguise! Anyway, they were now safely locked away. They were being well looked after – too well no doubt!

After this recent experience the Herr Doktor could surely understand their position when confronted with an agitated young man who spoke a foreign language and pretended not to understand them. Who not only responded to their attempts to question him with a sly avoidance, but when they took his arm began at once in terrible squeals and ferocious barks a language that sounded distinctly Slavic! Mightn’t the Herr Doktor forgive them for assuming that the young man was a Bolshevik spy upset at being caught out?

Mobius was dazed at their stupidity and callousness! So this was the world into which he had emerged - a world where a poor soul like Carl might be
suspected of sedition! Carl, who was still in the car with a bag on his head, despite Mobius’ pleas to release him.

It was then that Monika began to assure them that Carl would be better supervised, that it was her fault the boy had wandered away from the yard into town, where he had visited the barber, who had called the police. Monika assured them that she would apologise to the barber, and that she would oversee the garnering of the appropriate paperwork, immediately gaining the sympathy of the older policeman for precisely taking such burdens upon herself, leaving him in no doubt as to the worthlessness of her choice of mate, something she was certainly coming to realise, even as she spoke, even as he listened, staring at her breasts! The contrition in her voice excited him - for some reason it gave him hope. The combination of her large breasts and her eloquence cast a poetic light upon his power over the birdbrain in the car. With a touching earnestness he took her hands, consoling her with his decision to release the imbecile, consoling her because that was what she wanted but also because that was clearly her curse, her burden, a burden that he too could feel, and therefore share, if not entirely understand.

‘There, see…No harm done.’

The younger officer led Carl into the kitchen, removed the hood, and sat him down in front of Mobius. Carl didn’t appear at all frightened, in fact he had the look of one caught out, knowing that he had been wrong to wander off into town. This look of childish guilt was heartbreaking to Mobius, lessened only by the sulky glances he cast at Monika, and the shyly hopeful way he waited for the policemen to leave, wringing his hands and sighing. Monika lead them down the hall amidst warm farewells and the heavy clattering of boots. Mobius
rubbed Carl’s hands to get blood back into them, smoothing his hair and trying to capture his eyes. ‘I’m sorry Carl. It was my fault. Next time you want to visit the barber you wake me up, you promise?’

Carl was clearly heartened by the lack of anger in Mobius’ voice. He smiled, although there remained a hint of curiosity, or was it distrust, in his eyes? He finally blinked, and nodded his head in weary acknowledgement.

‘I’m sorry too Carl’ repeated Monika, who had returned to the kitchen. She stood away by the stove, her arms folded. Carl tried to ignore her for the moment by rubbing his hands to warm them. ‘I know what you’re thinking’ she said to Mobius, ‘but you’re wrong. It wasn’t deliberate, I didn’t mean to…’

Mobius didn’t dare look at her, fearing that he might detect the lie in her eyes. She hadn’t seen the bag on Carl’s head, after all. ‘I thought he was with the rooster. And the knocking on the front door, well, I never answer it. Friends come around the back.’

Carl had a welt on his left cheek and his wrists were chafed where he had been bound. Apart from that his feet were blue with cold, and most of the buttons of his shirt were missing. He had other things on his mind, however, and gratefully accepted the glass of water that Monika offered him. He gulped it down and asked for more. Mobius led him to the stove where they began to strip off his wet clothes.

They spent the afternoon in the car, driving from village to village, searching out roads that weren’t on the map, ending up on river banks where mosquitoes attacked them in forest glades overgrown with blackberry vines. The sky cleared on occasions but the rain continued to fall, out of the blue and across the
glittering windshield. Carl sat in the back seat of the car, a blanket across his legs and a hot water bottle wrapped in his arms. He sang and recited and gave directions along the muddy tracks that brought them to the point where Rocinante either stalled or ground forward in her lowest gear. It took them some time to figure out that Carl, to whom they had willingly given over the responsibilities of navigation, was actually taking his cue from the sounds of the car. Monika noticed it first, pointing out to Mobius that every time Rocinante began to growl in her engine or shudder in her frame as they climbed a track too narrow or dangerous to speed along, then Carl would close his eyes and plant his feet in such a way that he appeared to be gauging either the willingness or the reluctance of Rocinante to continue. At certain times he would stamp his feet, a signal for them to halt and reverse, or encourage Rocinante forward with rapid ululations.

‘Does he know that Rocinante was a horse?’

‘I think he’s reminded of the horse and cart that Gustav used to borrow sometimes, to carry his cement. But that can’t be right. Carl was only a baby then.’

At that moment Carl had laughed, pleased either at the fact that Rocinante had gained enough momentum in her engine to spring away down the track, or that those in the front seat were clearly talking about him, this time without a trace of reserve or strain, for the first time that day, after a long and uneasy silence.

By the time they arrived at Monika’s house in the clearing it was mid-afternoon. The clouds were so low they seemed to rest upon the treetops, and the drizzle that hovered between forest floor and cloud ceiling made the old
house with its mossy roof and vine draped walls appear part of the damp and impervious woods; woods that seemed to breathe upon them as they parked and stumbled towards the promise of fire.

Carl stretched out on the table and fell immediately asleep, on his back, clutching the hot water bottle to his belly. His belly rose and fell in airy swells that whistled out of his nose. His feet trembled as Mobius loosened his shoelaces, and slipped off his shoes. One of his socks dangled and the other of the odd pair, black and laddered and gone in the toes, remained tight as a bandage over his ankle and heel. It was icy cold in the room, and Mobius laid the car blanket over Carl’s feet and legs, then lifted his legs to wrap them securely.

Monika had the fire underway and had begun to carve what remained of the ham. Mobius poured her a schnapps and one for himself. He stood by her at the range and they shared a cigarette, waiting for the black iron pan to show some signs of heat. He had taken his woollen overcoat and placed it over her shoulders. Its stiff high collar rose around her ears, concealing the largest part of her hair, which was tied back and hidden beneath the collar. She leaned forward and began to manipulate the ham across the now even heat, pinching her shoulders to keep the coat from falling. The light in the room was fading and the candles Mobius had placed at regular intervals amongst the cupboards and benches gave the room an illusory warmth. He was shaking with cold, and so was Monika, her fingers even held the spatula at a distance. Their movements were narrowed by an icy oppressiveness that demanded stillness and silence. Even the thought of his words entering such a silence made him hesitate. In the room all sound appeared forced, just like the simple movement of bringing his
glass to his lips. Monika too was absolutely silent, and equally aware of it. Instead of speaking she glanced at him occasionally, a secretive smile at the corners of her mouth, a certain shy pleasure in her eyes. Eventually the cigarette in the centre of her mouth threatened to drop ash into the pan, and she turned her head once more to him, and he took it from her lips and knocked the ash into an empty jam tin. She gave him a quick smoky kiss and returned her attention to the ham, which cooked without fat was beginning to burn. She dragged it back and forth across the pan until it was ready. Then she scraped it all onto a steel tray that had been warming on the edge of the range. She carried this tray over to the table, where Mobius had sliced a loaf of bread and spooned out a bowl of plum conserve, made by Hannelore, and left over from the funeral dinner.

Not even the smells of fresh bread and ham could awaken Carl, and so they sat beside one another, their plates on their knees whilst he slept before them. The room had begun to warm and the windows were steamed over. The sounds of a rising wind in the forest, of trees groaning and tossing their heads, of vines creaking and branches rubbing, made the heat and light in the small room seem even more unlikely, even more welcome. Slowly they revived as they ate and drank and talked. The volume of their voices increased as they began to occupy the room in a way that cast out the last remnants of their earlier self-possession. The cold and gloom retreated back out into the forest and left them alone with their human warmth. They sat close by one another, their thighs touching, reaching across to fill another sandwich or pour another glass. But it was the presence of Carl on the table that finally united them, breathing loudly and smiling absurdly in his sleep, chuckling occasionally, dreaming of what they
tried to guess but couldn’t decide; a walk in the park perhaps, or a stomach full of navy beans, his favourite, or perhaps even the memory of old Gustav, buried not twenty metres away from them, the ghost of old Gustav tickling him in the ribs or under the arms, something he could never resist no matter how foul his mood. Whatever the reason, the boy was clearly enjoying his dream, even as Mobius was clearly enjoying the fact that, for the first time in days it seemed, Carl wasn’t coming between himself and Monika, but appeared rather as something they had in common. Worst of all from his point of view had been her unusual silence since the death of Gustav, and the arrival of Carl. Like the cold in the room when they had arrived, her silence on the matter of Carl had an aspect of bleakness that had resisted his every attempt to enter it. Her eyes had become sharp, her voice distant and flat, her movements snappy and even her once perfect stillness, the perfect stillness that had defined her belonging in her old chair, seemed rather now to enclose her within it.

The difference was that she was no longer trying. The strain of effort had been removed. Whether this was the result of the morning’s disaster or some decision she had reached was impossible to tell. There were so many things that neither knew about the other! If Mobius had waited patiently for Monika to speak to him about Carl, and if in that time of waiting he had felt the tension rising in her as she sought to find the words, or tried to ignore the words, and let instead her actions convey to him what she had accepted or refused, then either she had found a way to express to him what she wanted or had found that thing itself. She did, after all, seem surprised at her happiness, that much was clear to him. She had enjoyed herself thus far! Carl had behaved himself, as Mobius had assured her that he would, and yet the sense that it was not Carl who was being
tested but Monika, based upon some standard she appeared to have set herself, had passed as soon as they had driven away from the house. It was almost as though Monika had come to realise that it was indeed possible for them to be together, or for her to be herself around Carl. That this return to herself had come after the events of the morning, when the entire weight of the responsibility she had taken on had been made fully clear to her - this puzzled Mobius, and yet there it was – her hand on his knee, her shoulder pressed against his own, her face open and contented. Almost as if she were reading his thoughts she said ‘He’s quite a placid boy really, isn’t he?’

Mobius leant over and dropped the coat from her shoulders, then delicately nibbled her ear. He whispered a few words that made Monika chuckle. ‘No, we can’t, can we?’

He nodded his head in her hair. He closed his eyes, as though that might secure for him the time that they needed. He prayed that Carl wouldn’t awaken! If he had learnt one thing about Monika, and about her body in particular, it was that she needed time. Finally it was warm enough in the room! The single cot in the corner, with its patchwork eiderdown and plump pillows would be cold against their skin at first, but given time…

Mobius took Monika by the hand and led her, on tip-toes, away from the table and over to the bed. In the dwindling candlelight they undressed one another quietly, then slipped between the sheets.
There was one more thing to do before he returned home. Mobius parked the car in the main street and climbed out, as Monika shuffled across the bench seat and took the wheel. Carl, who had a large bump on his head after falling from the table during the night, nevertheless bounded out of the back seat at the sight of the barbers. The incident with the policemen had clearly done little to dampen his enthusiasm for the pictures of movie stars and racing car drivers, pasted above pyramids of face powder and brilliantine, beside box-sets of brushes, combs and shaving mugs, whose door trilled as they entered, enveloping them immediately in the warm smells of soap and shampoo, of steaming towels and perfumed tinctures. All of this fairground excitement made Carl mute with pleasure. He glowed as the barber entered from behind a mirrored door, wiping his whiskers delicately with a small blue serviette.

‘Ah, my friends! The police let me know you would be calling. Please accept my apologies!’

‘I’m afraid it’s for us to apologise. They said…’

The barber frowned, but patted Carl’s arm. ‘Never mind what they said. I called them only so you might know he was here, and safe let me add, and yet they ignored my protests and arrested him straightaway! All of this power lately has gone to their heads, I’m afraid.’

The barber bowed and took Carl’s hand. ‘It was a disgraceful thing. Your boy was most brave. He remained calm under the most terrible circumstances! Can I give him a treat?’
Mobius shrugged, but Carl recognised the word and shouted ‘Vonder!’

The barber smiled coyly and slipped a lolly into Carl’s mouth. ‘He’s a quick learner. He learnt that word off my brother Gus just yesterday! But look at that – that lump on your head, did those bad men do that to you young man?’

‘No, that was something else,’ Mobius admitted.

‘Ah, it’s a fraught life! Never mind. Now, will you come behind and meet Gus? You see, I was foolish enough to promise him you would visit, not knowing, or rather hoping, I suppose…’

‘Of course’ agreed Mobius, for whom meeting the barber’s elder brother had been the real reason behind his visit. The barber placed an amiable hand upon each of their shoulders. ‘He’s just finishing his soup. Or he might be already finished, in which case as sure as the sun rises he’ll be painting!’

The barber’s wife was at their allotment on the edge of town, ‘feeding the greens’ as he put it. The barber, who had neglected to introduce himself, replied upon Mobius’ own introduction that his name was Schwab, that his Christian name was Stepan but that Mobius could call him Bernie, which was what Gus called him. At the sound of his name the older man turned for the first time from his easel. His clear grey eyes regarded Mobius evenly, before turning his attention to Carl, who was waiting beside him, stepping excitedly from foot to foot. He took Carl’s fingers and dipped them in the tray of mixed paint on his lap, then draped them musically across the sheet of butcher’s paper hung from the easel. Carl whimpered at the feel of the paper and the sight of his rainbow mark. Gus nodded approvingly like a patient tutor and repeated the action. He shifted on his seat and allowed Carl down beside him. Silently they stared at the
two feathers of colour joined at the bottom of the page. ‘Vonder’ murmured Gus. ‘Vonder’ repeated Carl.

‘It appears you have found yourself a pupil Gus! Why don’t you show him how you paint Beethoven?’

‘Ya,’ muttered Gus, as though the prompt was unnecessary. ‘Ya, good.’

Bernie took a record from its sleeve and placed it on the gramophone. ‘Beethoven in the morning, Beethoven in the afternoon. Silence at night thank God!’

It was a piano sonata, and at the first few bars Gus began to wind his head and weave his upper body, humming to the music and patting the air with the fingers of one hand. This appeared to hypnotise Carl, who turned in his seat and stared amazed. Gus was far smaller, a shrunken version of Carl, and dressed in untidy layers of cardigan and vest, with a paint daubed waiter’s napkin slung over one forearm, a butcher’s apron concealing his lower body and bare feet propped upon the easel. From the back he seemed an elderly man like any other, with a wrinkled neck, bald head and incredibly hairy ears. In fact his posture at the easel reminded Mobius of the scholars in the library, intent as though eavesdropping, shoulders hunched against their own grey static.

This impression was lost however the moment he began to paint. A pythonic relaxation came over his arms that drifted across the sheet in time with the music, which he accompanied with a liturgical hum. Carl began to sway alongside him, mesmerised and transported, singing the same bright note over and over again.

In the meantime Bernie had put out some tea and buttered bread and fed the stove another piece of lignite. He sat beside Mobius at the table, and packed
himself a pipe, looking so pleased with himself at the way Carl and Gus were getting on that he seemed to have forgotten all about Mobius. A kind of fever had come into his eyes, a look of such pious happiness that his mouth became slack and his nodding head began to duplicate the exact movements of his brother at the easel. His brother is his only child, realised Mobius. And then - perhaps that is the secret of his happiness!

At that moment the barber turned his eyes away from his brother, if not his full attention, and tried with his eyes to encourage Mobius to join in singing with them. His quizzically raised eyebrows and the bliss radiated by his smile reminded Mobius of the expression of one of the men he had known in the asylum, a young pastor whose scrambled mind had led him to deliver gruellingly patriotic sermons long after the war was lost, exhorting his fellow patients and the staff gathered around for his benefit alone, according to the prescriptions of the doctor whose orders had to be obeyed, so that they had no choice but to hear him out, to wonder at the eloquence of his madness and the perverse strength of his one remaining conviction. The pastor’s god was dead, buried in the mud, as were all of their gods, but the nation had survived! And yet out of the look of frightening love that he bore on his face at the beginning of every sermon, out of this look began to grow a more personal and less thoroughgoing sanctimony as he ran over his script and kept on going, out into the silence that waited beyond the podium, becoming less and less sure of himself, tending towards contradiction, confusion, and longer and longer silences until finally he looked at them all sweetly and shrugged. Amen! Only then did they applaud!
Mobius looked around the room but couldn’t see any evidence of a religious life. Only that look of convinced happiness! The barber had given up on Mobius’ joining in and chirped along at his own pace, glancing across occasionally in order to share a smile. But the unbidden memory was still with Mobius, he could feel it in his stomach, he could taste it in his mouth. He drank down a glass of tea and lit a cigarette. He watched Carl and Gus with a new and determined interest, Carl wiping the page with vast sweeps of colour, while Gus worked fastidiously in the sole corner left to him, painting with the fingers of one hand and knocking out a soft beat with the other.

Finally the record came to an end. Bernie began clapping, Mobius joined in, and Carl grinned as Gus smirked self-importantly. Then Bernie got straight back up and put the record on again!

This time, however, as the weaving dance of the painters began - ‘Gus is just warming up!’ – Bernie reached across and took Mobius’ hand. He held it whilst looking carefully into Mobius’ eyes. ‘Going on what you’ve already told me, I imagine you’re curious to know about Gus, and how it might be with you and Carl. And your wife.’

‘Yes, in fact that was why I came.’

Bernie nodded patiently. ‘I could see that you were new to it, and having some trouble. But I want to be honest with you. It will be a difficult life, although not without its rewards. Have no illusions! The next years in particular. Carl is a young man, I’m sure you understand.’

‘I understand.’

‘I commend the arts, and plenty of exercise, but most of all the arts! Look how Carl has taken to painting already.’
‘My concern, as you have already noticed, is not so much with Carl but with myself, and my…Frau Phelps.’

‘As it should be. But I can assure you, if you are sensible about it, there is no reason why…’

At that moment the door trilled, and soon they heard the squeaky tread of well-shod feet. Bernie stood without hesitation. He smiled warmly. ‘Excuse me. I myself must be sensible. My custom has fallen off of late.’

Mobius stood and thanked Bernie, who quickly combed his hair. ‘Just keep changing the record!’

The door closed and Bernie disappeared. Mobius looked over to the gramophone, where the record was once more coming to an end. Carl and Gus were onto another sheet, having cast the first to the floor. Both had paint on their faces and clothes. Both were staring rapturously at a single orange swathe that curled gracefully around the page. Both were poised and waiting to resume. Mobius approached the gramophone, and was surprised to find that the only record the barber seemed to own was the record already playing.
It was early evening by the time they arrived home. Carl had resisted Mobius’ every attempt to remove him from the easel. Carl and Gus had created a system of sorts, whereby Gus worked methodically through what appeared to be variations upon a monochrome map of the sonata, before sitting back in the chair whilst Carl signed off with great swathes of the brightest colours. They rarely communicated directly, other than Carl’s precise repeating of Gus’ vague pronouncements, or the occasional approving looks from Gus that made Carl hang out his tongue and squeal.

The sun would be up for another few hours, but already the light in the suburban streets had begun to dim. This softer light however managed to clarify the children playing beneath the linden trees, magnifying their cries and songs, lending a theatrical air to their fussy intrigues. Carl held Mobius’ hand and plodded patiently alongside. He looked wistfully at the children who paused in their playing to watch them pass. Some of these children smiled at him and others felt sorry for him, readily identifying the child in the young man being led home to an early supper. Only a group of boys wearing the uniform of some institution or other regarded Carl with anything like an obvious malice. This gang noticed immediately the wrongness of a grown man leading a boy older than themselves by the hand, so that Carl, who was perhaps most aware of the uneasy silence as they approached, tugged his hand free and began to walk alone and slightly behind Mobius. Rude faces and monkey noises followed them past. A stone hissed through the air and landed on the other side of the
street. Mobius turned and the boys scattered, giggling and whooping and rushing to cover. He remained standing there in the middle of the street, his hands on his hips, unimpressed and glaring, following through with their charade of power and powerlessness.

Carl had continued on walking, his head inclined to one side, dragging his feet. Mobius caught him up and put an arm around his shoulder. He began to hum the sonata that had basted over their afternoon, that had rendered down finally after countless playing into something deeply felt but intensely stupefying, an emotional butter that lined his insides and yet billowed like a sail over their naked heads. Their feet floated, they began to glide, Carl taking up the momentum with his own earnest complement, reverberating clearly in the fading light.

* * *

There were two staff cars parked in the drive, surrounded by the entire Jensen family, peering inside and admiring the polished maroon leather, the silk curtains and silver fittings. As Mobius and Carl approached, the boys who were paddling the pneumatic tyres and the mother who was sniffing inside stepped back and looked guiltily at their feet. Only the father held his ground, still in his clumsily belted brown uniform, his hat in his hands. He waited until Mobius was quite close before stiffening and saluting – ‘Heil Hitler!’ – remaining at attention like a dog waiting to be patted, his face red with martial pride.

Mobius ignored Jensen by passing him without acknowledgement, but Carl stood right in front of him and saluted him back, his outstretched hand only
inches from the man’s nose. Jensen flinched but didn’t move. Shyly this time he repeated the salute, trying to ignore Carl, who was mimicking him too plainly for comfort, goosestepping around him, his arm raised and neck jolting robotically as he shouted out the words. This performance brought Monika to the front door, and then Albert, who was in his shirtsleeves and holding a half-polished boot in one hand and a blackened rag in the other. Monika was dressed in a dark woollen suit and stockings, smiling grimly, giving nothing away. Albert waved and laughed at Carl, then appeared to think better of it, stepping back into the darkness. Immediately two black-uniformed men emerged, both of them tall and athletic, with the same heavy jawed humourlessness and dull blue eyes. In each hand they carried a bag, packed and strapped for a journey. They ignored Mobius and Carl and Jensen’s weak salute to put the luggage in the rear seat of the second staff car, then take a seat themselves in the front. There they waited, staring straight ahead, motionless and resolute.

Monika and Albert had clearly practised their respective stories. Monika, who seemed afraid that Mobius might become angry at having to leave immediately, made a number of sympathetic representations that glossed over this inconvenience whilst lauding its purpose, which was evidently to attend a seminar that he was aware of, but hadn’t yet acknowledged. She rubbed his shoulders, then followed up with a series of rapid embraces that made it clear she was extremely proud of him, and that any stubbornness on his part would appear childish and unreasonable. So encouraged to be childish and unreasonable, Mobius raised his actually serious objection that he didn’t wish to go, only to be further petted and wooed. Albert on the other hand was more circumspect. When Mobius asked why the need for an armed escort, Albert
reminded him of what Flade had told him on his last visit, something that he repeated again. ‘I’m afraid they will brook no refusal.’ The words in Albert’s mouth sounded unlikely although well enough rehearsed. When Mobius responded that this amounted to kidnapping they were both ready with immediate chortles of amusement. ‘But they wish to honour you, and your work!’ Monika repeated. ‘It’s only for a few days’ assured Albert. ‘Everything is prepared to coincide with the opening of the castle. There will be seminars and celebrations! Even the Reichsführer Himmler will be there!’

Until that moment Albert and Monika had taken it in turns to pack and wrap him as though he were one more piece of luggage. Only when it became finally clear that Mobius had succumbed did they relent and allow a moment of silence, something until that time concealed by their enthusiastic competition. Now they let it hang there, to test its resilience, but Mobius sensed its purpose and was about to raise the one question they most feared, when - too late, they blurted out in unison ‘Don’t worry - Carl will stay with Hannelore!’

