



Translated extract from

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Weber's Record**

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First Chapter. Bonn.

So this is the new capital. A short, dull-sounding name. A city that is nothing, that stands for nothing, and that calls nothing to mind. A city with neither especially famous sons nor famous daughters, not counting Beethoven. Schumann was here, but only in the insane asylum. Basically, a gray mass with administrative offices plopped down in the middle that now calls itself a “capital”. According to my diplomat, a slightly euphemistic term for a 30-story building not too far from Cologne. But it hasn’t even been built yet as Weber, on his way from Zurich, steps off the night train one Friday morning. Bonn. The only one who was relieved upon hearing the decision, Weber is certain about that, was Mehring: “Anything but Frankfurt! Weimar was bad enough. It’s no wonder a republic didn’t take root there. Everything ruined by that harmonizing classicist! No state visit without a tour of his garden house.”

It is 1951. On April 10 the federal government sanctioned the reinstatement of former public officials, and Weber is traveling north from his Zurich exile for the first time. He is tired. From the back of the taxi he gazes languidly at the buildings. The cab turns before he is able to remember any details.

So this is Germany now. He thought it would be worse. Closer.

Weber has the driver pull over in front of a new building not far from the government district. He enters a small courtyard where plum-colored flowers wind their way up a wooden fence and stops in front of the steps leading to the front door. He turns around and watches the taxi drive away. There’s not a sound, not even the cooing of a pigeon. He is still hesitant. A woman from the building next-door steps out in a tulip-shaped outfit. She nods to him. He lowers his eyes and watches the hem of her dress sway. Then he walks up the steps.

He rings the bell, but there is no response. Weber studies the plum-colored flowers. They seem familiar to him, but