Mobius shook his head. ‘But that’s impossible. You know how she feels.’

‘Don’t be silly’ laughed Monika. ‘I know Han better than you. She’s quite capable of looking after the boy for a few days. And she’s already agreed.’

Carl joined them in the kitchen, putting his arm around Albert and trying to extract his pistol from his belt. He tickled Albert and made another attempt, but Albert was ready. ‘Alright’ Mobius relented. ‘But I want to hear it from her.’

It was an overnight drive to Westphalia but Albert had packed the car with all the provisions they might need; food in lacquered trays on a fitted silver stand, and several bottles of champagne in a frosty glass basin. Blankets
covered their legs and soft pillows supported their heads. The leather seats were spacious and giving, and with the curtains drawn against the night it was almost as though they were in a cabin at sea, so measured was Albert’s driving. The road purred beneath their feet and the distant engine crooned a gentle lullaby. It had all happened so quickly that Mobius was unable to resist. He ate the food as greedily as Monika and drank the champagne with the same tipsy gladness. ‘Isn’t this fun?’ she whispered, nuzzling his cheek. Albert, to whom Mobius had just passed a lit cigar, and who had heard Monika’s whisper became immediately enthusiastic. ‘We have to be in Wewelsburg by morning, but on the way back, why not let’s take a trip somewhere! The places I’ve driven Herr Professor Flade, you wouldn’t believe! Lakes, mountains, forests – everywhere he seems to have a house!’

‘Oh I could take you to Nurnberg, I could show you the house I lived in when I was little! And the old city!’

‘I’m sure it wouldn’t be a problem. Herr Professor Flade only ever needs me on weekends.’

Mobius laughed as Monika prodded his ribs. The memory of her childhood house seemed to have erased all of the years in between, so that she coddled him girlishly, her voice high and bright and insistent. ‘I would like that very much’ he agreed. ‘Rocinante will be jealous, of course.’

Mobius let his face be kissed even though his eyes were on the road. Not once since leaving S. had they mentioned Carl! That the boy had gone willingly enough into Hannelore’s arms had been a relief. She had shown no trace of her earlier disapproval, and had embraced Carl as though he were her own. Confronted with this act of welcome Mobius had been too polite to ask her if it
was ‘really’ alright for Carl to stay. The look of truce declared in Hannelore’s eyes told him that she would be wounded by his question, or at least pretend to be wounded. Carl had been excited because Monika and Albert had been excited, and had carried his packed bag from the car as though it were he about to embark on a journey! And yet Mobius was reluctant to let the boy go. He felt as though he was being smuggled into a lie by the excitement of his companions. Neither of them knew Flade as he did. How clever it was for Flade to send Albert to collect them, and to not come himself!
It was the sound of wheels on gravel that finally awoke them. The sun was up and leaking through the curtains. The car was cruising slowly along. Monika opened her eyes and yawned. ‘What is it, are we there?’

‘Yes, we’re right there’ replied Albert. ‘Thank goodness. I’ve had no-one to talk to for three hundred kilometres!’

‘I need to clean my teeth’ groaned Monika. ‘At least pass me some water will you?’

Mobius passed her the glass of water that had remained undisturbed throughout the drive. He rubbed his eyes and shrugged the blanket off his legs. It was so hot in the rear of the car that the smell of his body was suffocating. He wound down a window and thrust his head into the cold rush of air. Immediately his eyes began to water.

‘That’s better. Thankyou, now I smell less like a cigar.’

Monika folded up her blanket and began to rearrange her jacket and blouse. When this was done she laced up her shoes and pulled up her stockings. Before a mirror that she pulled down from the ceiling, something that Albert had said was installed at Flade’s request, she next gathered up her hair in one hand and began to flay at it with the brush she kept in her overnight bag. All this she did wearing a contented smile, her eyes wider than usual, looking closer and working faster as they neared the castle.

Mobius laced his shoes and then he was ready. He regretted sleeping in his best suit, but then again, who knew what awaited them at the other end? Albert
hadn’t been able to say, other than that they were to be quartered along with all the other guests in a newly furbished wing of the castle.

‘Up this hill and then we’re there’ said Albert, who was driving with one hand whilst combing his hair in the rear view mirror. ‘We’re even early. Just in time for breakfast!’

‘Good, I need a coffee’ replied Monika.

‘I need a wash’ said Mobius. ‘And then a walk. My legs are numb.’

‘Spoilsport’ she laughed, plumping up and down on the seat, smoothing out her skirt.

The forest that lined the valley began to thin and then they were in a small village of neat gardens and houses, puffing cottony smoke up into the clear blue sky. The streets were empty and newly paved, and flags were hoisted above every doorway. Albert paused the car at a crossroads, to let the second car veer past them. He beeped his horn and waved goodbye, but the second car didn’t reply.

‘They must be as tired as you are’ Monika suggested.

Albert shrugged. ‘No, I’m just a chauffer. They’re the ‘elite of the elite’ as they call themselves.’

In the minute it took to reach the main gates of the castle that loomed suddenly over the houses, Albert slipped into the mode of polite guide, as he must have done on many occasions before, pointing out the Renaissance castle with its three towered structure, chosen because of its choice location near the Teutoborg forest, where Hermann of the Cherusci had defeated the Romans, as well as its wonderful view over the Alme valley, and in particular how all of the recent changes made to the castle that were designed to achieve, according to
Albert, a more castle-like castle! - such as the digging of a deeper moat, the removal of the plaster cladding to reveal its original rough stone, the building of a sentry box and the addition of carved heads on the castle walls. All of this ‘restoration’ had been undertaken by employees of the Reich Labour Service, he added, jobless men dragooned from the cities, forced now to work for their welfare. As they approached the sentry box, out of which stepped a young SS soldier toting a sub-machine gun and iron expression, Mobius looked above him and saw one of the carved heads, grey and fierce, tucked beneath a cornice, birthed out of stone – *furore teutonicus* itself, with sightless eyes and roaring mouth. Above the face was inscribed in clear numerals – 1934.

The forecourt of the castle was filled with porters and caterers rushing from room to room, scurrying across the open cobbled area where trucks were parked and being unloaded, where maids in white stockings and black smocks were ferrying baskets of fresh sheets and rattling racks of laundered uniforms. In the midst of this Albert parked the car, and having smartened himself up appropriately, opened their door and led them into the peppery morning air. All at once the workers ceased what they were doing and fell away to the wall. Albert bowed to Mobius and Monika and guided them towards the heavy iron door that led into one of the towers. With a snap of his fingers and a point to the boot of the second car their luggage was collected to follow on behind them. Monika appeared more startled at all the fuss than Mobius might have expected. She never let go of his elbow for a moment, even as they began to climb the curling slate stairs.
Their room overlooked the valley, where a slight river crossed by an old stone bridge weaved its way across the green plains. Mobius pulled the curtains and stoked the fire whilst Monika ran a bath next door. He took a mouthful of fresh bun and followed it down with some coffee. In the darkened room he stripped off and hung his suit to air. Albert had said that nothing was planned until the afternoon, when there would be ‘services’ and ‘dances’ conducted in the court below, followed by seminars, a feast and speeches, and then the opening of the castle as the ‘Reich’s SS Leaders’ School & Special Research Units’.

The water had ceased running. Mobius opened the door into the steaming room and joined her.

Mobius submerged himself in the clear heat and stretched out his legs. Monika raised herself and leaned against the curved edge, letting her arms dangle.

‘I have a few questions for you’ she said. ‘I suppose I’d like to know what to expect.’

‘A case of drinking and renewing old hostilities, as I remember it.’

‘Even so…The book you wrote. Will they be discussing it?’

‘I have no idea.’

Monika lifted a foot out of the water so that Mobius might soap it. He did the same, and felt the hot lather glide over his ankle and shin.

‘You have the most extraordinarily hairy toes.’

‘Ouch, that hurts!’
Monika finished cleaning between his toes and ducked his foot back under. She lifted his other foot clear.

‘Tell me about that woman of yours, Barbe…?’

‘Esslingen. She was burned for witchcraft in 1632, in Koln.’

‘You say that very matter-of-factly.’

Mobius took up Monika’s other foot, and began to lather. ‘I suppose because her trial was conducted with such a cold efficiency. With meticulous records kept. With a bureaucratic pride. Fully within the law. In good faith, generally.’

‘What was she guilty of?’

‘Nothing, most likely. She was denounced by her neighbours, as was usual. She’d built up a reputation in her village, of being rude and unhelpful. She was poor and old and alone - quite common amongst accused witches.’

‘But being old and rude and unhelpful is hardly a crime, is it?’

‘Not until a child dies, or a crop fails, or a calf is stillborn. When people get sick or lose their wealth…’

‘Did those things happen to her neighbours?’

‘At one time or another. In the end she was reduced to begging from them, just to survive. When several of them refused, and she cursed them for their lack of charity, and misfortune struck them soon after, you can see…’

‘Did she believe she was guilty of her crime?’

Mobius paused to light a cigarette, having dried his fingers on a towel. ‘I don’t think so. She was tortured three times. The first time she denied the accusations. The second time she accused her accusers. The third time she admitted to everything, or anything I should say - poisoning children, bringing hailstorms, spreading disease with a magical powder. In all she denounced
seventy three other men and women, nearly every single person she knew. Many of whom were burned.’

‘The obviousness of it...It makes me feel sick.’

‘They believed in magic then. Things didn’t happen by accident. Someone was always to blame.’

Mobius passed his cigarette and leant forward so that he could splash his face. He looked down into the soapy water, and remembered Barbe Esslingen, as she was last described. A tormented, half-starved old woman in a woollen smock, her head shaved so that she couldn’t conceal any magical charms there, to protect her from the coming pain.

‘It must have changed you, studying something so grotesque...As a young man.’

Mobius washed his face with his hands, once again. ‘No, I’m not sure that it did.’

‘It must have, surely. Carrying that with you, into your own life. Walking around with that…’

He splashed his face a final time, because he didn’t want to look at her. Seeing had not always been believing, let alone feeling. And yet, he had never seen her more clearly, or felt her more closely than now. He climbed onto his knees, and leant across the soapy water, and kissed her.

Flade knocked politely, and entered when invited. Mobius was reaching down to tie his final shoelace when he heard Monika gasp. He looked up and there was Flade, immaculate in his black uniform, wearing his usual charming smile - and yet the smile was frozen. On top of his head, in the place of his
golden hair was a brittle silver crown, combed back in the usual manner, but set hard and fast like a sleigh trapped in ice. Each and every hair had become sheathed within a tint of the purest lucent white.

‘My God Flade, what on earth…?’

Flade ignored the question by flicking a piece of invisible ash from his sleeve. He bowed to Monika, and kissed her hand. ‘Frau Phelps…a pleasure to see you again. I trust that your journey was comfortable.’

Flade next cast his eyes over Mobius’ new suit. ‘I see you haven’t unpacked. Forgive me if I took the liberty of fitting you with some new costumes. You will find them in the wardrobe. What you are wearing will do for now, I suppose. And you too, Frau Phelps, forgive me if I say that I might have misjudged your size. There is a tailor on hand, however, should you need to make any adjustments.’

Monika looked down at what she was wearing, a ruby satin halter-neck dinner dress and coat, with a matching scarf and shoes. Her hair was fixed with a silver clasp that had been her mother’s. Mobius had only just finished telling her how beautiful she was when Flade had arrived. Now she looked to Mobius for support.

‘You shouldn’t have’ replied Mobius icily.

‘Yes, well, I apologise Frau Phelps for not giving you both more notice. It must have been quite a rush. As you can see for yourselves, the pressures of my own circumstances are not inconsiderable. Logistics are hardly my speciality, and yet I find myself…’

‘Apology accepted’ said Monika, with the merest bite of malice. Flade still had his hand out indicating the wardrobe, but there was no way she was going
to move. She took Mobius’ forearm and stood beside him. ‘Now, what do you have planned for us Herr Professor Flade?’

‘I’m afraid, Frau Phelps, that you must trust me with your companion for the next few hours. I have arranged a tour of the castle for you and the…wives, of our other dignitaries. Feel free to make your own way around, if you prefer. The staff have been instructed to cater to your every need, whether you remain here in your room or choose to take some air. I will leave it up to you.’

Flade inclined his head and smiled. His eyebrows too had become white, an effect made even more alarming by the cadaverous grey around his eyes. ‘Please forgive me if I appear thoughtless. There is so much to do, I’m afraid. Mobius?’

Mobius walked beside Flade as they followed the long corridor that circled the castle forecourt. Above them a black slate roof curved graciously over the wings like a casually thrown cloak, coming together over the one visible tower like a peaked and incisive brow. Into the roof at regular intervals were built small attic windows like buttons along a sleeve. On the lower floors large uncurtained windows drew in the morning sun. Mobius glimpsed within the countless rooms the comings and goings of people at meetings, speaking to unseen others, working at desks or staring at maps on walls.

Downstairs, men and women entered and exited the single entrance of the tower, some in the black uniform and some in civilian clothes, whilst others sat in the forecourt, smoking and drinking coffee at several tables. Despite its cold stone walls the castle interior gave off the slightly dreamy atmosphere of a university campus, or a sanatorium in the country; the sort of place where large
numbers of people come together with the same ambition but for their own particular reasons, and so never quite get to know one another.

Mobius kept pace with Flade as he walked confidently down the halls, acknowledging the salutes of his inferiors and the smiles of the universally pretty secretaries. On the floor beneath them however Flade lifted his shoulders and shortened his step. Po-faced young men with the same shoe-box haircut and uniform of shirtsleeves and corduroy trousers darted from room to room, carrying typed pages and facsimiles and rolled up posters and maps. Mounted on the walls were garishly framed paintings of ruined castles, burial mounds, Celtic hill-forts and the usual Nibelungen fancies. Flade turned over his shoulder and quietly hissed ‘these are the offices of the Ahnenerbe, the Institute of Germanic Prehistory and Archaeology, Wiligut’s people, the enemy.’

It was obvious that Flade had little authority in this precinct, because not only did the young men casually return his sneer but even the secretaries scowled at him, their arms crossed over their breasts and their hair tossed from shoulder to shoulder as they bounded past, at the very edges of his reach.

Flade led Mobius down a flight of stairs at the end of the hall, and the damp that clung to the badly plastered walls told him they had gone underground. ‘You have the best offices again, I see.’ Flade didn’t reply, because he was doing his best to keep his head from grazing the low wet ceiling. He stopped beside a window open to the courtyard. They could just make it out if they stood on their toes. In a crowd of people gathered beside a small stage Mobius could see Monika, standing with her arms folded against the cold. Within the circle of casual onlookers was an old man dressed in long white robes, onto which were stitched golden sigils and zodiac symbols.
‘That’s Wiligut’ said Flade painfully. ‘It’s a wedding ceremony.’

As he spoke a dozen couples emerged out of the tower door, the men dressed in their black uniforms, the women in white dresses. The line of couples then began to progress through an arcade of uniformed arms raised in salute, towards Wiligut, who held a wand that he used to touch the heads of every couple. An incantatory mumble emerged from his mouth as each couple passed him by. The men were all tall and lithe, and blond to a man, while the women were beautiful and healthy, with rosy cheeks and bright eyes. Before these paragons of ‘Aryan’ perfection Mobius couldn’t help but be reminded of the joke Monika had told him - ‘as slim as Goring, as tall as Goebbels, as blond as Hitler.’

‘Hardly funny in the circumstances’ Flade whispered.

‘What – the walls have ears?’

But Flade didn’t smile. Instead he looked cautiously up and down the stairs. The harsh white of his hair against the blackness of his uniform and the gloom of the stairwell appeared to sever his head from his body. ‘You see that man over there. You know what he’s doing?’

Mobius looked to where the onlookers had gathered around another old man, this time dressed in a white laboratory coat. With a special wand that resembled a toilet brush he dipped frequently into a plain metal bucket, holding the wand into the wind and shaking it. ‘He’s a homeopathic expert, once a disciple of Steiner. In that bucket is a glandular essence, with which he hopes to rid the valley of its rabbits!’

Mobius snorted. ‘Absurd!’

‘That is my whole point! Let me explain…’
Mobius watched Monika as she trailed along after the others, who were being led into the tower. She was still dressed in her own clothes, and was the last to reach the door, where she stubbed out her cigarette and looked around at the castle walls, sweeping her eyes over the upper storey windows. Was she looking for him?

Flade, who rightly guessed that he was losing Mobius’ attention, began to brief Mobius rapidly about the conflict between the two research units. ‘Levin has gone and embroiled himself in a skirmish with Wiligut - one he appears to be losing. Levin believes that the original Aryan religion was Wotanist in nature, whereas Wiligut has invented his own Irminist theology!’ Flade’s voice had become urgent but also tactically defensive, as though he were delivering a confession. There was an edge of desperation that belied the usual intrigues, the usual crafty machinations that were the true spice of his personal and professional lives. Mobius put both hands on the window frame, and hung his head, and listened.

‘It’s Wiligut, and Himmler’s aim, to restore this Aryan God to his people and their interrupted providence! This is to be the state religion of the new Thousand Year Reich, spiritual nourishment for the new and purified Aryan people. And yet Levin consoles himself by fishing for pike in the furthest reaches of a nearby lake! This only leaves me to defend our joint interests. You see what I’m up against?’

Flade paused and caught his breath. He moved a step closer, right up to Mobius’ ear. Even his breath smelt of sickness, like a blocked drain! Mobius cringed but there was nowhere else to move, not unless he wanted to relinquish
his view of the cobbled yard, and the single plane tree that in the murky shade resembled an old gallows.

‘Go on’ Mobius murmured wearily.

Flade’s shifty breathing accelerated at this minimum of encouragement. Wiligut’s influence, it seemed, extended to more than the creation of SS ceremonial and theology! Wewelsburg castle was to be the new ‘Vatican’ of the Greater Germanic Reich, and according to the plans Flade had procured it was to be built to an unheard of scale. In fact the project was going to be prohibitively expensive, perhaps even endangering Himmler’s other projects, especially those such as Flade’s that Wiligut saw as propagating what he called ‘Jew rationalism’. The fact was that the SS funded itself largely through its business arm, the German Earth and Stoneworks Company, which was now proposing to use the slave labour of criminals and misfits to quarry and thereby corner all of the contracts for the provision of autobahn and street paving materials. It was going to be a big business, according to Flade - actually a racket, and in large part responsible for what they intended to call ‘concentration camps’, right across the country, always near the quarries. However, there was no money to be made in supplying a service to oneself! Himmler was already borrowing heavily from the big German banks, claiming that the money was for ‘the Society for the Promotion and Preservation of German Cultural Monuments’. It was only a matter of time before he ran through the funds! Didn’t Mobius see what that would mean? Why did Mobius think his hair had turned white? If they shut down the department he’d be exposed, vulnerable again – just another aging scholar with a suspect background!
Mobius had been trying to listen, he felt he owed his friend that much, but for the most part had been staring into the forecourt, empty now but for the arrival and departure of staff cars and limousines, out of which invariably climbed high ranking officers of the SS, the top brass from some of the other services and their wives and girlfriends. Despite the warm greetings the occupants of each car received from the friends and colleagues who had been waiting in the chilly shadows, Mobius kept returning to the image of Carl climbing from the cars, dressed appropriately of course, but always giving himself away. The atmosphere in the forecourt was menacing in spite of all the huffy camaraderie. He could well imagine how they would view Carl, there in the courtyard amongst them. How glad he was they had left Carl behind, and yet how he missed the boy!

Mobius turned very deliberately to Flade, who was nervously smoking a black cigarette. ‘Surely you don’t expect my sympathy.’

Flade shook his head. He took Mobius firmly by one hand. ‘It’s only to impress upon you the importance of tonight’s proceedings. My friend, I can’t tell you how much it means that you’re here. I know you’ve had your problems, but to have the foremost authority on the persecutions here tonight! How are your nerves? Do you need anything? Are you ready to meet Levin? Are you ready to meet the others?

* * *

Levin greeted Mobius with the same desperate affection! He had been pacing the carpet when they arrived, practicing his speech, peppering it with
oratorical flourishes and thumps of his fist. At the end of every circuit of his desk he paused before a mirror and repeated the performance. As soon as he saw Mobius he threw himself across the room and grasped him by the shoulders. Despite the gushing words of welcome his eyes were restless. They darted over Mobius’ suit and came to rest at his collar, at his belt, at his shoes. Remembering another matter and therefore immediately forgetting Mobius, he admonished Flade for having failed to deliver the updated report of the day’s events. Flade sighed and pointed to it, there on his desk. Levin took his seat and tried to gather the energy sufficient to read the report. Deep bags lay beneath each of his worried eyes, eyes that continually returned to stare at a grey moth that had taken up residence on the handle of his letter opener. Breaking himself away from this new fascination, he attempted to read the report but couldn’t get past the first line. Levin flung the program at Flade and demanded that he recite, staring at Flade with a disfiguring intensity as he began to lecture in his impeccable grammarian’s diction. Somehow Flade had managed to make himself indispensable, Levin realised. How had that happened? It seemed as though Flade now controlled the purse strings and all he was good for was his signature! Levin was often aware lately that his secretary directed calls from other departments straight through to Flade. He couldn’t remember any longer what it was that Flade was supposed to be doing, now that he was doing everything. Here he was talking about the program, a subject over which Levin felt he should have absolute control, and yet of which he was absolutely ignorant. He comforted himself by stealing glances at the photograph on his desk, a recently framed photograph of his Pyotr bearing above his pale
shoulders a fat metre long pike. The pike had given them the run around, that much was sure!

Flade soon came to the end of his recitation but Levin hadn’t caught a word. He shrugged and pretended to reflect, inclining his head one way and then the other, taking in all the angles. Finally he nodded and reached for the pen, startling the moth that fluttered away in small vertical circles that led it only so far as the windowsill. Why was he reaching for the pen? Ah, that was it - the requisition form that Flade was delicately offering. He signed with his customary indecipherable scribble. This had been his tactic right from the beginning. If trouble ever came of any of these ‘things’ that Flade pressed upon him then he would claim forgery and deny it! That was why he was boss and Flade was his subordinate!

If only everyone could wear a uniform, Levin mused, and not for the first time either - if only everyone could have a rank, and march in step. In the face of a uniform, at least, one no longer had to think. Levin had seen with his own eyes the inmates of Oranienburg and Buchenwald. Wasn’t it precisely because of the introduction of a prisoner’s uniform that the new security measures, essential ever since the Reichstag fire - of detention without trial had been so readily accepted? The very thing that his father had complained about so vociferously, as though it were the end of civilisation itself! As though it would lead them back into the dark ages! Levin had laughed bitterly at his father in response. How could the old fool fail to understand what was so obvious to everyone else? The world had changed on that day! Now the gloves were off!

Levin smirked and stroked at his uniformed sleeve. He appeared not to notice the uneasy silence in the room until the moth left the windowsill and
dawdled across his desk, settling back upon the handle of his letter opener. Curious creature! He looked up and discovered the two old men, seated before him. Why were they staring at him strangely? What was he about to…? Ah, yes…

‘Go on!’ was all he needed to say, as usual.

Flade nodded to Mobius, who grunted to clear his throat. ‘I understand that I am to be available to answer questions. However, what isn’t clear is…’

Mobius ended his question at the first sight of blood in Levin’s face. Very clearly the young man had an aversion to his question, perhaps to every question. He reminded Mobius of the young officers at the front. Tell them anything but don’t ask them to think.

‘Herr Professor Flade is the one to ask. With all due respect, Herr Doktor Mobius, if I might have the pleasure of meeting with you tonight, after all the…proceedings?’

‘As you wish, Herr Doktor Levin.’

‘The…meeting has all been arranged, I take it Herr Professor Flade?’

‘Yes, it has. For after the seminar. In this very room.’

There was something in Flade’s voice that made Mobius glance across at him, only to find him staring at his shoes, rested beneath his casually crossed legs. Or rather, Mobius realised, it wasn’t something in Flade’s voice perhaps but something he was trying to fend away. Flade’s new deference to Levin and the fact that he now looked into Mobius’ eyes with such a veil of calm assurance made Mobius immediately suspicious. Where was the erratic hysteric Flade of the stairwell? Where was the shared deception of their last meeting with Levin? Flade took Mobius’ hand and helped him to rise, eerily at ease.
Monika was waiting for him in the courtyard, shivering with cold and smoking nervously. She stood apart from the other women who were seated at the tables beneath the plane tree, drinking coffee and poring over a large map. She was visibly relieved to see him again. ‘Oh it was dreadful!’ she whispered, taking him by the arm and leading him away. ‘These women! Apart from all being so young. They’re all…stupid! The questions they asked, you wouldn’t believe. They led us down into the cellars, and squeezed us into a tiny stone cell with a small window, no bigger than your fist. This was a room where witches waited for their trials, apparently, sometimes for months! No heating, just a cold stone floor. The questions they asked! As though it was a school excursion to the seaside!’

Mobius put his arm around Monika’s shoulders and led her across the courtyard towards the closest tower. ‘I feel the same way. But right now I need to stand by the fire. I can’t seem to get warm here. These walls radiate cold. I feel like I’m in a grave!’

Monika squeezed him tightly. ‘I ordered some brandy for our room.’

Mobius grunted in agreement and they changed direction, cutting towards the southern tower. When Monika spoke her voice trembled with cold. ‘Did you know that Frederick Barbarossa, in a castle somewhere else, I forget where…He took two twin babies away from their mother at birth, and locked them in a room? They were fed and kept warm, but no-one was allowed to speak to them, or hold them, or give them any comfort at all? And that they died within a matter of months?’

‘I know the story.’
‘Did he really do that? What on earth for?’

‘Didn’t the guide explain? He was trying to prove the importance of being with others. The importance of love. That without it we die.’

‘So it was an experiment.’

Monika shook her head in disgust. She paused to light another cigarette. She had just finished exhaling when from the other side of the courtyard there was a shout. ‘Mobius! You old rascal! You tyke!’

It was Gottlieb, Raab and Bremner!

Mobius lit a cigarette and watched them come, his arm around Monika’s waist. While Gottlieb had grown to immense proportions, he still had the same baby face, and sideburns like chin-straufs for his red helmet of hair. Raab on the other hand appeared to have shrunk. He hobbled between the giant Gottlieb and the tall Bremner like a child being taken for a walk. Bremner was so tall and wide in the shoulders, and yet so obviously thin that he had a strangely two-dimensional appearance, all front and no sides, like a signpost or sail.

‘Like old times eh Mobius? The Humboldt school. They were the days!’

Just as Mobius remembered him, Gottlieb had a cigar in one hand and a drink in the other. Raab as usual had his hands thrust deep in his pockets. Bremner waved away the smoke from Gottlieb’s cigar. All three of them wore the same black uniform. It had been more than twenty years!

Raab bowed and stole Monika’s hand. He kissed it and bowed again.

‘You can see that we haven’t changed a bit! Raab especially!’ shouted Gottlieb. Monika took her hand back and put it in Mobius’ pocket. ‘I see you have done well for yourself Mobius’ grinned Raab, blinking at Bremner, who
was looking shyly at the women by the plane tree. ‘Not like us three! All work and no play eh? Bremner! I said all work and no play!’

‘Yes’ repeated Bremner dryly ‘All work and no play.’

‘Where is Hansen?’ Mobius asked. Immediately Raab stopped grinning. An affronted frown appeared over his eyes. Gottlieb coughed and scraped the ground with the toe of his boot. Bremner hadn’t changed expression at all. ‘Not in front of the lady’ replied Raab eventually.

‘Don’t mind me’ insisted Monika, and when Raab hesitated again even asked the question herself. ‘What happened to Hansen?’

Gottlieb shrugged. ‘He’s been a bad boy, I’m afraid.’

‘He never did fit in’ agreed Raab.

‘His ideas haven’t matured. Very out of date’ said Bremner.

‘Quite the hothead’ Raab repeated sadly, clearly for the benefit of Monika.

‘Is he in some kind of trouble?’ asked Mobius. ‘I heard that you, Raab…Your leg. I heard you were arrested, or shot...’

All of the colour rushed out of Raab’s face. He looked as though he had been slapped. He tried to speak, but was having difficulty swallowing. He gulped and blinked and put his hand to his mouth. Gottlieb reached across and patted his shoulders. ‘There there old boy. We’re all friends here.’

‘Some of my students…a little boisterous. They took me for a socialist, can you imagine that?’

‘I seem to remember that you...’

‘Please Mobius, don’t say that here, not even in jest!’ giggled Raab. His voice had risen shrilly. His eyes were large and black. ‘Fortunately Herr
Professor Flade was able to sort the matter out. You can see that I have been completely…rehabilitated.’

‘If you don’t mind me saying so Mobius’ suggested Gottlieb, ‘and with all due respect. You do seem a trifle out of touch. Things have changed. The people have spoken. We must never forget that!’

‘Our work is very important’ agreed Bremner. ‘Great trust has been placed in us! We were all younger then, and perhaps a little foolish. It’s clear since the Reichstag attack we must do all we can to protect our nation. No-one wants a return to those days of anarchy after the war!’

‘In these dark times we all need to pull together’ said the gentle Gottlieb, his eyes wet with sincerity. ‘I’m sure you understand…’

‘I’m not sure that I do. You haven’t answered my question.’

Gottlieb cleared his throat, twice, for added emphasis. ‘Not the time or place, I’m afraid.’

Bremner’s tone was more conciliatory. He smiled humbly. ‘Forgive Gottlieb if he appears a trifle blunt. But he’s a family man now. Three children. Two boys and a girl isn’t it Georg?’

‘Two girls and a boy, in fact.’

‘Two girls and a boy, how about that! And I, while a bachelor, and despite my…successes…found myself reduced to selling magazine subscriptions during the depression. I can laugh at it now, but it wasn’t funny at the time.’

But Bremner wasn’t laughing. He was looking somewhat enviously at Raab, and scratching his long bluish nose. ‘Only Raab was able to maintain his position after the war. Professor of History at Berlin, no less. Regarded as somewhat of a Young Turk, I’m told…’
‘Please Bremner…your teasing is quite unpleasant.’

‘What happened to you Mobius? We all thought you were dead’ said Gottlieb.

‘And what have you been working on, all of these years?’ asked Raab.

‘Flade has been rather secretive about your…movements, I’m afraid.’

At that moment a trumpet blared from each of the three towers. Three pages in medieval costume stood at their windows, blowing one long note that soon flushed out the courtyard. They stepped into the alcove of the nearest tower to escape. Gottlieb patted Mobius on the back. Raab took his hand and lead him towards the stairs. Monika held his other hand and Bremner brought up the rear. It was time for the seminars to begin!
There were three seminars to be held at once, in each of the towers. Raab had no idea what the other seminars were about, except that the overall theme referred in general to ‘Security’ and ‘Building’. Mobius followed him and the others downstairs into a large circular hall with a domed roof and marbled windowless walls. Around a central podium were rings of chairs that stretched right back to the door. Flade was waiting and guided them to the seats before the podium. Monika sat on one side of Mobius and Flade sat on the other. Monika squeezed his hand and Flade surreptitiously passed him a silver flask. Mobius drank a mouthful of the brandy, whose earthy perfume rose above the tang of the flask and flooded his mouth with warmth. He took another mouthful and settled back into his seat.

Around fifty or so guests had gathered by the time Wiligut took to the stage. The atmosphere in the room, which had been one of bored restlessness, instantly changed to become tense and close, as though the air itself had thickened. The lights went up a fraction as Wiligut paced to and fro. He had changed into the same black uniform as all of the others and yet his uniform appeared darkest of all; it was so perfectly black that Mobius’ heart began to beat faster. This took him completely by surprise. He shifted in his seat and took a deep breath, although nothing could stop the rapid march of his heart. He squeezed Monika’s hand ever harder, it was the only part of him he felt able to move. The flask of brandy hung helplessly in his other hand. His eyes swept around the scythe of faces that seemed to peer at him from a great distance.
Some of the faces he recognised but couldn’t place, insistent and transparent at the same time, templates of noses and ears and eyes that wandered over from face to face, whole heads of hair that lifted up and settled elsewhere, the only constant the stark black uniforms in the rounds of chairs, like spiders in a web, that was it, like spiders in a web, and he and Monika alone amongst them. In the centre of the web was Wiligut, shouting and panting about the spiritual degeneracy of democracy and how those born again into the New Faith of the Old Order had saved the nation just in time from a failed experiment whose corruption might yet have damaged the minds and souls of a whole generation! There can be no freedom without security! There can be no security without tradition! There can be no tradition without education! Tradition is our education! The army is our tradition! Wiligut sat down to wild applause, into which stepped Levin, equally fierce and determined to build upon the arousal created by the oratorical skills of his enemy. And yet he failed as soon as he opened his mouth! As soon as he began to speak all of the power built up by Wiligut, all of the prickly lust and mindless suggestibility swept around and down from the seats as though there were a drain at Levin’s feet. It was almost as though Wiligut’s speech had raised them up a few inches into the air, and now they were dropped rudely back into themselves. Mobius had never heard anything like it. Levin was talking about the Somnium, and yet the jargon in which he couched his analysis was so obtuse, so deliberately mangled that nothing emerged at the end of his sentences but the impenetrable density of the sentences themselves – every sentence was like a tunnel blocked with words, strings of clever sounding nonsense tied into thick knots that fell at his feet and were still. And yet when he was finished there was another round of the most
enthusiastic applause! No-one appeared to have understood a word he had said, yet he seemed to have proved his case. ‘Clever fellow, that Levin’ murmured Raab. And what language was Bremner, who had replaced Levin, now speaking? He had started talking about the narrative Mobius had written, describing Brinkman the travelling Saxonian executioner, whose job had included torture and witch doctoring when required, and yet now he was going on about the real subject of his presentation - Towards a New Language! The exemplar being apparently the language of Brinkman himself, whose technique, as far as Mobius had been able to make out, consisted of repeating, over and over again, in front of the accused and the witnesses all of the accusations and threats facing the poor victim, repeating the accusation time and again in a hypnotic drawl until finally everything was believed - and yet nothing was proven. This terrified the victims because their confession was irrelevant. Brinkman had confessed on their behalf. Their denials were taken for guilt. Enough people believed to make the verdict clear. He was the most successful interrogator and highest paid executioner in the land!

Bremner was followed immediately by Raab, talking about his speciality – the social conditions that contributed to the persecutions, apparently now the result of too many years of exposure to a decadent, comfortable and lawless complacency whose ‘soft belly’ had been fully exploited by the foreign Church, by Jewish and the Masonic saboteurs whose aim had been nothing less than to inflict a fatal psychic damage upon German womanhood! ‘So that, therefore, if we value our freedom we must be prepared to learn from the lessons of the past, to protect ourselves by any means, to strike first wherever the enemy gathers!’ This was more to the liking of the crowd, although Raab hadn’t presented any
evidence to support his claim other than the occasional ‘the reports suggest’ or
‘it is clearly the case that’ - so that, by way of this short-cut the newly flattered
Raab was soon able to take his seat amidst a warm and considered applause.
Gottlieb patted him on the shoulders and strode purposefully to the stage. He
scuffed his feet and confidently regarded the corralled faces before him. As
always he spoke powerfully, marshalling his phalanxes of words directly into
the argument, short bristling sentences that carried forward the hard authority of
his incredibly loud voice. Gottlieb’s manner was as impressive as ever, and yet
what was this rubbish he was spruiking? ‘The idea of history is shaped by
unconscious forces manipulated by the conscious! The leaders are conscious,
the people are asleep! Give them flattering myths and marches and the flag!
Give them the accumulated wisdom of a millennium of war! That is their sacred
history! Give them the spilt blood of their heroic youth, our true nation-
builders!’ Mobius was even more appalled when Gottlieb very deliberately
catched his eye, and bowed in respect. Did he really believe what he was saying?
‘The whole world is against us, they want to destroy us, they are envious of our
freedom, our power, and our courage – we saw that at Versailles! Never again
will we allow the murder of our people! From now on every hand raised against
us will be slapped back down!’

All around Mobius people were standing and applauding. Even Levin was
barking his hands and beaming widely. Mobius looked across to Monika, whose
bewilderment was obvious. She still held his hand but the other dragged her
short coat tightly across her chest. She met his eyes and said something to him
that he couldn’t hear over the clamour. ‘I want to go home’ she said again, when
the applause had died down. Mobius agreed with relief. He was even more
relieved when it became clear there were no questions for him to answer. There were so many objections that he could make and yet... he hardly had the strength to stand, let alone take up opposition against everyone else in the room! Was that what Monika expected of him? She had asked to leave, and yet remained in her seat, staring at him coldly.

‘This isn’t what I expected. I want to go home’ she said again, this time more loudly. The room had nearly emptied. Gottlieb had taken up the drink that he had left at the foot of his chair and was smugly toasting Mobius. Bremner and Raab followed him out to the next seminar. Raab winked sympathetically on the way. Clearly Mobius had women troubles to sort out?

‘I’m afraid that the Herr Doktor Mobius is required for a short time. If you would like to wait in your rooms, he will return shortly.’ Levin’s voice was polite but the contempt on his face was unmistakable. He reluctantly offered his hand to Monika but she stood by herself. Mobius stood alongside her, baffled and embarrassed. He wanted to go with her yet felt powerless to object. Whatever it was that they wanted, perhaps it was better to get it over with quickly. There was a subtle and yet sure threat in the way Levin waited for Mobius, not letting him get too far ahead, trying to get between himself and Monika, as though he were guarding Mobius, as though he suspected Mobius might say something to Monika if given the chance. Levin followed Mobius right to the door, which Flade opened politely for Monika before indicating the direction she should take down the cold stone hallway. Mobius kissed her on the cheek. ‘Don’t be long’ she said. ‘I won’t be’ he replied. ‘I promise.’

* * *
‘We don’t have much time’ Flade reminded Levin. ‘The Reichsführer is due to arrive in thirty minutes.’

Levin nodded impatiently to the young man in the long brown leather coat, who shut the door quietly, then stood before it. Levin sat beside Flade on the other side of the desk from Mobius. ‘What is this?’ he asked finally, to Flade, who until that moment had deliberately avoided his eyes. ‘Think of it as an interview’ Flade replied evenly. He then looked at Mobius directly, in that particular way of his that suggested to Levin that he was being strictly efficient, but let Mobius know that he should play along. ‘Now, Herr Doktor Levin has a few questions to ask you. Regarding academic matters. And others. If you’re ready, Herr Doktor Levin?’

Levin sat forward with his hands on the desk, twirling the death’s head ring on his middle finger. He appeared to be considering how to begin, then thought better of it and lit a cigarette, taking his time, blowing out a large cloud of smoke that hung in the air between them. Yes, thought Mobius, now I can see it – how you were able to ‘reform’ the history faculty at Heidelberg – and bully timid academics from their posts!

‘First question. Have you today, or any at other time met with, or discussed in person, or by correspondence, any matters relating to witchcraft with Brigadier Karl Maria Wiligut or anyone on his staff?’

Mobius snorted. ‘What is this?’ he asked Flade again. ‘Some kind of joke?’

‘No, my dear Mobius. I’m afraid it’s far from a joke. Answer the question.’

‘No, I haven’t.’
‘I would ask you to consider your answers most carefully. The punishment for lying is extremely unpleasant, I can assure you. As your colleague Hansen has discovered.’

‘Flade?’ Mobius asked weakly. ‘Is that true?’

But Flade was staring at the pen in his hand, waiting to write down his answer. Quite clearly, if Mobius wasn’t going to play along with the ‘game’, then Flade had little sympathy for him. He even sighed impatiently.

‘Second question. With regards to your applied research. What information can you give us, based upon your unrivalled knowledge of the literature, of the existence, whereabouts, chemical properties or recipes for either the magical powders used by witches or the spells, incantations, vexations and curses used to harm their enemies. Particularly in regard to weather cooking and communicating disease, a subject most interesting to the Reichsfuhrer!’

‘Surely you don’t expect me to answer that question. It’s ridiculous!’

Levin flinched at the word ridiculous, but recovered with a thoroughly vicious stare. ‘Raab, Bremner, Gottlieb…They have all been forthcoming! They have given us spells and secret poisons! What is your reason for withholding? Have you spoken with Wiligut? Have you ever dabbled yourself in the black arts? Has your woman? It is your duty to tell us. This is knowledge relevant to the security of the Reich! It belongs to us, it is our historical birthright. We mustn’t let it fall into the hands of our enemies. We want to learn from you!’

Mobius managed somehow to stand. He asked in a choking voice if he could visit the toilet. Levin sneered and waved the young man from the door. Flade put down his pen and gave Mobius a disappointed glance. The young man opened the door and pointed down the hall. Mobius nodded his thanks and
walked quickly, then trotted, then took the first door available. He needed to get away from those fools. He needed to think, and get his nerves back. But behind the door was another seminar! All eyes in the room turned to him. Gottlieb, Raab and Bremner saluted him from a middle row. The speaker, a small man with a skull face, which on closer inspection appeared to be the result of a severe burn, of a type common in the last war, waited impatiently for Mobius to take his seat. When he once again had their complete attention, in his own good time he prepared to speak. Mobius sat down and took some deep breaths. Surely Flade wouldn’t look for him in here?

‘Now, you have all heard of the reforms being made in the name of the purity of our blood. To secure the future health of our nation it has long been our intention to make sure that the criminal, the feeble-minded and physically infirm, and by association the soft-hearted and weak who are wastefully drawn to their care, are not allowed to pass on their weaknesses. This is being achieved through the use of forced sterilisation and other methods. One unexpected benefit of this top secret T-4 program has been the surplus of materiel made available to researchers such as myself, whose aim is the betterment of all of our lives.’

The speaker paused for effect, and even sighed warily, an obvious caveat.

‘I only mention this because of what you are about to see. It is important that you not misinterpret the following data, and that you understand that the subjects in the following film are constituted only from the aforementioned population.’

With a nod to the projectionist the speaker stepped aside. The lights in the room were cut. The only illumination now came from the screen before them,
and the thin mote of light that passed above their heads. The speaker was visible as a dark silhouette, to the left of the screen, microphone in hand.

‘What you are about to witness is the result of many years of patient research. In my offices we concentrate on research that is pure because it will bring immediate benefits to our fighting men, and therefore to the security of all of our people. This procedure is part of a recent initiative…’

On the screen jerked an image of a young child, a girl perhaps in her early teens, with her fist thrust into a large steel barrel. The girl was clearly uncomfortable; stepping from one bare foot to another, as though she desperately needed to urinate. Her face was turned away from the camera. The film was silent. The only sound that could be heard was the ticking of the film.

‘The subject is sedated with ordinary battlefield morphine. Watch this closely!’

A man in a laboratory coat extracted the girl’s arm from the barrel, and led her towards a simple concrete trough. He forced her to kneel, and rest her arm upon the edge of the trough. A large wooden mallet was passed to him.

‘A mere ten minutes in a fully transportable, liquid nitrogen tank, was able to facilitate this immaculate procedure…’

The man in the laboratory coat looked to camera, and nodded. He struck the girl’s forearm lightly, breaking it off at the elbow - to shatter like glass in the trough. She looked at it carefully, dazed, then began to scream, although her voice couldn’t be heard. The screen became blank.

‘Fully transportable! Cheap and efficient! Battlefield amputations will no longer be the same. The subject heals quickly, there is no subsequent bleeding and therefore a markedly reduced risk of infection.’
Beside Mobius a man retched, an officer with campaign medals. Mobius’ own head felt suddenly very heavy. He was looking at his feet, which wouldn’t move. His heart was sick. That child might have been Carl! Several others in the crowd were retching, and the bitter cereal smell of vomit spread quickly throughout the room. One or two excused themselves and made for the door, doubled over their hands. Mobius tried to stand but was unable to keep his feet. Once more an adrenal impulse flared through his body and left him helpless.

At all this the speaker appeared unconcerned. He was obviously used to this kind of reaction. When he spoke his voice was the same warm, easy tonic.

‘The next procedure has consequences that will interest many of you here, I am told. It began with an accident, as has many a great scientific discovery, although that is a different story. Watch this!’

A number of baths had been placed in a long concrete cell. The cell was lit with naked bulbs, which reflected silver light off the water. The camera moved to avoid the reflection and examine the baths more closely. In each bath was a drowned child.

‘The water temperature is barely above freezing. The subjects have been immersed for one hour exactly. Ages vary from six months to six years, in increments of six months, where possible.’

The screen became blank. The next shot was of the same cell, with all of the baths removed and replaced by gurneys. On top of the gurneys were the children, and in some cases, babies. Each were swaddled in dark blankets, and affixed to some kind of monitoring machine.

‘The room temperature has been increased to one hundred degrees Fahrenheit. The subjects are all deceased, or are they? Watch closely the four
subjects closest to camera, whose ages range from six months to two years. In each case, despite one hour of submersion, the child is revived, brought back from death. One heartbeat every fifteen minutes, gentlemen, is all that it takes to keep these children alive. As they become warm, the natural heartbeat returns. They return to life without any negative side effects.’

The lights came on suddenly. Mobius was caught unawares. He was unable to remove his eyes from the blank screen. His eyes, like his mouth were wide open, but blind – speechless.

‘The catch is that we have been unable to successfully revive subjects over the age of three years. Clearly we are born with some natural ability to exist within death, each of us, although we have not had the same success with our older, indeed adult subjects. If we can tap into this natural born ability of ours, think! Think gentleman what that will mean for us! Death itself can be cheated. We will be able to store the living well into the future. The implications for our people are obvious. There is no reason, for example, why the Fuhrer shouldn’t live to see the totality of his thousand year Reich! He could be revived during times of crisis, and celebration! Imagine, gentlemen, the prospect of such a world!’

The speaker’s short arms were thrown up in triumph. A sharp bout of handclapping ensued, then people took to their feet, and saluted repeatedly, inspired by the idea of an eternal Fuhrer, a father who would never leave them, whose strong hand might never leave the tiller, who like their ancient gods would be there for them in times of strife and need!

The speaker climbed down from the podium and reluctantly accepted the blessings of the gathered admirers. He pushed through the crowd with his folder
and clipboard wearing a look of the utmost humility. Just another servant of the nation working for the betterment of the fighting man! The academics followed behind him full of stimulations and gesticulations, arguing already with laughing faces and triumphalist shouts. Times had been hard for them, but finally they had backed the winning side, of that there could be no doubt! Mobius slipped in amongst a gaggle of men, bickering about the luncheon they had been forced to miss. Dazed, he nodded his way to the middle of the group and supported himself on a stranger’s forearm. In the corridor he wandered from huddle to huddle, barely keeping ahead of the tail of hungry men that seemed ever ready to expose him to the view of those who must by now be searching for him. Mobius had no idea which direction he was headed, except that he was moving, and that as long as he was moving his nerves might continue to obey him. He noticed that his hands were trembling, and that his face was hot with blood. His skin tingled and his eyes burned. His stomach was sick with what he had seen and heard. His body, revolted once again with being his vehicle - seemed about to rebel. He glanced out of one of the windows onto the courtyard and saw Monika there, waiting with Albert beside the staff-car that appeared ready to leave. Monika had changed out of her evening dress and back into her woollen suit, armoured with a steely impatience. She regarded the passing guests on their way to dinner with an unflinching stare, arms crossed and puffing on her cigarette.

Mobius struggled into the courtyard just as the trumpets announcing dinner began. The open space upset his balance, and the car across the courtyard seemed impossibly distant. Monika had seen him but hadn’t noticed his distress.
She uncrossed her arms and stamped out her cigarette. ‘I’m sorry Paul. I’ve got to go. I’m worried about Hannelore!’

Mobius motioned for Albert to start the car. Without a word he crawled onto the back seat and lay upon Monika’s lap. The car started and began to pull away. The shaking returned to his fingers, then spread to his arms. Monika hugged him to quieten his tremors. ‘Paul, what is this? What has happened? Albert, what can I do?’ Mobius gritted his teeth as he struggled to stay with his body. A hot white bandage of light covered his eyes and filled his ears with cotton. The smell of blood and the taste of iron sealed his mouth and nostrils. The light began to fade in his eyes as the darkness buried him. ‘Just hold him gently and don’t let him swallow his tongue’ he heard Albert advise. ‘It’s the veteran’s spell. I’ve seen it a hundred times.’

Now Mobius was blind and falling. He could hear voices above but couldn’t hold on.

* * *

Mobius was conscious for a long time before his eyesight returned. The temporary blindness had happened many times before - it had something to do with blood pressure. He knew that he was awake and in Monika’s lap and that she was still sleeping. He listened to the drone of the tyres and the soft hand of the wind on the roof. The rise and fall of the car on its springs was accentuated by the fact that Albert was driving extraordinarily fast. In the darkness he caught a glimpse of something frightening; the room with the naked lights, eerily silent. Now the dread fear secreted by sleep began to rouse itself once
again. Had he seen what he thought he had seen? He was no longer sure. The more he tried to see, the more his memory confused him. Unbidden images wandered before his eyes. The image of Flade’s white hair, for some reason. The image of the priest’s naïve smile. Images of the war, of faces whose names he had forgotten, of incandescent flares over seas of mud, crows soaring into the clear blue sky. Images of the forest and Carl asleep at his feet. Images of Gustav, muttering on the train. An image of Monika, sleeping in the dawn beside him, her teeth visible between her lips, white and square like tombstones in the moonlight. All of the people he loved! His dread and his love had become one, a dark bond that had captured his senses and turned them inward, against one another. He tried to control the images but was unable to hold onto them. Even though he was with Monika he didn’t feel safe. Not until he could imagine her there, sleeping above him, rather than the yearning to imagine her. So too he tried to imagine Carl, just as he had done back at the castle, knowing that they would have to flee, knowing that his only protection against the problems of the future was his ability to imagine it otherwise – He and Carl and Monika stepping off the train in the Gare du Nord, boarding a ship to America, hiding out in the forest like criminals. But he couldn’t clearly imagine any of these things.

Very slowly a thin grey mist began to appear at the edges of his sight. It was the same grey mist whether his eyes were open or closed. He waited patiently as the mist began to settle, the faintest sunrise revealing lost shapes that as he looked became Monika’s dark hair, her shadowed face and open eyes, staring down at him. He smiled, and saw her smile in return. ‘What happened to
you?’ she whispered hoarsely, kissing his face, stroking his face. Mobius shook his head. Finally it was becoming light outside the car.

*          *          *

In the town there were people out on every corner, some carrying pitchforks, others armed with clubs. Mothers carrying babies stood proudly alongside teenage sons in uniform, who saluted vigorously at the car as it passed, then returned their attentions to the hedges and bushes of the gardens. Men in the brown uniform of the SA patrolled the streets armed with rifles and pistols, riding vigilantly on the back of farmers’ trucks, holding on with one hand and aiming with the other. The fire service and the postmen and the Hitlerjugend had all been mobilised. Despite the universally stern faces of the men and boys there was an atmosphere of festivity on the streets. Every man of every shape and size and class wore the same mask of grim alertness, and every woman the same look of unlikely fear. Outside the town hall Mobius saw Mrs Jensen with other women behind a trestle table laden with bread and cakes, and a steaming urn of soup. Exhausted soldiers stood around the table dunking their soup with bread. ‘I’ve never seen anything like it’ said Monika. ‘The whole town is out’ agreed Mobius.

‘Perhaps it’s an exercise’ remarked Albert. ‘A drill of some sort.’

Like all of the other women Hannelore was waiting at her front gate. She saw the car from down the street and started walking towards it. There was a worry in her eyes that was visible from some distance away. Her hands were
raised to stop them. Immediately all of the other women poured from their front fences onto the street and surrounded the car. Mobius realised immediately what had happened. He dropped the bottle in his lap and tried to open the rear door, but the way was blocked by a dozen peering faces. Hannelore screeched through Albert’s window. ‘They have orders to shoot him!’ Monika got Hannelore inside the car, who sobbed and clutched at the sleeves of her cardigan. ‘When the boy saw the two policemen…He was too strong for them. He hurt one badly! Then he ran away!’

‘But why?’ shouted Mobius. ‘Why did they come?’

‘Oh Hannelore – what have you done?’ cried Monika.

‘Drive to the barbers Albert! Monika, tell him the way!’

Mobius sank into his seat as Albert reversed on Monika’s orders. Hannelore had her face in her hands, weeping. Monika tried to console her but Hannelore was too ashamed of her friend’s disappointment. She was so shaken that every time she tried to look at Mobius to speak to him her eyes grew wide and then she had to look away. Finally her lips curled back to reveal her teeth. Her eyes filled with hate. ‘You! You! It’s your fault! If you hadn’t come here…’

Monika sat between them, one hand on each of their shoulders, her eyes pleading. Mobius was numb again. The blood in his face and the beating of his heart filled his ears with static. He felt the ebb and flow in his body as the turmoil in his mind increased.

The barber’s was closed. Mobius fell upon the door, beating it with his fists. Presently Bernie appeared from behind the mirrored door. Gus emerged beside him, curious and wringing his slender hands. Mobius could hear the
strains of the piano sonata, coming to an end. Bernie waved Mobius away. He shrugged, then waved him away again. He pushed Gus back and shut the door behind them.

Mobius left the car and hurried down the cobbled alley that led to the river. He struggled along the linden shaded path that was strangely empty. The trees soon gave way to parkland and then pasture. Still his legs managed to land one in front of the other. He reached the gate that led to the forest; it was firmly closed. He loosened the catch and edged it open with his knees and hands. He followed the chalk path that verged from the river, casting his eyes along its banks. Might the river have carried Carl away? For a moment he wished it might have. The thought of the mob catching Carl was too much to bear.

He reached the forest and felt its damp embrace. Soon he was reduced to shuffling as he climbed, his toes pushing through the leaves and fallen branches. The path dwindled and disappeared. The forest became darker and more silent. He could still hear the river hissing amongst the reeds. His eyesight was fading again, it was becoming too dark to see. He found the log they had sat on before. He had hoped Carl would be there, but new leaves had fallen over the place where the boy had slept. There was nothing to show where they had been. The forest closed around him; all was becoming dark. He reached for the log and felt across it with his hands. He slumped down, and put his hands over his eyes. He put his hands over his eyes, and waited.

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On Humanitas

1. Introduction

The story of Bend Sinister is not really about life and death in a grotesque police state. My characters are not ‘types’, not carriers of this or that idea...The main theme of Bend Sinister...is the beating of Krug’s loving heart, the torture an intense tenderness is subjected to – and it is for the sake of the pages about David and his father that the book was written and should be read.

Nabokov, ‘Preface’ to Bend Sinister

It became apparent while I was writing Asylum that there was another story trying to be told. This showing through of a second, more documentary layer I would liken to Pentimento, the Italian word for both ‘repentance’ and ‘overpainting’, something that American writer Lillian Hellman has describes as:

Old paint on canvas, as it ages, sometimes becomes transparent. When this happens it is possible, in some pictures, to see the original lines: a tree will show through a woman’s dress, a child makes way for a dog, a large boat is no longer on the open sea. That is called Pentimento, because the painter ‘repented’, changed his mind. Perhaps it would be as well to say that the old conception, replaced by a later choice, is a way of seeing and then seeing again.¹

This exegesis is then an attempt to examine the underwriting rather than the writing of Asylum, a desire to clarify the themes and concerns, rather than the historical research necessary to produce a work of historical fiction. Both can be seen as an attempt to hold up a mirror to my own world.

Asylum and this exegesis therefore seek to define, and explore, and express my own ideas that relate to what it means to live the Socratic good life, to rediscover what is important and in opposition to every political or cultural program that attempts to motivate people with beliefs encouraging others to be regarded as means, not ends (according to Kant’s formulation of the categorical imperative). If Asylum is therefore the method by which I hope to capture my understanding of a

¹ Hellman, L., (1979) Three (pg. 409)
newly troubling mood, in the form of an indefinable sense of expanding ‘negative’ possibilities, of the boundaries of tolerance and apathy being tested yet again, then it is also, as previously mentioned, an answer to a question that I and many others have asked - many times before. Put simply, this question is (Why?)

Walter Benjamin, writing about Fascism and its ‘perennial’ forms, in terms relevant to the treatment of history in Asylum, and the conception of its relevance to my own world, declared that ‘[t]he current amazement that the things we are experiencing are “still” possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge – unless it is knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.’² For my own purposes then, a question more appropriate than (Why?), asked by both Arendt and Todorov is Why Not? Why didn’t, and don’t some otherwise ordinary people participate, against their own best interests, in the persecution of others? As has often been pointed out, the failure to either ask this question, or to understand its answers, is merely another way of asking ‘when?’

In other words, it is the fruits of the relations between belief and behaviour, the conceptualisations of philosophy and the way we treat one another, day to day, that is the subject of this exegesis. In particular, the tensions between so-called anti-humanistic theories of subjectivity and humanism’s alleged dependence on a coherent selfhood (and therefore universal morality) will be examined after a discussion of belief, and ways of believing, in the light of some of the recent writings of Tzvetan Todorov, and others, regarding Humanism and communication (specifically how these ideas relate to the importance of the human subject being maintained as an end, not a means, as a relation, not an instrument.) The answers given here I hope will suffice to explain those choices made in Asylum regarding Mobius and his relationships with Monika, Gustav and Carl, expressions of belief similar to Todorov’s and Arendt’s discussions of redemption, particularly in relation to the narrow ambitions of Flade and the other scholars in Asylum, and therefore what might protect us from collaboration with

² Benjamin, W., (1973) Illuminations (pg. 257)
and submission to every doctrine that seeks to unify by war mongering and persecution.
2 – ‘Asylum’ in a Small Frame:

The story that remains a question, because it is only an answer ‘of sorts’, began with the discovery of an article in the Times, January 11 2000. The article entitled ‘How Himmler fell under the spell of witches’ briefly described the setting up in nineteen-thirty three, in Berlin, within the Ahnenerbe or the Society for Ancestral Heritage (for further reference see Simon Wiesenthal Center website) of the Hexen-Sonderauftrag, or Witch Special Work Unit, consisting of a team of academics tasked with the collation of a vast card-index of witchcraft trials. As part of their researches, the academics, who were known only by their initials, and two of whom are believed to have been concentration camp inmates ‘retrieved’ because of their specialist knowledge (Levin was their leader, a man who escaped at the end of the war and has never been found) received from Himmler 140,000 books from libraries and private collections all over Europe. As a result, some 33,846 cases of witchcraft trials were indexed (discovered in Schloss von Haugwitz by the Poles after the war) and various seminars held (one relating to the damage done to the German race by killing so many women) and papers released. The papers were of such a poor quality, however, that they came to nothing, although the card-index has been useful to contemporary historians, despite the fact that it tends to indicate the opposite of what the Nazis hoped for; that there had not been a concerted, concentrated effort by Christianity to destroy either a ‘native German religion’ or ‘Germanic womanhood’.

The image of academics poring over medieval texts in the light of an entirely predetermined end, and in the same manner constructing a vast Nazi semiotics relating to all kinds of other texts (ancient sites, works of art, architecture, literature, fairy tales, heraldic shields etc.) was in turn crystallised by a single question – why did Victor Klemperer, an assimilated German Jew, an academic like Husserl removed from his post because of the Nuremberg racial laws, write in August 1936, with such uncharacteristic vehemence?

If one day the situation were reversed and the fate of the vanquished lay in my hands, then I would let all of the ordinary folk go and even some of the leaders, who perhaps after all might have had honourable intentions and not known what they were doing. But I would have all of the intellectuals strung
up, and the professors three feet higher than the rest; they would be left hanging from the lampposts for as long as was compatible with hygiene.³

While the yearning for and eventual welcoming of the Stark von Oben, or ‘Strong One From Above’ as a result of Germany’s ‘loss’ in the First World War and subsequent economic hardships is well documented, as is the resurgence around that time of an interest in what might be termed today ‘New Age’ practices and therapies amongst the middle-classes, what this in fact meant, according to Nicholas Goodricke-Clarke, a Cambridge lecturer and specialist in ‘Aryan’ cults, was both a widespread distrust of liberalism and rationalism because ‘they tended to de-mystify time-honoured institutions and to discredit accepted beliefs and practices.’⁴ This conservative tendency and distrust of rationality, and democracy, also meant placing a greater emphasis upon a ‘new irrationalism…a product of the emotive and intuitive faculties, coupled with a fearful mistrust of analytical reason, materialism and empiricism.’⁵ While this distrust of reason and critical thinking was of course encouraged by the Nazi propaganda machine, as a means to manipulate the irrational hatreds and fears of a large number of Germans, the academic context was far from immune to its influence. Quite naturally, those academics who attempted to compete with the ideals of the regime were swiftly removed, leaving the field clear, much to the disgust of Klemperer and his kind, to those careerists and others cowed enough to ‘speak the new speak’, and re-examine their scholarship in the light of the agendas and claims of the new regime. In essence, what the Nazis hoped for was to ‘leapfrog’ back over the Enlightenment and into the so-called Dark Ages, reinstituting the imagined ‘pure’ and ancient society of caste-warriors and compliant peasantry, of pagan priests and dutiful maidens. There was no room in this Nibelungen fantasy for the Enlightenment forms of ‘Jew Rationality’, outside of the gains delivered to the military by the fields of science, of course. It was into this context that I wished to place Mobius, as a remnant of that membership of scholars whose unfashionable task remained yet to understand, in the light of a Socratic ‘learned ignorance’,

⁴ Goodricke-Clarke, N., (1992) The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and their Influence on Nazism (pg. 4)
⁵ Ibid. (pg. 58)
rather than by the new ideals of faith, if not blind belief, and therefore accession to the utopian conservative project.

If Nietzsche has been named as an influence over the Nazi ideal of a Superman elite, Schopenhauer on Hitler’s belief in the efficacy of the Will as agent of social change, and Wagner as responsible for both Hitler’s rabid anti-Semitism and nostalgic Romanticism (along with his high-school history teacher, a Dr Leopold Potsch) the genealogy is incomplete without the mention of several arch-Conservative volkish and occult scholars, if only because one of them appears in Asylum, men in general who had little to do with practical politics but who nevertheless ‘had the imagination and opportunity to describe a dream world that often underlay the sentiments and actions of more worldly men in positions of power and responsibility.’ Each of these ‘scholars’ had things in common; firstly, they were Austrian (Joseph Roth commonly depicts this Austrian fear and suspicion of the Slav peoples, and the parallel rejection of democracy and modernisation during the final stages of the collapse of the Hapsburg monarchy, similar to the lurch towards the right in the post-cold war Balkans), secondly, they were influenced by the theories of Social Darwinism and Russian theosophist Madame Blavatsky (herself hugely influenced by English occult fiction, interestingly enough) in particular Blavatsky’s loathing for the rationalism and materialism of Western culture.

Without going into too much detail about each of the three main ‘scholars’; Guido von List, Lanz von Liebenfels and Karl Maria Wiligut, it is perhaps enough to mention briefly their visions for the future of a Germany eventually unified by that other Austrian, Adolf Hitler. Of the first two, List’s blueprint called for the ruthless slavery of all non-Aryan peoples, a hierarchical and patriarchal state structure, and strict racial and marital laws (all of which were later codified in the Nuremberg Racial Laws), whilst Liebenfels’ recommendations included the slavery of non-Aryans, and if not their use as beasts of burden then their deportation to Madagascar (seriously considered by the Nazis as a solution to the ‘Jewish problem’) and/or ‘incineration’. The final scholar, Karl Maria Wiligut, the

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6 Ibid. (pg. 1)
only one to live to participate in the Third Reich, the so-called ‘Rasputin of Himmler’, given the rank of Brigadier in the SS and head of the Department for Pre-and Early History, responsible in large part for the SS ceremonial and use of Wewelsburg as order castle of the movement, achieved a great degree of political influence, if not over Hitler then certainly over Himmler, particularly in the area of successfully bestowing on a martial organisation a degree of ideological and traditional aura, similar to that of the Teutonic knights (until it was embarrassingly revealed that he had spent three years in an asylum because of ‘violence at home, including threats to kill his wife, grandiose projects, eccentric behaviour [and] a history of schizophrenia involving megalomaniac and paranoid delusions.’)  

These unlikely but nevertheless recognisable origins of Nazi ideology, in particular the influence exercised by this cabal of ultra-conservative volkish scholars, is intended in Asylum to serve as a backdrop, in the form of the narrative that takes place in Wewelsburg Castle - to Mobius’ merely human struggles to find himself a place of happiness in the world. These ‘Aryan’ scholars, for whom the importance of the abstractions of ‘Aryan freedom’ from the threatening existence and contamination of the untermensch, and consequent need for lebensraum and creation of a ‘Greater Germania’, meant that in essence the individual existed only to serve the interests of the totalitarian state. It was their fantastical but simplistic worldview that nevertheless encouraged the perpetuation of essentialist notions of ‘good’ and ‘evil’, and of ‘us’ and ‘them’, and therefore most decisively of projecting onto ‘them’ all of most the most negative and hateful characteristics explicit in their own worldview, as was common to both the witchcraft persecutions of the middle-ages, the various anti-Semitic pogroms, and the subsequent vilification and persecution of socialists, communists, democrats and ‘untermensch’ during the twelve years of the Nazi regime (and disturbingly of the recent descriptions of terrorists and ‘rogue’ states as ‘evil’, and the more subtle but no less deliberate attempts to dehumanise asylum seekers as disease carrying, barbaric, potential terrorists). In contrast to this ‘wider’ context, the umbrella of ideology beneath which the German citizens chose to either shelter or cower, are placed the ‘merely’ human needs of Mobius and Monika for love and friendship,

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7 Ibid. (pg. 182)
and of Gustav and Carl for succour and refuge, and thereby of the importance of responsibility and resistance in the face of a coercive conformism, one encouraged by exaggerating the difference between the persecutors and an increasingly vulnerable persecuted, and of a licensed intolerance and encouraged suspicion, all in the more clearly focussed context of village life. On the surface of it, the simple choices individuals make with regards to their acceptance of one another might seem a rather feeble antidote to the overwhelming power exercised by an incipient totalitarian regime. However, both for the narrative reasons of avoiding didacticism, and bearing in mind James Wood’s criticism of the work of Ibsen; that is the charge of ‘tying the moral shoelaces of his characters’\(^8\), and in the light of the discussions of Todorov and Arendt with regards to the question of (Why Don’t?) some people participate in the persecution or betrayal of others, despite overwhelming coercion and life threatening consequences, all of this results in the rather banal observation that such choices are made in every case by individuals, and that therefore it is at the site of individual experience that such questions might be explored, and answers sought.

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From my own experience, there is nothing either mysterious, or evil about killing, once the danger of killing has been removed; once it has been ‘licensed’ in other words. Let me describe:

You are nineteen years old, an addict who sponges an existence off prostitutes, a drug dealer and petty thief. Through one means or another you have found yourself without a passport, and therefore without an identity, washed up on foreign shores so to speak, although you haven’t the imagination to imagine, let alone the desire to be elsewhere. Precisely because you are a foreigner, you feel as though you should belong, and you do belong, in the same way that a ghost belongs. You are as yet uninterested in writing, and for that reason you are unsafe, there is no distance, although you are not above spending days in bed

reading, whenever possible. The glue that binds you to your books and sets you apart from the others is the drug, of course, a clear glue that has set hard around you. For this reason you are content to patrol the limited horizon of single city block, for the length of a year, and then another, by which time you are forced into exile by the police, who have already imprisoned most of your friends.

It is a nocturnal existence, as befits a ghost. A single street, crowded with bars and nightclubs and 'lie down' hotels is your haunt. You are not beneath sleeping with a woman just to get a place to sleep, or even a meal. You are not beneath encouraging others to try the drug, despite its consequences, just so long as you can work some for yourself.

But all of this is unimportant, if not irrelevant, because you are learning something. You are not learning to kill your feelings, because the drug, a fine anaesthetic does that for you. You are still capable of love, for example, but it is a love conditioned by your need, and the needs of others are at best opportunities, at worst anathema. You are not one of those selfish, self-destructive young men who demand with guile and importunity to be looked after, to be mothered by your lovers (you were a runaway child). This is because your own problems are, in the context of things, not only minor but meaningless. Despite your contrivances and manipulations, you find redemption in your worthlessness, which is just as well. You are a ghost, are you not?

What you are learning is something you should already know - that it is nothing to kill something that is nothing, in this case the young children who survive on the street by prostitution and theft. You befriend them, and yet one by one they are killed. You find their bodies in the alleys, sometimes left there for days. You watch as another is beaten to death by an angry mob, with sticks and stones. Another still is set on fire, and when his body is burned down to a stump, his friend, who has been forced to watch, is burned beside him. There is nothing you can do about any of this, except watch (you are forced to learn to watch). You watch as three young soldiers, playing up to a baying crowd, torture and break the limbs of three young men, then remove their heads with automatic gunfire, an artful, methodical performance. Your girlfriend, a teenage prostitute, is chained to a pole in the
police station and raped by six policemen; there is no recourse. A debtor is macheted across the forehead, and as the crowd gathers, he tries to speak. Every time he tries to speak the roof of his skull lifts comically, one cannot hear his words over the laughter. And not too far away, outside the city, several hundred young men, the pitiful remnants of a once powerful guerrilla army, are gunned down in a futile attempt to overrun the government positions. Their defence against machine gun nests? A ‘magic lotion’, prescribed for them by their high-priestess and General. At the same time, after a failed coup attempt, the vice-President is shot, burned, hacked into pieces and his organs are dropped from a helicopter over his tribal lands. The coroner’s verdict? Suicide.

The ‘people’ are not looked after by their government, and yet the slightest hint of war sends many into paroxysms of nationalistic fervour. Beneath the violence and cruelty there exists a carefully calibrated morality. Thieves must be burned, even if they steal because of hunger. Traitors must be shot, even if they are only questioning injustice, or corruption. To kill in these instances is not a crime, it is a responsibility. Even those killed seem to understand this, never once do you see a thief fight back, or complain in any way. You watch the face of a middle-aged woman you know well, a generally kind woman and mother, as she repeatedly plunges her keys into the face of a young thief. Her eyes are merely grim and determined, as though she were wringing the neck of a chicken. She makes way only for the young man carrying a paving stone, high above his head, which he uses to mercifully dispatch the poor boy. Yes, you recognise him. They were friends.

What is it that you think you understand? How much more do you need to see, before you believe you understand? Isn’t it just a fact of life, but of theirs, not yours? Kill, before you are killed? Or is it something more than that, something far more dangerous – isn’t the vulnerability of these poor wretched children a reproach upon the goodness of the killers? Isn’t this also what drives a man to beat his animal, or his wife, or his child? Or is it, as Bataille would suggest, the age old, sanctioned breaking of what is otherwise taboo? So that, when people are allowed to kill, ‘licensed’ to kill, therefore they kill?
And what is this unhealthy question that you cannot identify, except in your dreams? Will writing help you understand? And if so, why do you keep writing the same story, asking the same question, over and over again? Are you not listening? Are you still a ghost?
3. Belief – The Empty Canvas

Even if the person who doubts the evidence of his/her senses has traditionally been labelled either a philosopher, a mystic or a lunatic, so that, as Nietzsche said ‘[e]veryone wants the same thing, everyone is the same: whoever thinks otherwise goes voluntarily into the madhouse’\(^9\), even if the Buddhists, idealists and the quantum physicists assure me that the desk over which I work does not in fact exist, \textit{if one looks close enough}, most people would agree – there is much that needs to be taken for granted. We do not walk upon the earth as though it were a cloud.

Michel de Certeau, in his \textit{The Practice of Everyday Life}, describes as an example of a past belief that no longer defines practice - the joke, illustrative of the comic tradition of the \textit{Hagadah}, ‘Jews…are French people who, instead of no longer going to church, no longer go to synagogue.’\(^{10}\) What interests me, however, is not so much past beliefs that remain as empty practice, the husks that surround our ritualised behaviour, but rather those practices that continually define, and redefine belief.

In the same way, Certeau defines belief ‘not as the object of believing (a dogma, a program, etc.) but as the subject’s investment in a proposition, the act of saying it and considering it as true – in other words, a “modality” of the assertion and not its content.’\(^{11}\) This is an essential distinction to make, particularly in a multi-cultural, consumer society such as our own because ‘people want to produce it artificially…There are now too many things to believe and not enough credibility to go around.’\(^{12}\) This, however, does not necessarily remove the need for the practice of ‘investment’, nor the importance of all interrogations of ‘investment’ in desire/belief, the origins of which New Zealand poet Vincent O’Sullivan locates in childhood, when he says that ‘[for] a child reality is so often something…living

\(^9\) Lechte, J., opcit. (pg. 218)
\(^{10}\) De Certeau, M., (1984) \textit{The Practice of Everyday Life} (177)
\(^{11}\) Ibid. (pg. 178)
\(^{12}\) Ibid. (pg. 179)
and graspable and immediately there in front of you; and what is quite as real but you will never touch...[t]hat gap where for many of us longing begins.13

In other words, in a modern, multi-cultural society whose economic health is underwritten by increasing and varied consumption, our capacity to take things for granted (and to resist this) is manipulated in the realm of marketing, media and politics (in this sense, they are one and the same) precisely because our satisfactions depend upon our beliefs, and our beliefs upon our satisfactions. It is a banal but nevertheless important observation that modern democracies have succeeded to the extent that political power need not depend upon actual domination of the average citizen (as in a totalitarian system) but rather upon what Bataille calls our ‘discontinuities’ with one another.14

All cultures were once ‘shame’ cultures, and most still are. In these instances shame is a cohesive factor in encouraging us to conform to codes and standards of behaviour. One ‘without shame’ is therefore criminal, or at the very least ‘suspect’. If in the West it is true that one of the most decisive social changes (rued by conservatives) of the previous decades has been the ‘overthrowing’ of shame, particularly with regards to matters of gender, sexuality and race, this ‘overthrowing’ of shame, in the name of justice, freedom and pride, does not of course guarantee, in every case, a just, or ethical outcome (in that justice is a political matter, and ethics a private concern). For example, I have met many rapists and paedophiles who, despite their lowly place in the prison hierarchy, have managed to remain ‘unashamed.’ This is not a matter of conscience, or its lack, as one might imagine, although that too plays its part, but rather one of ‘triumphing’ over one’s shame via a pride in difference, and rebellion, or most commonly pseudo-philosophical appeals to ‘nature’ (as with Sade), both private and generalised, human and animal. In these cases there is a definite logic at play, as a means of reinforcing belief, or fantasy (she wanted it/the child and I were ‘lovers’). What is relevant here is not the fact that, even in a largely ‘shameless’ society, taboos and their transgressions still remain, but rather that there is always a crucial nexus between shame, the justifications accorded by belief, and personal

behaviour. It is this nexus, I feel, that accounts for ‘the banality of evil’ (to my mind, based upon what I have seen, all evil is banal, or at the very least ‘human’), whether in the case of a technocrat such as Eichmann signing transport documents, or a mob slaughtering a homeless child in the name of reducing crime, or a soldier pleased at the prospect of putting his/her training into effect, or even the case of the feckless writer/academic acting under the ‘radical impulse’, for the sake of fashion, or disgust, or even for the sake of radicalism itself (which is, let’s face it, a safe, sterile, technocratic deviancy, but not one without possible implications - as was the case with Celine’s disgust at Modernity, and subsequent welcoming of the Nazi barbarism, or Heidegger’s collaboration with the misconceived Nazi ‘Platonic Republic’).

If it is still the case that, as Walter Benjamin believed, ‘the family is the rotten, dismal edifice in whose closets and crannies the most ignominious instincts are deposited’\(^\text{15}\), then this description of the secretion of relegated shame within family life can only have been compounded in the modern information age by what Certeau calls the ‘real talk[ing] constantly.’\(^\text{16}\) In other words, the narrations of the ‘real’ one receives at the hands of a constant media, whether that of print journalism, or television, via what Certeau calls ‘covering the event’, all aim to ‘make the real present, to speak in the name of facts and thus to cause the semblance it produces to be taken as a referential reality. Hence, those to whom these legends are directed are not obliged to believe what they don’t see (a traditional position) but to believe what they see (a contemporary position.)\(^\text{17}\) One example of this might be to point out the way images of irate and desperate asylum seekers at Woomera, protesting at the conditions of their incarceration (invisible), were able to raise both the ire of those opposed to mandatory detention, and simultaneously confirm in the majority the suspicions raised so successfully in the previous election campaign - that these people were ‘not like us’, that they were violent and unfit to live in our society. On the other hand, images taken of the asylum seekers that might have ‘humanised’ them, or ‘personalised’ them were, according to evidence presented to the ‘children

\(^{15}\) Benjamin, W., (1986) Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings (pg. 91)
\(^{16}\) De Certeau, M., opcit. (pg. 185)
\(^{17}\) Ibid. (pg. 187)
overboard’ Senate inquiry on April 17, 2002 (pp1151-1152) explicitly forbidden by order of the Defence Minister’s press secretary in instructions given to the Defence Department.18

The presence of such inescapable simulacra (unquestioned fact, assimilated fiction) in the home means that there is little need for observation of the sort practiced by totalitarian governments. The home becomes therefore the site of observation, of safety, but also the site of answers, not questions, of invested beliefs in other words. If for Todorov the aim of totalitarian governments is to encourage belief through repression, to the extent that ‘the desire to believe is stronger than the desire to see’19, then for Certeau the central problem is no longer being observed but observation itself, where seeing has become believing (with at least the possibility of resistance - one is condemned to hope, after all) and where one merely communicates what one sees, as a substitute for experience and enquiry. As Canetti in Crowds and Power has pointed out, this ‘passive reception’ is most commonly an aspect of crowd behaviour, and yet the podium and loudspeaker and public space are no longer necessary (the ‘people’ need to be reached, to see one another as believers in the same thing, but crowds are always dangerous). In other words, what we have instead is a galvanising of whispers, although the message is always the same - ‘Be unafraid at your own risk!’

The utility of shame, it might be said, has therefore been replaced by the efficacy of fear. If shame depends upon the gaze of others who ‘care’ enough, and are close enough to dare communication, fear is the modern equivalent in societies where we look not only to our relationships with others for instruction but also to the realm of information, of the ‘real talking constantly’. Unfortunately, however, if shame encourages self-censorship, for the sake of group cohesion, for better or worse, fear needs an ‘other’, and so promotes hostility and suspicion, regardless of the true state of affairs. It is a prosaic observation to make that in the West, despite increasing standards of living and longer life expectancies, people are not necessarily happier. While the reasons for this are complex, one obvious factor is

that levels of fear have not declined, and if anything appear to be increasing with the recent experiences of terrorism and war. While fear and belief have always been related, mutually dependent and even interchangeable, the consequences of believing not what we cannot see, as was once the case, but of what is presented to us (beliefs which in any case exist alongside one another and are often complementary, something Certeau perhaps fails to recognise) means that now more than ever it is ‘legitimate to inquire into the opportunities it offers for changing “belief” into “mistrust”, into “suspicion,” and indeed into denunciation, as well as into the opportunities for citizens to manipulate politically what serves as a circular and objectless credibility for political life itself.’

20 This disguised reformulation of the Enlightenment project sits nicely alongside the influence of Heidegger’s belief, cited in Joanna Hodge’s *Heidegger and Ethics*, that ‘it is redundant to construct metaphysical systems, since everyday life has taken on the form of a metaphysical system. The consequent erosion of the everydayness of everyday life is in part an erasure of the autonomy of the ethical mode of questioning.’

21 It is this same ‘erosion’ and ‘erasure’, in the context of *Asylum*, whereby the tools of propaganda and surveillance reinforce an atmosphere of suspicion and malevolence, which mean that the characters in the story find themselves adrift in a world where nobody knows any longer what is true and what is contrived, what is acceptable and what is dangerous, according to the usual means of examining the world around, and its relation to one’s ‘conscience’. How then, in our own era, where belief is continually reinvigorated because of the existence of a ‘supermarket of beliefs’, is such an inquiry into changing ‘belief’ into ‘mistrust’ to take place? But first, to believing what we cannot see.

20 De Certeau, M., *opcit* (pg. 189)
21 Hodge, J., (1995) *Heidegger and Ethics* (pg. 3)
4. A Tree Will Show Through a Woman’s Dress

Every word wants to be taken literally, else it decays into a lie. But one mustn’t take any word literally, else the world becomes a madhouse.

Musil, The Man Without Qualities

One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.

C.G. Jung

You notice at the barber that many of the customers collect their hair off the floor, making sure to take it home with them. Your girlfriend collects her toe and fingernails and flushes them down the toilet. This kind of thing no longer strikes you as odd.

One night, you return to a lover’s apartment to find that her husband has arrived home a day early. You only notice when you enter the bedroom half undressed, where he is waiting. You shrug at him (you know him, and like him) and collect your clothes, and shoes, and leave.

You are unaccountably cold to her, when she finds you that night. You have nothing to say to her. Her approach even strikes you as perverse, and so you are as cruel to her as she is cruel to him. He loves her, and she loves you, and you want nothing more to do with either of them.

It comes as no surprise to hear then, from a friend, that she has visited X, to put a spell on you. To harm you? Or win you back?

The nightmares begin shortly after. You dream you are at a cemetery. Hiding behind a gravestone, you are terrified, but compelled to watch as a group of people, their faces hidden, perform a rite over another grave. You can’t make out the name on the headstone, but feel that it is your own. You creep closer, to try to see, when all your instincts tell you to run. You make a noise, and they all turn to you. It is she!
When they begin to chase you, you wake up screaming. You are soaked, and your bed sheets are soaked, in an ice cold sweat.

You have this dream every night, until eventually you are afraid to sleep. The terror in this dream is something you have never felt before. You have never felt even remotely as afraid as this, whilst awake. Is it guilt? Or is it the spell?

Finally you visit Y, a friend, who knows about such things. He tells you what you must do. You must take the carving he provides home, and picture it, will it to be her. Then you must take it to the river, which you do, and toss it from the bridge into the waters, which you do. That evening, the nightmares stop...

One doesn’t have to ‘go’ into history to discover examples of either magical practice, or magical thinking. However, because it relates to Asylum in theme and content, the lessons of the witchcraft persecutions of the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries are relevant.

The reasons for this are threefold, and interrelated. Firstly, there are many popular misconceptions relating to the persecutions in general, misconceptions that in my opinion tell us much about a contemporary desire to believe in what was never there (history as longing) and secondly because the results are informative with regard to the tensions surrounding everyday communication. Finally, and more obviously, the fact remains that various leaders of the Third Reich were interested in the metaphysical/occult, in large part stemming from a desire to rediscover in ‘native religion’ or mystical thinking something that predated Christianity. Indeed, Schopenhauer, who had an enormous influence over the ideas of Adolf Hitler (belief as longing) as shall be demonstrated, called magic ‘practical metaphysics’ (taken from Bacon’s definition of magic as experimental or empirical metaphysics) and described the means by which it not only worked but could be manipulated, reflected perhaps in the following poem attributed to Hitler, dated to the Great War, and cited in Cornish’s The Jew of Linz:

I often go on bitter nights
To Wotan’s oak in the quiet glade
With dark powers to weave a union –
The runic letters the moon makes with its magic spell
And all who are full of impudence during the day
Are made small by the magic formula!
They draw shining steel – but instead of going into combat
They solidify into stalagmites.
So the false ones part from the real ones –
I reach into the nest of words
And then give to the good and just
With my formula blessings and prosperity.22

It is testament, therefore, both to our willingness to believe, for psycho-political reasons perhaps, and a desire to reduce complexity to simplicity, that, for example, the ideas of historian Margaret Murray are not only still in currency, but outside the discipline from whence they emerged are perhaps more widely believed now than at any other time (the growth of Wicca is one example). Her book The Witch Cult in Western Europe (1921) claimed that witches were in fact the matriarchal descendents of an ancient Cult of Diana, persecuted as rivals to the church. Millions of women were supposed to have been murdered by a patriarchal orthodoxy intent on wiping out all traces of this ‘cult’. Despite immediate and compelling refutations, her influence has endured.23 While the reasons for this enduring belief are no doubt complex (belief as practice) and similar to the desire of the Nazis, albeit without the racist ideology, to rediscover in such a religion the means to a more healthy relationship with the natural world, it is also expressive of a worldview that seeks to introduce a practical, interpretive and symbolic element into the realm of intersubjectivity. This communicative, practical aspect of magical, or mystical thinking is only relevant here because it was used to manipulate belief with such efficiency by both the persecutors of witches and the leaders of the Third Reich (and contemporary fundamentalist and authoritarian thinkers of all stripes – particularly wherever the term ‘evil’ ascribes a malevolence beyond physical acts). If ‘[m]agical activity is a kind of dynamo supplying the mechanism of practical life with the emotional current that drives

it…where the emotion evoked is an emotion valued on account of its function in practical life"24, then similarly, for Bataille, mystical thinking:

brings to a world dominated by thought connected with our experience of physical objects (and by the knowledge developed from this experience) an element which finds no place in our intellectual architecture except negatively as a limiting factor…Objects are identified with discontinuity, whereas mystical experience, as far as our strength allows us to break off our own discontinuity, confers on us a sense of continuity.25

The widespread use of magical thinking (rather than the practice of diabolical witchcraft, which was a scholarly invention) in early modern Europe therefore served the function of explaining causal relationships, according to a logical system, with the purpose of unifying subject-object-subject relations in an emotional/mystical/shame/fear nexus.

I say that this was used by the leaders of the Third Reich for propagandistic purposes because Hitler, as a disciple of Schopenhauer, who believed that the existence of magical thinking in all cultures meant that ‘besides the regular way of producing change in the world by means of the causal nexus of bodies, there must be another quite different way that does not rest on the causal nexus at all’26, and that this ‘different way’ outside the causal order was in fact the Will at work - this meant that the world was in fact ‘the Will as perceived by the senses.’27 Hitler, then, was able (in his own terms) to unify his Will with that of the people, so that:

My success in initiating the greatest people’s movement of all time is due to my never having done anything in violation of the vital laws and the feelings of the mass. These feelings may be primitive, but they have the resistance and indestructibility of natural qualities...At a mass meeting, thought is eliminated...Don’t waste your time over ‘intellectual’ meetings and groups drawn together by mutual interests. Anything you may achieve with such folk today by means of reasonable explanation may be erased tomorrow by an opposite explanation. But what you tell the people in the mass, in a receptive state of fanatical devotion, will remain like words received under an hypnotic influence, ineradicable, and impervious to every reasonable explanation.28

24 Cornish, K., opcit. (pg. 150)
25 Bataille, G., opcit. (pg. 23)
26 Cornish, K., opcit. (pg. 155)
27 Ibid. (pg. 154)
28 Ibid. (pg. 148)
One example of this ‘effect’ should suffice, a description of a 1938 rally at Breslau provided by a German teenager, and cited in Davies and Moorhouse’s history of Breslau - Microcosm: Portrait of a Central European City:

At that moment, I felt as if the whole Schlossplatz and the thousands of spectators would explode like a colossal bomb. The roar of enchantment became unbearable…Of course, I was screaming like everyone else with all my strength. The wonderment carried me away. Apart from that, one can’t escape from mass hysteria. I myself wanted to participate, to be at one with that wonderful company…For a few brief moments, it promised the unobtainable, a glimpse of immortality.29

This ‘unification’ of the will of the leader, and the mob, is clearly a long way from Goethe’s conception that Germany is nothing, and that rather, each individual German is everything.30 It is also dramatic testament to Walter Benjamin’s complaint that ‘the greatest of all European achievements…the right to lead lives independent of the community…had completely deserted Germany.’31

In the same way that various scholars helped turn fantasy into National Socialist ideology, and in some cases into practice, what historian Margaret Murray has been most criticised for is her literal-mindedness, in taking fantasy for fact, even fantasy induced under torture, denying, in other words, that ‘fantasy is a genuine experience’.32 Even if the current literature suggests a figure of around 40,000 executions of ‘witches’ across Europe over several centuries, the bare majority of whom were women, what is not disputed is that ‘the belief in sorcery and witchcraft was so pervasive among villagers that the associated activities [e.g. spells, counter spells, conversations and trials] dominated their imaginative world.’33 The role of fantasy and its relation to fear (of what cannot be seen) in this context accounts for the fact that the greatest bouts of persecution generally occurred in the times of greatest uncertainty and change (excluding during war, for obvious reasons) when crops failed and starvation and disease were prevalent. The role of fantasy as the currency linking native magical practices with an imposed

31 Benjamin, W., (1986) opcit. (pg. 27)
32 Briggs, R., opcit. (pg. 39)
33 Behringer, W., (1997) Witchcraft Persecutions in Bavaria: Popular magic, religious zealotry and reason of state in early modern Europe (pg. 11)
Christian demonology, and ultimately persecution is important. Unlike genocide, with its emphasis on exterminating the visibly uniform, the fear generated in times of turmoil by the hidden ‘enemy within’, maintained by the fantasies and practices designed to identify and protect against threats of maleficence, real or imagined, had terrible consequences for those who were vulnerable, particularly beggars, vagrants, unmarried women, widows and the aged - all those who were different, in other words, ‘unnecessary’ and ‘unproductive’, and therefore threatening in one way or another (for reasons of guilt, or jealousy) until a sinister use was found for them.

Although the rule of law was strong throughout this time, so that records were scrupulously kept, and young lawyers ‘cut their teeth’ on witchcraft trials (because of the greater degree of ambiguity) where judges and court officials presided over the use of torture (which was used in all variety of criminal trials) and where innocence was a more common outcome than guilt, in short, where execution was in fact a rare outcome in response to the charge of witchcraft, one crucial factor can be identified in determining the length and breadth of the persecution (a factor hinted at in Asylum, in the village of S.). That is, the fact that accuser and accused were generally well known to one another (while the larger number of accused were women, so too were their accusers). This was both the result of village and city life, crowded and stifling in many respects, and the tensions surrounding personal relationships. It is clear that one had more to fear from the interventions of one’s neighbours than the church or state. This is both similar and different to being denounced in a totalitarian state, similar in that the denouncer or spy might be well known to the accused, but different in that the act of denouncing was more often the result of fear than ideology or gain. To bring a charge of witchcraft against another was a serious matter, in that it was hard to prove, and because failing to prove the case could lead to serious repercussions for the accuser, including confiscation of property and even execution.

One example of a ‘classical’ case should be sufficient, taken from the Maleficus Maleficarum, or ‘Hammer of Witches’ written by the ‘scholars’ Institorus and Sprenger (responsible for much of the demonology, and therefore much of the subsequent persecution in the following centuries), a description of a persecution
in a small German town whose crops and orchards had been devastated by a hailstorm in the fifteenth century:

…when this event became known through the notary of the Inquisition and because of the clamour of the people, an inquisition became necessary, in as much as some, yes almost all the townsfolk held that such a thing had come about through bewitchment, with the consent of the councillors an inquisition was held by us in legal form for fourteen days into heresy, namely witchcraft, and proceedings were brought against at least two persons, who were in evil repute with the others, who were present in no small numbers. The name of one, a bath-house keeper, was Agnes, and that of the other Anna of Mindelheim.34

Both of these women were executed, as indicated, by popular demand. What is also well known are the lengths the authorities sometimes went to secure a confession, if the evidence presented by others was insufficient. The following case, that of Konrad Stoecklin, the subject of the book The Shaman of Obersdorf by Wolfgang Behringer, currently Professor of History at York University, and with whom I have been in communication regarding the writing of Asylum, describes the torture of an Alpine shepherd indiscreet enough to mention to a friend that at night, when his wife was asleep, he flew (a lucid dream?) over the mountains:

When we reminded him of this point only, and he did not wish to admit it, as always, he was handed over to the Master for hard torture, orders having been given, and at 2 in the afternoon he was racked and until 4 he was strewn with fire, pitch and brandy, mixed with gunpowder. And also harshly tormented with two red hot irons which were placed under his arms, so that his skin was burned from his genitals to the head, but he would not confess or say the least thing.35

Little wonder that after subsequent tortures the poor shepherd confessed all and was executed! This case came at a time before the main concentrations of persecution, which can be said to have lasted roughly from the end of the sixteenth century to midway through the seventeenth. During this time of consolidation of power by both church and state, of a growing authoritarianism and cultural

34 Ibid. (pg. 77)
conservatism in Northern Europe in general, some of the more infamous aspects of the witchcraft persecutions were played out:

Executions were ‘celebrated’ in such theatrical style that the literature speaks of a ‘liturgy of punishment’ and a ‘theatre of death’. Tens of thousands gathered to witness these demonstrations of the power of the state and of the law…an execution of several witches in Munich in 1600 became so famous that it was not only recounted in numerous contemporary broadsheets and poems, but will still being cited as an example in a ‘Handbook for Townsfolk and Countryfolk’ printed at Leipzig in 1744.36

If it is the case, as suggested previously, that we no longer need to gather together to witness the ‘demonstrations of the power of the state’, in that the recent wars of ‘spectacle’ have been selectively televised (a return to Foucault’s early modern ‘public’ punishment rather than private incarceration of the ‘guilty’?), then the means of critiquing what is ‘presented to us’ are nevertheless the same, and to some extent born in ‘the crucible’ of the witchcraft persecutions of the middle-ages. While the level and ferocity of persecution began to peter out during the latter part of the seventeenth, the ‘iron century’, the reasons for which are fairly clear, brought about by emigration, greater prosperity and the delayed arrival of the Enlightenment in Northern Europe, what is most telling is the effect of the latter upon legal processes. As early as the sixteenth century, writers such as Montaigne had criticised the persecutions for their cruelty and irrational bent. What is less known is that throughout the period various scholars, writers, lawyers, priests and philosophers continued to combat the zeal of the persecutors (secular and religious scholars, Catholic and Protestant) with varying degrees of success. These reformers effectively used the only means at their disposal to dissent and alter: the forums of scholarly debate, the courts of law and places of legislation. As much as the courage of individuals, it was also the devolution of power amongst the various courts, free cities and bishoprics that made this possible, as well as a pre-existing tolerance of dissent in certain places (it was the disappearance of the latter two factors with the coming of nationalism and its technologies of control that finally brought about the birth of totalitarianism – hence Derrida’s recent call in the Writer’s Parliament for the reinstatement of contemporary ‘cities of refuge’). In this newer, more secular and liberal context,

36 Behringer, W., (1997) opcit. (pg. 102)
the result of a greater cross-fertilisation between learning and law, the final ‘nail’ in the coffin of witchcraft persecution was simply that torture would no longer be employed as an interrogative tool, so that right away the secondary accusations made under duress were removed. In Northern Europe, from that time on, therefore, argument and evidence became the preferred tools of both the courts and academe, at least in principle, a process whose necessity is nowadays taken largely for granted, even when its imperfections, as we have recently witnessed, mean that evidence can nevertheless be ‘sexed up’, and conformism remain encouraged by the simplistic demands of patriotism.

In retrospect however, the writings of witchcraft persecution historians Robin Briggs and Wolfgang Behringer seem to agree on one important factor, important in particular for the thesis of a writer such as Daniel Goldhagen, whose research indicates that the German people were far more complicit in the destruction of European Jewry than previously imagined (and important therefore for the atmosphere of general complicity in Asylum). What is clear in the history of the witchcraft persecutions is that ‘in principle persecutions seem to be found when the interests of the people and the authorities coincided…A purely official inquisition into witchcraft, such as is often assumed…was never behind the beginning of the persecution.’ And again, ‘[w]itchcraft persecutions were conducted when the interests of the authorities coincided with those of their subject’s. If the population actively opposed a witch hunt, it ended quickly. If the authorities opposed a persecution, it never even started.’ This observation, that persecution can only happen with the complicity of both people and government, even in a rigidly hierarchical and conservative society such as that of the middle ages, and even in the context of a totalitarian society such as that of Nazi Germany (whose euthanasia program and transportation of ‘non-Aryans’ married to ‘Aryans’ were both stalled by public opinion) has nevertheless important implications for liberal western democracies such as our own, where ‘spin’ (more playful than propaganda) takes the place of terror, and ‘believing what we see’ replaces ‘believing what we don’t see’. In other words, the freedoms inherent in the liberal democratic system will protect its citizens (it is only non-U.S. citizens

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37 Briggs, R., opcit. (pg. 181)
38 Behringer, W., (1997) opcit. (pg. 389)
who are being detained without charge in that country) merely to the extent that the laws remain to protect them, whatever the vagaries of public opinion and governmental doctrine. It should never be forgotten that the Nazi regime came to power by way of legitimate elections, and it was only subsequent to this that the rights and freedoms of the people were annulled, one by one, in the name of protecting ‘national security’. It is not my intention to suggest that some of the recent changes made in the United States with regards to privacy and surveillance by the Office of Homeland Security (which are being roundly resisted) and here in Australia with the granting of extra powers of detention and interrogation to A.S.I.O. - might in any way lead to the horrors wrought by the Nazis against certain members of the German population. It is merely my intention to point out that in Nazi Germany those changes didn’t happen overnight, but in fact accrued rather slowly (it was some ten years after the accession to power that the ‘final solution’ was finally conceived, and even then away from the eyes and ears of the world). Before that time, for the majority of German citizens at least, life not only continued as before, but might also be said to have measurably improved. The idea that one should remain unconcerned at the removal of certain checks and balances put in place originally to protect citizens from their own government is an idea, in my opinion, predicated upon a naïve trust and the misguided belief that somehow - ‘since S11 the world has changed’. This idea, to reiterate, in the words of Walter Benjamin, is ‘not philosophical’...[because] the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.’

The reason such a view of history is untenable, in my opinion, informs one of the main themes of Asylum. At the very least the belief, reinforced by the Nazi regime, borne of the claim that there were ‘evil’ agents who wanted to harm its citizens, meant that individuals were encouraged not only to be vigilant, but also to be hateful and ruthless, to betray one another and openly persecute those labelled as suspicious, in other words to take upon themselves the worst aspects (albeit illusory) of those ‘others’. In this sense, the view of history informed by my own experiences and related in the concerns of Asylum, evidenced in both the Nazi years and the centuries of the witchcraft persecutions, can be summed up by the following personal observation – that when encouraged, or given license to openly persecute others, some people will openly persecute

39 Benjamin, W., (1973) opcit. (pg. 257)
others. When given the license to prosecute others, according to laws that allow for such prosecution, government agencies will prosecute/persecute others (as suggested by Briggs and Behringer, it is only when these two factors become aligned that violent persecution occurs).

It is my own belief in the truth of these two statements that forms the thematic basis of both Asylum and this exegesis. While the scope of discussion in this exegesis is by necessity philosophically broader, it is yet in the exploration of personal behaviour, something encouraged by both the demands of narrative and the things that I have personally witnessed (ordinary people doing harm to other ordinary people) that I am essentially interested, particularly the role that fantasy and belief play in the processes and justifications afforded by the persecution of others.

What role then did fantasy and belief play in the persecutions at a personal level in medieval Europe? What made ordinary Europeans offer up their neighbours and even family to humiliation and torment and occasionally destruction? The most readily believable argument is again made by Briggs, who found that:

[t]here is likely to have been a considerable overlap between poorly integrated personalities and inability to prosper in small communities. Those who felt themselves to be repeatedly disadvantaged, while routinely provoking antagonisms, would also have been unusually bad at disguising their hostile fantasies, so that a self-reinforcing pattern would have been established. Everyone would have found it easy to slip witches into their inner theatres, as classic personality figures, probably finding comfort in displacing hatreds they could not readily admit to onto more acceptable substitutes.40

This observation that fear is a great motivator of hatred, particularly racial hatred (an obvious feature relating to traditional black/white relations in this country), is particularly marked by the demands of conformism in societies or cultures that are suspicious of difference (‘the nail that sticks out will get hammered back in’ they say in Japan, or ‘fit in or get fucked’ they say in the Australian army). The conservative tendency to prefer certainty over ambiguity, and therefore ‘action’ over ‘inaction’, featured heavily in the medieval witchcraft persecutions, the

40 Briggs, R., opcit. (pg. 387)
motivations of the Nazis, and in my opinion the recent war in Iraq. It would therefore seem that the aims of the Enlightenment, with its secular emphasis and belief in reason as a tool to question traditional beliefs and systems of control, and its hope that with sufficient education and opportunities humankind might ‘transcend’ what Kant called our ‘immaturity’ as a species, in particular our apparent need for superstitions that project dissatisfactions onto others, might appear utopian in the light of subsequent events (unless it is properly regarded as an unfinished, and unfinishable process). For Robin Briggs, this is precisely because ‘[i]t remains an open question whether most people do not retain a not-so-secret preference for magical rather than logical ideas. Perhaps certain kinds of analytical thought do not come naturally to us, or have such unpalatable consequences that we are always looking for escape routes from them.’\footnote{Wedgewood, C.V., (1973) \textit{The Thirty Years War} (pg. 382)} A new emphasis on critical thinking and a humanism born of the return to direct readings of the Classical texts (hadn’t Socrates brought philosophy down from heaven to earth?) had come to the aid of the persecuted in the early modern age, via the intercession of thoughtful and compassionate reformers, and often at great personal risk, so that the question articulated by Arendt and Todorov as ‘why don’t some do as most others do?’ becomes crucial. Valuable too is the lesson of how ‘fantasies can achieve a causal status once they have been institutionalised in beliefs, values and social groups. Fantasies are…an important symptom of impending cultural changes and political action.’\footnote{Goodricke-Clarke, N., opcit. (pg. 1)} In the case of the birth of the Enlightenment, and the resulting diminishment of the power of the church, this meant that ‘a new emotional urge had to be found to fill the place of spiritual conviction; national feeling welled up to fill the gap.’\footnote{Ibid. (pg. 409)} How the ‘creatures’ of nationalism, and \textit{laissez faire} capitalism, and ultimately totalitarianism, were born out of this simple project of questioning traditional beliefs, values and attitudes, so that the project itself came to be blamed for both those responses made against it, and those that have taken advantage of its limited claims, will be examined next in greater detail.

\footnote{Ibid. (pg. 409)}\footnote{Goodricke-Clarke, N., opcit. (pg. 1)}\footnote{Wedgewood, C.V., (1973) \textit{The Thirty Years War} (pg. 382)}
5. A Child Makes Way for a Dog

‘The sparrows sang about it from the roofs’
A German soldier, Lublin, Poland. 1942

From the window of the nearly empty bus you watch as the forest closes around you. The forest reminds you, in its uniformity and measured distance, of Canetti’s idea that the crowd symbol of the Germans was the army, but that the army was more than the army, it was the forest too, marching in conspicuous rhythm, orderly and impersonal, a place not to escape from but a place in which to escape, from discontinuity into uniformity, away into the safely diminished horizon.

Suddenly you are there - Wewelsburg castle, the site of Himmler’s SS ‘Vatican’ and Niederhagen concentration camp, all but disappeared, whose inmates worked to their deaths in the realisation of his most famous ‘project’. Whilst inside the castle scholars prescribed appropriate SS wedding ceremonial (‘The speaker’s address is to end in a “Sieg Heil” to the Fuhrer and the young married couple. The rest of the wedding feast is to be filled with joy. If there is a possibility to dance, those present should dance’45) beneath them in the valley the concentration camp was filled with those rejected by ‘the healthy common sense of the Folk’46, including Jews, Adventists (much favoured because they refused to escape) gypsies but also ‘prostitutes, beggars, tramps, pimps, traffic offenders, alcoholics etc. 47 who all slaved under murderous conditions.

The castle itself is not much to speak of; an early Renaissance building now used as a youth hostel. The museum on one floor is filled with artworks and items relating to its prior incarnations as monastery and council house/cultural centre. The only testament to its more recent history has long since been removed. It was a plaque dedicated to those who died in the camp, but was removed (after being

46 Ibid. (pg. 83)
47 Ibid. (pg. 82)
consistently defaced) because it ‘allegedly disturbed the participants of the International Folk Dance Festival which takes place in the castle every two years.48 There is no mention in the ‘exhibition’ of Wiligut and his trove of rings, or Himmler and his grand plans. You know only from your own research that the basement room, a prison cell once used to house witches awaiting trial (cold stone walls and floor, a single barred window) was also used to house Jews rounded up in an effort to make the town Judenfrei, Jews who were subsequently shipped off to their deaths.

Only in recent years (it was resisted for three decades) has a small museum been allowed by the town council, outside the castle walls. The museum documents the accounts of survivors and the deeds of their captors. Uniforms and plans are on display, as well as photographs of the dead. The visitors book is a measure of the tension between the town’s, and the nation’s willingness to forget, and the need of others to remember. The two sides compete on paper, the one calling for guilt to be absolved, or denying guilt altogether, the other for an attempt at understanding.

As you reach the end of your reading, is it possible? - the final statement is dated the same day of your own visit. Between an acid-house smiley face, and a swastika, is written with an exclamation ‘Echt Ganz!’ or ‘This is great!’, referring mockingly to the ‘entertaining’ scenes around you. You look up at the volunteer guide, who is watching from behind her desk. She indicates with a shrug and a jerk of her head the group of German teenagers sitting listless and bored on the museum steps, waiting to be taken away. I must look dismayed, because she shrugs again, although her hurt is obvious.

The enduring fascination with Hitler and the Third Reich means that an enormous amount has been written about the rise of National Socialism, the Second World War and the Shoah. The atrocities in particular have been well documented, and it is not my intention to reproduce them here. As to the rise of National Socialism, the contribution of various economic factors such as the inflation and subsequent

48 Ibid. (pg. 115)
depression (SA Commander in Breslau, Edmund Heines, ‘noted that 60 per cent of his men were long term unemployed’\textsuperscript{49} are now taken for granted. Others such as Elias Canetti point to the ‘insult of Versailles’ and its demand that the entire German army be demobilised (he seems to believe that this is a greater factor than the harsh economic repayments demanded under the treaty). Canetti goes so far as to say that traditionally, ‘anyone who excluded himself [from the army] was no German.’\textsuperscript{50} Even Nietzsche, it seems, took as the inspiration for his work, \textit{The Will to Power}, the illuminating sight of a cavalry squadron on routines - that most perfect representation of unified will and uniformity. Others have pointed to the importance of Social Darwinism to the ideology of the Nazis, a pseudo-scientific theory that as we shall see has led many to blame science and by inference rationality itself for the atrocities of the Reich, while others correctly prefer to find fault in the effects of an exaggerated Romanticism and a violent irrationalism at the core of its ideology. This, and the so-called German rejection of liberalism and modernism in preference for Prussian authoritarianism, is what is supposed to have been manipulated by Hitler. Historian Sebastian Haffner’s compelling thesis on the other hand is his belief that:

…many things bolstered Nazism and modified its character, but its roots lie here: in the experience of war – not by German soldiers at the front, but by German schoolboys at home…A childish illusion, fixed in the minds of children born in a certain decade and hammered home for four years, can easily reappear as a deadly serious political ideology twenty years later.\textsuperscript{51}

When I read this statement I couldn’t help thinking of my own childhood, when I and my brother wanted so much to be ‘war heroes’ just like our father (except he could not be a ‘real’ hero because he had the bad fortune to survive - for the child, and I suspect not always for children, war is more about the fantasy of dying rather than killing – Thanatos \textit{is} Eros, perhaps at least in the prepubescent male). This is relevant to my own thesis only because, as Haffner has pointed out, aside from the terrible physical consequences of war, even when the opponent is hopelessly ‘outgunned’, the moral damage necessary to both create the atmosphere sufficient that a war might be waged, in the movement towards war, and the

\textsuperscript{49} Davies, N., Moorhouse, R., opcit. (pg. 335)

\textsuperscript{50} Cannetti, E., (1973) Crowds and Power (pg. 210)

\textsuperscript{51} Haffner, S., (2002) \textit{Defying Hitler: A Memoir} (pg. 14)
damage done to subsequent generations, even amongst the victors, is relevant to the early years of incipient Nazism. What fantasies were shared between the state and its people? What desires and what beliefs influenced the one and the other? And how might our own populace behave in an economic and social crisis rivalling that of Germany in the early part of the Twentieth century?

While the effects of the inflation of 1923 and the depression upon Germany are well known, what is less well known is that Berlin was for a long time the centre of the European working class movement. The effects of Industrialisation there were more pronounced and enduring, so that, for example, in Berlin in 1895, according to Alexandra Richie in her Faust’s Metropolis: A History of Berlin, the average life expectancy of a female factory worker was twenty-six.\(^{52}\) That Nazism and Soviet communism had common roots in poverty, resentment and war is historically obvious. The lesson, however, of how Red Berlin was so easily converted to Nazism relates not only to the fact that, as Joseph Roth has observed, ‘morality depends on the stability of the currency’\(^{53}\), or that hunger and despair breed anger and intolerance. The crucial fact is that the persecutions of Jews or other minorities could not have proceeded without the tacit complicity of a majority of people. Most alarming however is that such persecutions were made possible without a vast change in the attitude of the ‘masses’. All that changed was the context; the potentialities were already there. In other words, ‘Berliners were naïve, cowardly, greedy or indifferent in an age when such weaknesses could mean the difference between life and death.’\(^{54}\) And yet, the common self-image of the ‘true’ Berliner encapsulated ‘collective wit, a disrespect for authority, suspicion of leaders and tolerance.’\(^{55}\) The difference between this self-image (familiar to any Australian) and its actuality under the Reich, what Australian writer Robert Dessaix calls the failure to break the covenant between lived life and the stories told about it\(^{56}\) relates similarly to a society wherein an ‘artist-caste’ ‘lived in a world of suspended morality, revolving in a glittering, glamorous, intellectual limbo which had little to do with the real world’ and whose elite

\(^{52}\) Richie, A., opcit. (pg. 184)
\(^{53}\) Roth, J., (1991) Right & Left (pg. 71)
\(^{54}\) Richie, A. opcit. (pg. 432)
\(^{55}\) Ibid. (pg. 157)
\(^{56}\) Dessaix, R., (2000) A Mother’s Disgrace (pg. 11)
consisted of ‘film starlets, sports heroes, theatre directors, business moguls, artists and writers.’ As described, only one of the latent ‘weaknesses’ for self-deception in the human subject that Richie points to is to flatter ourselves with a dubious national ‘character’ (I have a photograph of my grandfather, when in the army in the 1930’s, alongside which Norman Lindsay has written a short article, stating that his head, like that of a ‘Roman legionnaire’ is that of the quintessential Australian ‘man of action’, a type ‘brave and true’, but nevertheless limited and anti-intellectual). This suggests the importance of reverting the focus of general histories away from the events and catastrophes of the witch persecutions and the Third Reich, towards a discussion of everyday people, their relationships and responses to their society, and how these responses relate to our own (fiction is my only real means to achieve this), particularly when the differences are not so great as we might imagine. For example, it is little known that even six years of Nazi propaganda and brutal suppression of dissent were insufficient to make a majority of German citizens welcome the onset of the Second World War, so that, according to Alexandra Richie:

Neville Henderson, a long time appeaser, later wrote that “the mass of the German people…were horror struck at the idea of the war which was being thrust upon them…the whole general atmosphere of Berlin was one of utter gloom and depression. Albert Speer remembered scurrying to a public shelter during a false air-raid. “The atmosphere was notably depressed”, he said, “people were full of fear about the future.” On the evening of the English declaration of war Hitler had his bags packed and quietly left for his headquarters in Pomerania. There were no crowds to see him off: he crept out of Berlin under the cover of darkness, leaving a confused, frightened, angry crowd behind.

How then was this despair and disillusionment ‘turned around’ in such a short time? Again, by what Victor Klemperer has called taking a ‘gamble on stupidity and primitiveness’, in essence taking a gamble on history, or at least on anti-history, or history as lost memory. Hitler himself unequivocally counted on this gamble when he said:

Genghis Khan had millions of men and women killed by his own will and with a gay heart. History sees him only as a great state-builder…I have sent my

57 Richie, A., opcit. (pg. 345)
58 Ibid. (pg. 486)
59 Klemperer, V., opcit (pg. 79)
Death’s Head Units to the East with the order to kill without mercy men, women and children of the Polish race or language. Only in such a way will we win the Lebensraum that we need. Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?60

Similarly, Goering during the Nuremberg trials was explicit when he said that:

[O]f course, the people don’t want war…Why would some poor slob on a farm want to risk his life in a war when the best that he can get out of it is to come back to his farm in one piece. Naturally, the common people don’t want war; neither in Russia nor in England nor in America, nor for that matter in Germany. That is understood. But after all, it is the leaders of the country who determine the policy, and it is always a simple matter to drag people along whether it is a democracy, or a Fascist dictatorship, or a Parliament, or a Communist dictatorship…[V]oice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of their leaders. This is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for their lack of patriotism and exposing their country to danger. It works the same in every country.61

That this is a ‘gamble’ that has paid off time and again is for the fairly banal reason that victory is intoxicating, and that war and other persecutions act as cohesive agents in times of uncertainty, so that ‘peaks of hostility towards a specific enemy, usually quite disproportionate to the offence, generate an equally unrealistic feeling of goodwill towards all other neighbours.’62 This generation of acceptance and accompanying feelings of community, to give one example, is similar to what was described in the recent Iraq war as the ‘visceral reaction’ of those Australians who opposed the war right up until Australian troops were sent into ‘action’. Almost overnight, it seems, polls suggest an estimated twenty percent of the population changed their opinion from opposition to support for the war, based on the commitment of a mere two thousand Australians (roughly .0001% of the population) to the ‘operation’. If this figure is correct, roughly three to four million Australians dropped their assumed ‘moral’ objection to the war in the name of ‘getting behind our boys’ and ‘getting behind the leader’, a so-called ‘visceral reaction’ that implies, quite obviously, the importance of ‘blood’ and ‘tradition’ over a prior ethical position.

60 Davies, N., Moorhouse, R., opcit. (pg. 380)
61 ‘A quote from Nuremberg Diary (Gilbert, Gustav, 1946 April 18)
62 Briggs, R., opcit. (pg. 343)
In other words, while a soldier is always a means, not an end to his/her masters (as Celine said, when a government starts praising its soldiery, we should all be worried), yet for those who reside in the ‘Homeland’, out of ‘harm’s way’, the safety of the soldier becomes a ‘pure end’, because of the so-called ‘visceral reaction’ when confronted with the dangers posed to ‘one-of-our-own’. By this double agenda of treating soldiers as means to an end at the site of combat, and as pure ends from the perspective of those at home, therefore any act of aggression becomes justified, in the hearts of the majority of citizens, once the aggression is underway (as was taken for granted by Hitler). Similarly, this galvanising of the support of the populace in the face of any threat, real or imagined (as in the case of the persecutions of witches and Jews), this ‘gamble’ - for the German people meant that, after the Reichstag fire of nineteen thirty-three, only a month or so after Hitler came to power, the new regime, in the name of protecting the German people from Bolshevik ‘terrorists’, stripped away most of their rights, instituting in particular the policy of detention without trial, so that across the country many of those who opposed the government were simply rounded up and held indefinitely in ‘beating centres’. These illegal ‘beating centres’ were the predecessors of the concentration camps that would be developed over the course of the following years. With the help of an admittedly terrorised opposition made doubly compliant by not wanting to seem weak on security, and an apparently natural tendency of a majority of people to either remain indifferent, trust in authority or assume the guilt of those in incarceration, the new regime was able to consolidate its power absolutely. The rest is, as they say, ‘history.’

That this kind of group loyalty and national feeling usually suits the agenda of conservative governments will be discussed later in greater detail. However, to take another more contemporary example, when one looks at the indifference, let alone the hostility, the majority of Australians feel towards indifference, let alone the hostility, the majority of Australians feel towards asylum seekers incarcerated in this country, illegitimate or otherwise (Umberto Eco identifies this growing indifference towards refugees as one of the biggest moral and human problems of the present century63) and the ease with which underlying dissatisfactions have been turned into fears and insecurities for political gain, then

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63 Eco, U., (2001) Five Moral Pieces (pg. 103)
my reason for writing a work of historical fiction such as Asylum becomes clear. In other words, rather than examining the contemporary particular and thereby suggesting the historical universal, as I might have done, I feel it has also been useful to examine the case of an historical extreme with regards to the universal, particularly when so much of the extreme turns out to be banal, if not absurd (hence the tone of the novel). For example, ‘under the same roof’ as the Nazis terrible crimes, where vicious statements such as that of Dr. Fischer, the Rector of Berlin University, no less, were proudly proclaimed: ‘the morals and actions of the Bolshevist Jews bear witness to such a monstrous mentality that we can only speak of inferiority and beings of another species’64 existed such absurd statements such as that of Count Baudissin, a Nazi tasked with removing all ‘degenerate art’ from the nation - ‘[t]he most perfect shape, the sublimest image that has recently been created in Germany has not come out of any artist’s studio…it is the steel helmet.’65 Similarly, how does one such as Victor Klemperer react, as an assimilated Jew converted to Protestantism, and a Great War veteran, suffering under the increasingly onerous restrictions placed upon himself and his ‘Aryan’ wife, when as a proud cat owner he receives a copy of his Cat Club magazine, and above the swastika on the cover is stated the theme of the issue The Care of the German Cat?66 With dismay, and disgust, naturally, but also with laughter (he tells many anti-Nazi jokes throughout his journals, as a way of keeping his spirits up, for example ‘Hitler says to Moses: But you can tell me in confidence, Herr Moses. Is it not true that you set the bush on fire yourself?’67

In this sense historical fiction is able to examine, with the appropriate caveats (I agree in this instance with Foucault, for whom history is writing the present backwards,68 and with Wilde, for whom it is our duty to rewrite history69), that which remains the same, which I would contend is that battered entity called ‘human nature’, rather than the changes of context, because quite clearly when one looks to the changes with respect to the one constant in human history, that which

64 Richie, A., opcit. (pg. 509)
65 Ibid. (pg. 450)
66 Klemperer, V., opcit (pg. 92)
67 Ibid. (pg. 48)
68 Foucault, M., ‘What is Enlightenment?’ http://www.knuten.liu.se/~bjoch509/works/foucault/enlight.txt, (pg. 12)
is ‘human’, then little really has changed. It is not therefore ‘things’ which remain the same, the more things change, but us. And neither is this a pessimistic view, in the manner of Hobbes’ or Schopenhauer’s, or Nietzsche’s, or alternatively one taken in the somewhat reductive light of a Hegelian or Marxist view of history. It does not contend that history is immediately knowable, or dialectical, or linear or otherwise, and nor therefore does it make any great claims for authenticity, outside of presenting, in the background, certain incidents and characterisations. What it does suggest is merely the obvious (a novel begins where it ends?) that the human subject is imperfect, and is therefore potential. It’s task, as I see it, regardless of the possibility or impossibility of achieving its aims (an act of potentiality) seems all the more relevant given what J. G. Ballard, cited in Modjeska, has said about the modern world, and the relationship between reality and fiction:

Increasingly their roles are reversed...We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind – mass merchandising, advertising, politics conducted as a branch of advertising, the pre-emption of any original response to experience by the television screen. We live inside an enormous novel...the fiction is already there. The writer’s task is to reinvent the reality."70

What is essentially unchanged then, from my perspective at least, is what is most interesting, most hopeful and finally most troubling. When Klemperer writes in 1934 that ‘never has the tension between human power and powerlessness, human knowledge and human stupidity been so overwhelmingly great as now’71, I feel that this is potentially also true of my own age. When he identifies the essential attitude of his countryfolk towards the victims of persecution as being a case where ‘the majority of people are so thick-skinned, they are not really touched by a disgrace of the spirit’72 leading to what Haffner calls ‘a kind of anaesthesia...Objectively dreadful deeds produce a thin, puny emotional response’73 this is not too different from the situation in our own country where children are kept imprisoned for years at a time, and yet which, it seems, is also in accord with Todorov’s description of how in such cases ‘the legally guilty feel they are innocent while those who are truly innocent live in guilt.’74 While

71 Klemperer, V., opcit. (134)
72 Ibid. (pg. 66)
73 Haffner, S., opcit. (pg. 126)
74 Todorov, T., opcit. (pg. 263)
Todorov’s reformulation of Yeats’ line - ‘the best lack all conviction whilst the worst are full of passionate intensity’ fails to take into account a suggestible majority who, I suspect, lack not conviction but interest, in that if answers are given often, or entertainingly enough, no questions seem to be needed, then Briggs’ description of the purpose of propaganda as something ‘mediated through personal fantasy and dreams to relate to the personal fantasies of individuals’\textsuperscript{75}, is always relevant. Relevant also is Briggs’ description of the witch persecutions as a ‘hideous warning of the dangers when the rulers give unwise encouragement to our more violent side’\textsuperscript{76}, relating to the fact that in ordinary circumstances ordinary people need ‘permission’ to be brutal, to their neighbours at least. Similar too is Robert Dessaix’ description in Soviet Russia of how power ‘grows out of binary constructions of the world…binary constructions raise the stakes in any power game and make the thinking on both sides of the divide (the source of all power) more and more totalitarian.’\textsuperscript{77}

Most relevant of all however, in that it encapsulates the basic dilemma for Mobius, while leading necessarily to the ending of Asylum (whereby tragedy is defined by its inevitability), and far more important than the fact that the Hexen-Sonderauftrag or Special Witch Research Unit actually existed, and that Wiligut existed, and that in this sense Asylum is historically accurate, is the theme of the following passage by Umberto Eco, relating to the worldwide ‘refugee problem’, and the even greater problem of the destabilising growth of a ‘new’ intolerance:

Intellectuals cannot fight uncontrolled intolerance, because when faced with pure unthinking animality, thought finds itself defenceless. But it’s too late when war is waged on doctrinal intolerance, for when intolerance is transformed into doctrine the war is already lost, and those who ought to fight it become the first victims. Yet it is here that the challenge lies. To inculcate tolerance in adults who shoot at one another for ethnic or religious reasons is a waste of time. Too late. Therefore uncontrolled intolerance has to be beaten at the roots, through constant education that starts from earliest infancy, before it is written down in a book, and before it becomes a behavioural ‘skin’ that is too thick and too tough.\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{75} Briggs, R., opcit. (pg. 165)
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid. (pg. 408)
\textsuperscript{77} Dessaix, R., opcit. (pg. 66)
\textsuperscript{78} Eco, U., opcit. (pg. 103)
6. The Boat is No Longer on the Open Sea

I was angry with my friend:
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

The Poison Tree, William Blake

Where doubt, there truth is – 'tis her shadow.

P.J. Bailey (in Festus: A Country Town)

What is human being? A transition, a direction, a storm that sweeps our planet, the return or revival of the gods? We do not know. But we saw that, in this puzzling essence, philosophy occurs.

Heidegger

Robert Dessaix, in A Mother’s Disgrace, describes the genesis of his writing as created out of an incident in which physical and sexual violence threatened his life. He was literally shocked into expression. This was not the case with you, however. Years after the last time your own life has been threatened, by your own hand or another’s, years after the last time you saw someone murdered, you are still ‘silent’.

Unlike Dessaix, for whom the stories began after nearly losing his life, as an answer to death if you like, you can say without qualms that writing, for you, is an answer to life. Gradually you regain control over the world, with what Makine calls the harmony of style – ‘the flow of words into which the world dissolve[s].’

Paradoxically, it is this harmony that helps you better appreciate the importance of imperfection, and failure, and ambiguity. You recognise quickly how limited are your talents of perception, of understanding, of expression. You are sceptical of your work, and rightly so. You begin, therefore, for the first time to distrust language as a means of understanding, and of perception as a reliable, constant measure of truth. And yet, like Hannah Arendt, you have always felt that the world has you under a ‘spell’, and that the divine is therefore in the detail (hence your preference for nominally realist, rather than ‘magical realist’ fictions). You

therefore agree with Benjamin when he says that ‘[w]e penetrate the mystery only to the extent that we recognise it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectic optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday."\(^{80}\) In particular, you take strength in the unsatisfactory relationship of answer to question, wherein the answer becomes the question, but only so far as to wear it like a mask, so that the question speaks always through the mask, and not the other way around.

If you have always been what Modjeska calls a temporiser, which is essentially ‘an attitude of mind that develops in certain people who find themselves engulfed, tipped off balance, by the sadness of the present...[who] protect themselves with psychological manoeuvres that slip them into other time frames; in other words they play with time\(^{81}\) this only tends to make you more aware, from the perspective of the ‘engulfed’, of what Certeau calls the practice of everyday life. It occurs to you only now, looking back at that time when you began writing, that your then favourite authors; Genet, Celine and Beckett, had all been present during the Nazi occupation of Paris. How did they react, and what might you have learnt from them? When the first, Genet, whom Sartre has called a great moralist, chose defiantly to fuck ‘with’ the handsome enemy, and continue to steal, and write (what accusers might have called a ‘feminine’ response, as opposed to the ‘masculine’ political forms of collaboration), while the second, whose disgust at ‘humanity’ lead him not only to welcome the barbarian/destroyer but also to write vile anti-Semitic propaganda, and therefore to continue to write, whilst the latter, Beckett the ‘exile’, chose to become active in the Resistance, and did not write, at least until his friend Alfred Peron was arrested by the Gestapo and he was forced to flee, and hide, and so began once more to write?

In my undergraduate years, as a student of literature and philosophy, it seemed that everywhere I looked, ethics, as the cousin (in-bred, it was regarded) of humanism was under fire. Many of the theories, it seemed, of feminism, structuralism, post-structuralism, post-modernism and Marxism appeared to contribute to a weakening of the ethical project by way of an extended

\(^{80}\) Benjamin, W., (1986) opcit. (pg. 237)

\(^{81}\) Modjeska, D., opcit. (pg. 75)
examination of subjectivity. Now, however, that many of these same theorists (such as Eco, Todorov, Derrida) have returned their attention to what might be called the ethical field, while others such as Levinas and Habermas can be said to have never left the field, what becomes apparent from a retrospective examination of this wax/wane/wax is paradoxically the reductive nature of most critical conceptions of humanism over the past decades (it should be clear to most people now that the so-called ‘nihilism’ inherent in humanism was not, as postulated by Heidegger, and taken up by Derrida, responsible for totalitarianism, or Nazism – rather an irrationalist and scientistic bias) and secondly that many defenders of humanism have over-emphasised as anti-humanist and relativistic some important aspects within these critiques of humanism, what has been called the ‘humanism of critiques of humanism’.

How did it come about then that the ‘school’ of humanist thought, or ‘family’ as Todorov prefers to call it, came to be associated with the scientistic domination of nature, the myth of the unified subject, capitalist greed and the power relations between the subjectivity of the white, heterosexual male and his so-called other? And how did it come about that materialist, psychoanalytic, structuralist, feminist and deconstructionist theories that really only continue the humanist project of sceptically examining what it means to be human have often appeared to be slaying a false, ‘straw-man’ conception of human subjectivity? And that therefore, logically, because limits have been placed upon largely imagined claims of objectivity (again, which rightly belong to the ‘families’ of conservatism and scientism), that suddenly the basis for making moral judgements and actions becomes endangered? Doesn’t this mean that, now more than ever, despite the pressing concerns of modern life, philosophy merely ‘leaves everything as it is[?]’

[b]eside the demand placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters. The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world through redemption: all

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82 Hallett, G., (1977) A Companion to Wittgenstein’s Philosophical investigations (pg. 219)
else is reconstruction, mere technique...It is the simplest of all things, because the situation calls imperatively for such knowledge.83

If Kant can be said to be the first modern philosopher to have destroyed the unity of Being and thought, or of essence and existence, the core of whose reconstructed ethical system is the categorical imperative - ‘Act according to the maxim which can be adapted at the same time as a universal law’, the lines relevant to this discussion follow most directly (leaving aside Hegel’s idealism and its influence on Marxist dialectical materialism) Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer through to Nietzsche and Heidegger, and from there, in terms of contemporary influence, to the post-structuralist and post-modern thinkers.

Firstly, it was Schopenhauer’s reformulation of Humean radical scepticism and its empiricist project that reiterated how our experience of ‘reality’ is limited by our perceptual apparatus, and yet that there must exist a ‘reality’ beyond our ability to perceive it (which he called the unified Will). Similarly, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche both ‘realized that the criteria of truth arise from the life-situation of the individual and [therefore]...“objectivity” frequently means nothing more than “collective subjectivity.”’84 Nietzsche of course was influential not only because of the way he placed limits upon objective reasoning and so ‘re-located’ meaning to the site of the aesthetic, but also because he was suspicious of faith, allegedly part of the humanist worldview (and therefore belonging properly to the modernist subject), whereby:

Faith is always coveted most and needed most urgently where the will is lacking; for will, as the affect of command, is the decisive sign of sovereignty and strength. In other words, the less one knows how to command, the more urgently one covets someone who commands, who commands severely – a god, prince, class, physician, father confessor, dogma, or party conscience.85

While Husserl was occupied with the neo-Cartesian phenomenological project of re-conceiving the possibility of human knowledge, and Sartre was confirming the cogito as the truth most important to the dignity of humankind (criticised for such

84 Howey, R.L., (1973) Heidegger and Jaspers on Nietzsche: A Critical Examination of Heidegger’s and Jasper’s Interpretations of Nietzsche (pg. 23)
a universal presumption), it was Heidegger (having famously and shamefully betrayed Husserl, his once Jewish colleague) who sought to show how pervasive a Platonist metaphysics of presence had remained in Western thought and philosophy. His criticism of humanism in particular rested on the notion that our humanity ‘is determined with regard to an already established interpretation of nature, history, world, and the ground of the world, that is, of being as a whole.’

Rather than taking a definition of humanism as a ‘family’ of thought (there are many humanisms) defined solely by a reliance upon human agency, Heidegger, mistakenly to my mind, located its origin in a simplistic Roman binary between the Roman ‘human’ and the barbarian ‘non-human’ other, a distinction he claimed was still inherent in all conceptions of humanitas (it certainly was in Nazi ideology), and whose ‘discovery’ of the binaries concealed beneath the metaphysics of presence was taken up by Derrida as the core recognition of deconstructionist theory. While Heidegger criticised contemporaneous humanisms for not going far enough, for not taking into account technological relations (which he vainly hoped Nazism would address), he was also careful to point out that to be anti-humanistic was not to be inhumane, in fact to be anti-humanist in the Heideggerian sense (and in many others, I would suggest), was merely to continually redefine humanitas and to seek to ‘open up new vistas.’

Leaving aside Heidegger’s undoubted involvement with Nazism (he remained a party member throughout the war, never apologised, and was even perverse enough to offer his services to the Allies after the war in the de-Nazification process), what is most troubling in terms of subsequent attacks by the left upon humanism was his ‘re-description’ of Western philosophical thought as a ‘nihilist metaphysics.’ According to French writer and philosopher Jean-Pierre Faye, prior to Heidegger’s involvement with Nazism, Heidegger had never located the Western philosophical tradition, with its alleged roots in unquestioned representations of truth (what of scepticism and sophism?) as a site of nihilist metaphysics, and therefore as a ‘system’ to be blamed for the Nazi horrors (it was this allegation that was taken up by the left). What Faye shows is how, because of Heidegger’s involvement with Nazi ideology, and the demands and challenges and

86 Heidegger, M., (1993) Basic Writings (pg. 202)
87 Hodge, J., opcit. (pg. 90)
88 Heidegger, M., opcit. (pg. 227)
attacks this involvement placed upon him, as a public intellectual, ‘the evolution
of Heidegger’s thought from 1932-1933 to 1945 can be understood essentially as a
response to party attacks…and Heidegger’s (apparently successful) attempts to
distance himself from the…“metaphysical nihilism” of the Judenliteraten.90
Furthermore, it turns out that the terms Deconstruktion and Logozentrismus
originated in a Nazi context, the first in a Nazi psychiatry journal and the second
‘coined [for denunciatory purposes] in the 1920’s by proto-fascist thinker Ludwig
Klages.’91 While other thinkers important to the theoretical ‘canon’ such as
Blanchot and Le Man had Fascist sympathies, what is relevant to this discussion is
the extent to which Heidegger’s kehre, or ‘turn’ has influenced not only
subsequent theoretical conceptions relating to subjectivity, but have also been used
as justification in a wider, more important critique of humanist thought, and
therefore ethics. In other words, how did democratic, decadent Weimar Germany,
overcome by what Heidegger called the ‘internal greatness’ of the Nazi
movement, come to be blamed not only for its own destruction, but also for the
birth of Nazism? And how was the obvious irrationalism and contempt for critical
thinking as a ‘Jewish metaphysics’, and the perversion of rationality bound up in
Social Darwinism conveniently sidestepped, so that the blame for the Nazi
catastrophe might be directed at the very things it rejected?

[I]t became possible for Derrida, Lyotard, Lacoue-Labarthe, and others, to say,
in effect: Heidegger, the Nazi, “as a detail,” by his unmasking of the nihilistic
“metaphysics of the subject” responsible for Nazism, was in effect the real
anti-Nazi, whereas all those who, in 1933-1945 (or, by extension, today)
Oppose and continue to oppose fascism, racism and anti-Semitism from some
humanistic conviction, whether liberal or socialist…such people were and are
complicit in fascism.92

This is a troubling observation, made in the light of the mistaken classification, to
my mind, of Fascism as a ‘right wing’ rather than totalitarian system, and yet one
can hardly accuse Derrida of being an anti-humanist, outside of the sense
articulated by Heidegger, nor of being uninterested in ethics. Apart from being a
member of the Writer’s Parliament, and of a Committee against Apartheid,

89 Goldner, L., ‘The Nazis and Deconstruction’. http://home.earthlink.net/~IrGoldner/faye/html (pg. 1)
90 Ibid. (pg. 2)
91 Ibid. (pg. 1)
92 Ibid. (pg. 2)
Derrida has also been visibly involved in human rights issues and, as various pragmatists have pointed out, his theories still address themselves, rather obviously, to the human subject. In recent years, apart from addressing religious themes and others related to friendship, he has also written, like Eco, on the worldwide refugee ‘problem’, where his thesis with regards to this and the issue of the ethics of forgiveness is the important observation (framed within, of course, a binary system, in this case the rather obvious one opposing political idealism [it is our duty to support all refugees] and conservative pragmatism [there are limits to the number we can support]) so that we ‘must then…respond to this transaction between two contradictory and equally justified imperatives.’93 Far from ignoring the importance of ethics then, despite his concept of the undecidable, and the impossibility of knowing whether we are making the correct decision or not, all that Derrida is calling for in essence is, quite correctly, a recognition of complexity in moral issues which yet require decisions, and so rather than merely obeying laws, or beliefs, or traditions, we need to recognise that responsibility is prior to the law, that there is a limit on the ability of logic, or law, to guide us perfectly, and that when we make moral decisions we are in effect beyond a metaphysics of presence, and that therefore moral decisions must ‘confirm [the decision’s] value, by a reinstituting act of interpretation.’94

Post-Structuralism then, which critiques the idea of a centred human self, and seeks instead to show how values, knowledge, morals and human nature are socially constructed and relative, to some extent, nevertheless has humanity and *humanitas* at the centre of its concerns, precisely because when there are no external reasons for being, or moral behaviour, then ultimately the self, with the appropriate materialist, psychological and linguistic caveats is the source of human meaning. We can only, therefore, according to Foucault in his essay ‘What is Enlightenment?’ try to ‘proceed with the analysis of ourselves as beings who are historically determined, to a certain extent, by the Enlightenment.’95 In this essay Foucault repudiates humanism but only because it is too diverse to serve as a ‘simple’ object of reflection. He points out that at various times there has been a

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93 Derrida, J., (2001) *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (pg. xii)
95 Foucault, M. opcit. (pg. 12)
Christian humanism, a humanism suspicious of Christianity, a Marxist, a Fascist and even a Stalinist humanism (Todorov, correctly I believe, rather situates these latter two within scientism, wherein an overarching ‘scientific’ ideology such as social Darwinism or dialectical materialism becomes totalitarian and so makes the freedom of the human subject irrelevant. Individual humans become mere means to the achievement of the utopian end). The choice for Foucault, as he sees it, quite correctly, is that one has the choice to either remain within the Enlightenment tradition of rationalism, and so be praised or criticised, or to criticise these same principles of rationality, and so be praised or criticised. The dangerous mistake that many have made, he believes, quite correctly again, is to accept in its place anything ‘that might present itself in the form of a simplistic or authoritarian alternative.’ It is very important for Foucault to separate out the confusion of the thematic humanisms from the aim of modern philosophy, which he defines as simply an attempt to answer the question ‘What is Enlightenment?’ And yet, surprisingly, the tactic to achieve this end of understanding this question appears little different from the humanist agenda as set out by Montaigne, Constant and Rousseau, whose aim as we shall see, and which Foucault admits, was also to ‘test the limits that we shall go beyond...as work carried out by ourselves as free beings.’

The context, particularly with regards to power relations and technologies have changed, and yet, as Foucault describes, the key concerns remain threefold (what might once have been called ontological/political/ethical) and which he systematises as follows – ‘How are we constituted as subjects of our own knowledge? How are we constituted as subjects who exercise or submit to power relations? How are we constituted as moral subjects of our own actions?’ These, as one can see, are not the questions asked by an irresponsible, ‘inhumane’ anti-humanist, but rather of one who despairs, to use Kant’s term, that humanity may never grow beyond ‘immaturity’ (an immaturity that is our own responsibility), and so it appears will forever remain in what Montaigne called the ‘imperfect garden’ of humanitas, a work in progress, a potentiality, but one whose important task, as Foucault concedes at the end of his

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96 Ibid. (pg. 12)
97 Ibid. (pg. 16)
98 Ibid. (pg. 18)
essay, ‘requires work on our limits, that is, a patient labour giving form to our impatience for liberty.’

A more useful criticism of Derrida and Foucault, as it relates to the concerns of Asylum regarding the importance of personal relationships as both ‘buffer’ and means to understanding, other than that they are anti-humanistic, relativistic thinkers, which I hope to have demonstrated is an over-reaction, might be to point out what, like their intellectual predecessors Heidegger and Nietzsche, is their preoccupation with the subject, rather than with intersubjectivity. If for Nietzsche there always emerged ‘something for the sake of which it is worthwhile to live on earth, for example, virtue, art, music, dance, reason, spirituality’ these appear responses to ideals rather than other human beings. Similarly, Hannah Arendt describes her preference for the theories of Karl Jaspers over those of Heidegger in the context of their responses to Nazism because, according to her own philosophical formulation regarding ‘Existenz’:

Existenz itself is never essentially isolated; it exists only in communication and in the knowledge of the Existenz of others. One’s fellow men are not (as in Heidegger) an element which, though structurally necessary, nevertheless destroys Existenz; but on the contrary, Existenz can develop only in the togetherness of men in the common given world.

In other words, Arendt prefers Jaspers in this context because he dares to ask of all philosophies of subjectivity ‘what do they signify for communication? Are they such that they may help or such that they will prevent communication?’. This emphasis on communication is not, of course, an imposed communication but speaks rather of both the possibility and importance of communication to subjectivity and therefore to moral philosophy. A tension of course always exists between personal freedom and the necessity of communication, and this tension has of course been the site of conflict, particularly between totalitarian/authoritarian and individualistic ideologies, or temperaments. A good example of this might be to compare Walter Benjamin’s complaint that the right to live independently of the community had completely deserted Germany, alongside

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99 Ibid. (pg. 20)
100 Nietzsche, F., (1990) Beyond Good and Evil: a prelude to the philosophy of the future (pg. 93)
the gloat of Nazi philosopher Alfred Rosenberg that ‘[I]t is a mark of the German style of life that no German wants nowadays to feel himself a private person.’ Similar (and something that kept both Benjamin and Joseph Roth from aligning themselves too closely with Soviet communism), was the kind of thinking defined by Hegel when he said that ideally ‘the individual merely counts among many…integration into the universal is the important factor here.’ This kind of thinking found its apotheosis not only in the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century but was also a factor within the various forms of nationalism (apes must be descended from nationalists, says Joseph Roth, because they clearly represent an improvement on them). For example, speaking of the ‘glorious failure’ of the Gallipoli campaign, the Sydney Morning Herald wrote in 1922 that ‘It has made us a nation. Was the price worth paying? Are not nations like individuals? If the nation is born, if the nation is to live, someone must die for it.’

It is in the context of this importance of communication to subjectivity, and the resulting inevitable tensions between personal freedom and the claims of others, that both Jurgen Habermas and Tzvetan Todorov have situated much of their recent discourse. Habermas (as opposed to Rawls’ ‘original position’, and its importance to the idea of justice in the political sphere) has taken as his central concern a ‘rhetoric of intersubjectivity’, essentially seeking to show how within language there exists (as opposed to the Derridean ‘language guards the difference that guards language’) validity claims and therefore also a rational basis for understanding one another, with appropriate limits. In this way his task is both to critique positivism in the social sciences, while at the same time rehabilitating the Enlightenment project of maintaining a social sphere of discussion, of communication, using hermeneutics as a tool oriented towards intersubjective consensus and understanding in the ‘lifeworld’ (itself a background knowledge that informs our experience while remaining more implicit than explicit). This examination of what might be called an ethics of discourse, whose success or failure cannot be properly examined here, is relevant only as an example of how ‘neo-humanism’, in reaction to the ‘humanism of critiques of humanism’ and

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102 Ibid. 53
104 Ibid. (pg. 193)
other more unlikely theories that overemphasise the symbolic aspects of language and therefore the possibility or impossibility of understanding one another, has taken upon itself the task of rehabilitating the importance of intersubjectivity for precisely ethical reasons. While the average ‘person in the street’, whomever that is, might dismiss this theoretical banter as ivory tower rubbish, or worse, for reasons of pragmatism, simply because whatever the truth of the matter, the human subject generally acts as though it constitutes a discrete self with some degree of volition, as well as some degree of pre-determination, the fact that such a debate has been taking place amongst those once closely aligned with the field of literary theory, is clearly the result of the recognition that moral relativism and irrationalism can potentially have negative consequences in the public domain. Even if the ‘straw man’ of Enlightenment humanism has been incorrectly blamed for the political and scientific excesses of the last century, and even if the defenders of humanism have in turn often been reductive in their defence against this blame, the contemporary move towards a reinstatement of moral concerns cannot be accidental.

In the preface to his recent book A French Tragedy: Scenes of Civil War, Summer 1944, Tzvetan Todorov is ‘upfront’ about the reasons for his defence of moral philosophy:

My own past in a totalitarian country (Bulgaria) has made me immune to the temptations of moral relativism. I know that political evil exists and that it is not to be confused with the insufficiencies of the political system in which I live today in France…It therefore seems to me that a comforting Manichaeism is every bit as harmful as moral relativism…one must avoid the habit of identifying oneself with good heroes or good victims by depicting the wicked as totally different from oneself.106

It would be an over-simplification (but necessary in this context of limited space) to say that Todorov’s central project is to demonstrate how fragile and yet inextinguishable whatever the circumstance, is the human tendency towards goodness, and therefore how tenuous is the possibility for moral action to succeed in the larger scheme. His pragmatic humanism, that unlike Habermas has avoided ‘taking the bait’ of ‘radical’ critiques of humanism (or sidestepped the issue,

105 Ibid. (pg. 201)
depending on how you look at it) has as its heroes Primo Levi and Vassili Grossman, writers who were prepared to recognise ambiguity in all matters of good and evil, an ambiguity to be found within themselves as much as in others, and therefore the importance of acts of ‘ordinary virtue’, with real humans as their end. In particular, the thesis of Todorov’s book Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps, using the examples of the Shoah and the Soviet gulags, endeavours to counter, through the use of countless examples of kindness and sacrifice in the face of terrible consequences, the nihilism of Tadeusz Borowski’s This Way to the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen, and the common Hobbesian notion that all people will revert to selfishness and barbarity when faced with the problem, in extremis, of their own survival. As opposed to the heroism of fighting back against human evil (although sometimes killing, and even suicide can be a moral act), where often the appeal to sacrifice relates to an ideal, such as the nation, race, religion or ideology rather than real humans, acts of ordinary virtue, which Todorov locates within the practices of maintaining one’s dignity, and through acts of caring, and continuing a life of the mind, these refer in every case to oneself and to an ‘other’. If the aim of the camps in every case was to destroy the dignity and virtue and thought and creativity of the inmates, an experiment in reducing humans to the status given to them in the propaganda as animal/criminal, then the existence of acts of ordinary virtue by both inmates and guards in the face of such extreme conditioning is cause for hope. The occasion of the exercise of these ordinary virtues, as noted by Arendt, crossed all boundaries of class, education, age and gender (although it was a feature of both lager and gulag that women often coped better with the general conditions, partly because of a greater emphasis on communication, whereas men, according to these women, from a position of sympathy, were less able to tolerate pain and humiliation, and so tended to either break down entirely or retreat into ‘making themselves tough’ and therefore ruthless).

Important to this thesis is also the fact that, according to many witness statements, the idea that most camp guards were sadists is incorrect. In fact, it is clear that sadists were in a very small minority. It was obvious to many witnesses, and

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106 Todorov, T., (1996) A French Tragedy: Scenes of Civil War, Summer 1944
writers such as Levi, that the guards and camp officers were not ‘without morality’. This does not of course excuse either their actions, or their complicity in the actions of others, but is crucial nevertheless to the tactic of understanding the role of moral choice in circumstances where simple decisions can mean the difference between life and death. In other words, for Todorov, ‘totalitarianism reveals what democracy leaves in the shadow – that at the end of the path of indifference and conformity lies the concentration camp.’\textsuperscript{107} Similarly, for Briggs, the most disturbing aspect of the witchcraft persecutions was that ‘these horrible proceedings were carried out in good faith.’\textsuperscript{108} The fact that it was in the main ordinary people, rather than the sadistic, or psychopathic, that colluded in or accepted the destruction of millions of other ordinary people is far more troubling than the alternative. The fact that ordinary people were able to convince themselves that what they were doing was not only moral but necessary is even more troubling. The usual claim that the participants in the Reich and Soviet atrocities were at best cynical, at worst nihilistic, is unsustainable. The accusations that they were merely evil, or psychopathic, is even less helpful. In fact, it seems rather nihilistic and unhelpful to claim, in the light of the evidence presented by Arendt, Todorov and Levi, that all humans, or all men at least, are ‘evil’ beneath the veneer of civilised behaviour, and that therefore (a conclusion drawn by moral conservatives) strict law and punishment, rather than education and opportunity, are the answers. What is more the case, upon consideration, is that, ‘[e]vil is not accidental; it is always there at hand, ready to manifest itself. All it needs to emerge is for us to do nothing. Nor is good an illusion; it persists, even in the most desperate circumstances. There is no more reason to resign ourselves to cynicism than there is to indulge in naïve dreams.’\textsuperscript{109}

To return then to the question asked at the beginning of this essay, ‘why don’t some people participate in the destruction or humiliation of others, given the opportunity?’, it is first useful to look briefly at some of the reasons why some people were able to, and were able to justify their actions, both to themselves and others. Firstly, evidence of the trait Todorov calls fragmentation (what Briggs

\textsuperscript{107} Todorov, T., (1996) opcit. (pg. 260)
\textsuperscript{108} Briggs, R., opcit. (pg. 383)
\textsuperscript{109} Todorov, T., (1996) opcit. (pg. 139)
calls ‘splitting off’”) is to be found in the camps (as in all life) mainly in the form of behavioural inconsistency. As Primo Levi observed of the same phenomenon, in *The Drowned and the Saved* - ‘Compassion and brutality can coexist in the same individual and in the same moment, despite all logic.’ 110 This system of dividing one’s thinking and feeling into ‘watertight compartments’ so that, as Eichmann was able to do, one limits the consequences of one’s acts from ‘infecting’ the overall, was particularly common in the camps as a response to brutality and responsibility, as it is still common today. It is for this reason that to label others ‘monsters’ or ‘evil’ is unhelpful. As mentioned before, I have met many murderers, rapists and paedophiles, and each of them has been pleasant, to me (charm can be a useful substitute for goodness). The idea that someone is either wholly good or wholly bad is in this sense dangerously naïve. It is in the context of this intra-personal conflict that moral choice becomes crucial, except in the obvious cases of pathology or illness, where volition is affected. It is also an important question as to how much this ability to ‘split off’ parts of ourselves from the whole, enabling us to harm others whilst maintaining a sense of dignity and good conscience has been affected by the degrees of specialisation called for in the workplace in general today (soldiers are the most obvious example; nobody seems to expect them to think for themselves, but rather to just ‘get on with the job’, and follow orders, which is something that also absolves them from blame). This consequence of ‘technicalism’, taking pride in one’s efficiency whilst ignoring the overall moral context, is to my mind the reason Klemperer was so scathing of so many of his academic colleagues, those who for reasons of conformity or ambition or intellectual fashion were able to seamlessly continue their careers not only after 1933, but once more after 1945, conveniently ignoring their responsibility (in his eyes) as intellectuals, for moral consistency and critical probity. This aspect of fragmentation is also relevant to the second of Todorov’s forms of ‘collaboration’, or accession to the destructive projects of others; that of *depersonalisation*.

If fragmentation refers to the way we are able to isolate certain of our actions within an overall moral position without reference to the ‘bigger picture’, choosing for reasons of conformity or otherwise to carry out actions that are

detrimental to others, depersonalisation refers to the way we allow ourselves, as individuals, to become the instruments or means of others’ ends. If for Kant it was important to act so that ‘humanity, both in your own person and that of others, be used as an end in itself, and never as a mere means’, pragmatic humanism recognises that while we are all occasionally ‘means’ (as consumers, or employees for example) it is important that humans are never reduced to being solely means to an end, as they are in situations of war or totalitarianism. This danger of reducing individuals to a function within an overall framework where one’s duty is to an entity such as nation, religion, corporation or ideal is exactly what allows one to feel virtuous in fulfilling a command, a task, an aktion however onerous or damaging to others, whilst keeping a clear conscience. ‘Docile acquiescence and abdication of will and judgement can be found well beyond the confines of the camps and the totalitarian states; they are everyday behaviours.’ This kind of thinking is best suggested by Albert Speer when he admitted, after the war that ‘the sight of suffering people influenced only my emotions, but not my conduct. On the plane of feelings only sentimentality emerged; in the realm of decisions, on the other hand, I continued to be ruled by the principles of utility.’

The common recent awareness that the self is fractured, that materialist and psychological forces affect us in ways that we cannot always understand, recognitions that force us to look hard at the ‘hidden agendas behind “rational” thinking’ is, after all, hardly an original recognition. As Todorov explores in Imperfect Garden: A Legacy of Humanism, these same observations were long ago made by early humanist thinkers such as Montaigne and Rousseau (one might even say that the fact they can be claimed today is because of thinkers like Montaigne and Rousseau). Two examples should suffice, the former by Montaigne, the latter by Rousseau:

And there is as much difference between us and ourselves as between us and others.

111 Todorov, T., (1996) opcit. (pg. 158)
112 Ibid. (pg. 168)
113 Ibid. (pg. 175)
114 Briggs, R., opcit. (pg. 371)
Our sweetest existence is relative and collective, and our true self is not entirely within us.\(^{116}\)

As mentioned previously, *Humanitas* is described by Montaigne as an imperfect garden (‘I want death to find me planting my cabbages, but careless of death, and still more of my unfinished garden’\(^{117}\)) and therefore it is possible only to make *claims* for truth, and understanding, rather than achieving that end. No discrete selfhood exists, and nor should it, we are constituted by sociability and curiosity, by enthusiasm, love and friendship. Nor does any human ‘essence’ exist that can withstand the effects of existence, although this does not mean that we are constrained wholly by existence. We are not totally free, in other words, but we are not totally determined either. Some measure of free will exists, and therefore we are to some extent responsible for our actions.

The examples of Montaigne and Rousseau’s recognition of a decentred intersubjectivity would therefore appear to contradict the existence of the humanist ‘straw man’, who stakes a claim for an ultimately objective knowledge (in fact a claim of science), and that language is a product of the self and that the self is therefore the source of all meaning and truth, rather than existence. Rather, the self, and by inference therefore society, is imperfect, a work in progress, an unattainable end and horizon of knowledge, whose passage through life is advanced intersubjectively via caring, love and dialogue, and subjectively by way of critical thinking, whilst acknowledging, as Bataille, Nietzsche and Foucault have argued, that there exist alternative, mystical and aesthetic means of approaching this end and horizon. This way of thinking recognises that logic is merely a tool for helping to decide between competing claims (rather than a phallic weapon used to destroy the natural world and subject the ‘other’) where the fact that various regimes have supported themselves upon pseudo-scientific bases, and have claimed to know the ‘truth’ about the world, such as Nazism and communism, means that the fault lies not wholly with science, or rational thinking, whose imperfections and horizons are readily apparent, but rather, as Habermas has indicated, with a real *lack* of dialogue and critical thinking, suppressed by violence and substituted with unthinking belief. It is in this sense that theorists

\(^{116}\) Ibid. (pg. 105)
such as Derrida and Foucault, by positing limits, by highlighting the restrictions on pure self-presence, but not necessarily denying the importance of what remains within those limits (of identity, intersubjectivity, rationality) are merely continuing the enlightenment project of describing *humanitas*. In the same fashion, precisely because the issues within this debate are not abstract but relate to how we treat one another, and how we can avoid repeating the catastrophes of the twentieth century, in a largely secular society, writers such as Todorov and Arendt aim to show how the responsibility for these things lies with no-one other than ourselves, itself a succinct definition of humanism. This central claim for responsibility, and engagement, for putting into practice what Todorov calls the recognition of the ‘universality of the they, the finality of the you, and the autonomy of the I’\(^{118}\), calls for the practicing of ordinary virtues within the realm of the interpersonal sphere, such as those described by Primo Levi. This would seem to be a vital antidote in a society where the drive of a rampant technical scientism for efficiency, production, profit and consumption, means that once more citizens are reduced to means not ends in the achievement of these goals, and where the distrust and frustration created by such a world leads many down the path of individualism, where others similarly cease to matter (response as reflection), co-existent with the older discourses of religious fundamentalism, nationalism and conservatism that appeal to the abstractions of god, nation and tradition. All of these factors, to my mind at least, mean that now more than ever it is important to peer behind those false masks of humanism (conservatism, individualism, scientism) to continue the enlightenment project (of questioning/questing, as described by Foucault) and so most of all to encourage and practice the ordinary virtues of friendship, love, respect and tolerance, our only tools in resisting the forces of depersonalisation, fragmentation and intolerance whose roots lie in every context, in every age, because they belong to the self, to the intersubjective, and to the social. It is for the above reasons that, in *Asylum*, nominally a work of historical fiction, once Mobius has been flushed from his isolation by the increasing incursions of a regime that insist upon our ‘belonging’ to abstractions such as ‘nation’, *volk*, ‘race’ – he finds himself grasping even more desperately for the succour and safety to be found in love and friendship, a succour and safety that

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\(^{117}\) Ibid. (pg. 139)  
\(^{118}\) Ibid. (pg. 232)
proves to be futile only in the sense outlined by Eco, because it is taken too late, because Carl is to become one of the first victims of the new ‘doctrinal intolerance’, and because neither Mobius (despite being an academic ‘of persecution’, nor any of the others saw, or ‘thought’ it coming).

One of Todorov’s most important insights, therefore, gleaned from his meticulous research of human behaviour in extreme situations, is the rather banal fact that people do not always mean what they say, and that as a result they do not always do as they intend. And yet, what redeems this insight from banality is the fact that it often causes surprise to the people concerned, to discover this about themselves. It is precisely this fulfilment of deed in the face of belief that would appear to justify the Hobbesian notion that a thin veneer of culture masks a darker selfishness when threatened with difficult choices. However, as Todorov and others have demonstrated, this retreat from civility into an alleged natural selfishness is not always the case. Leaving aside the cynical and the individualistic, what then defines those people who resist this ‘fall’ into complicity, in situations where both compliance and non-compliance can mean the difference between life and death, to either oneself or another?

If for Eco the role of the intellectual is to insist upon recognising ambiguity wherever it exists, so that ‘to think means to play the voice of conscience’¹¹⁹, and if for Klemperer the important difference between those who don’t comply and those who do is a keener awareness of what he calls a ‘disgrace of the spirit’¹²⁰, for Hannah Arendt, to whom ‘there is no such thing as obedience in political and moral matters’¹²¹, the difference between the minority of those who stuck by their beliefs and those who tossed them aside was because:

The non-participants, called irresponsible by the majority, were the only ones who dared to judge by themselves, and they were capable of doing so not because they disposed of a better system of values or because the old standards of right and wrong were firmly planted in their minds but, I would suggest, because their conscience did not function in this, as it were, automatic way - as though we dispose of a set of learned or innate rules which we then apply to the particular case as it arises, so that every new experience or

¹¹⁹ Eco, U., opcit. (pg. 3)
¹²⁰ Klemperer, V., (1998) opcit. (pg. 66)
¹²¹ Watson, D., opcit. (pg. 48)
situation is already prejudged and we need only act out whatever we learned or possessed beforehand. Their criterion, I think, was a different one: they asked themselves to what extent they would still be able to live with themselves after having committed certain deeds; and they decided it would be better to do nothing not because the world would then be changed for the better, but because only on this condition could they go on living with themselves...Hence they also chose to die when they were forced to participate.122

This kind of moral heroism, although it is more than heroism, because the object that occasions the sacrifice is most often a real person rather than a heroic ideal, meaning that the heroism of the sacrifice accords more with what Todorov calls an ordinary virtue (in an admittedly extreme circumstance) than a heroic virtue, what both Todorov and Arendt agree upon is the fact that, while these ‘doubters and sceptics’ who are used to thinking for themselves belonged to no one particular class, religion, politics or gender, of more importance is the presupposition that ‘this kind of judging is not a highly developed intelligence or sophistication in matters, but merely the habit of living together explicitly with oneself, that is, of being engaged in that silent dialogue between me and myself which since Socrates and Plato we usually call thinking.’123 What Todorov and Arendt are saying is that neither one’s beliefs, whether religious or political, however fiercely held, nor one’s gender, nor one’s ‘nature’ or intelligence necessarily guarantees keeping to one’s convictions when confronted with a difficult choice that threatens one’s beliefs in a god, or a politics, or in the innate goodness of oneself or one’s gender. None of these things count for anything besides the ability to achieve what Nietzsche calls an ‘overcoming’ of oneself, so to empathise and to be good if not to achieve good, the sturdiest of goodnesses, both created and maintained by way of a means of thinking that relates one’s actions to the consequences of one’s actions, one’s thought and one’s deeds, within a framework of personal shame, or conscience. It is precisely this confluence of dignity, conscience, love, caring and the life of the mind that Todorov calls the ‘ordinary virtues’. It is precisely these ordinary virtues that prevent the fragmentation and depersonalisation that allow us to harm others without conscience and allow ourselves to be used to harm others. In this sense what Todorov and Arendt are talking about is not ‘niceness’, or ‘decency’, or even tolerance, but rather the importance of protecting others, of

122 Ibid. (pg. 47)
resistance and vigilance. Theirs is also, crucially, a recognition that there exists, in practice, in the lives of real people, in both extreme and ordinary circumstances, a direct relation between a mode of thought and a morality that is perhaps our only recourse against the vagaries of competing beliefs, moralisms and ideologies, with their alluring binaries, radicalisms and conflicts. That this relation between a mode of thinking and a morality (that is also a way of feeling) implies both autonomy and responsibility is obvious, just as the consequences of denying this autonomy and avoiding this responsibility are obvious. The roles, too, of education and example are clear, at least as clear as the impossibility of a perfect world. The choice is, accordingly, therefore ours to think, and therefore ours to be.

123 Ibid. (pg. 48)
7. Conclusion

‘Only the wise are ethical from sheer intellectual presumption, the rest of us need the eternal truth of myth.’

C.G. Jung

‘My story is always likely to be someone else’s too, until those rare moments when we say, even so, I am never more myself than now.’

Vincent O’Sullivan

The most appropriate conclusion is to admit, of course, that the story that ‘begins where it ends’ is in fact the story of failure. Perhaps this failure is a reflection, or a consequence, or at the very least an aspect of the failure of humankind to realise that within our stories, real and imagined, lie the certainties of our future. On one level this failure is strictly personal, as are all failures of fiction. If we merely feel, but cannot see, the real winds that blow through our (fictional) identities, if indeed we are not fictional enough to know less than we know now, as Coetzee would have it, then perhaps this is where fiction and reality part company; not in the break between experience and imagination, but in the failure of a narrative fiction to ‘lie truthfully’ enough, to achieve some measure of prolonged and real truth by means of the very manipulation, concealment and denying of realness, for the duration. The limits of this possibility of success or failure relate of course to the limits of the self, and perhaps also express the true blessing of intersubjectivity. Aside from matters of craft, perhaps this explains both the lesson and the need for writing fiction, just as it is the true benefit of reading fiction. The failure of the writer is the failure to remain in a sense ‘true to oneself’. This failure, however, is also a form of necessary truth, the truth of the struggle for communication, and acceptance, and trying and failing, and trying and failing always – whose ‘overpainted’ struggle is perhaps the true measure of a fiction’s success.
Bibliography


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124 Coetzee, J.M. (2002) *Youth* (pg. 139)


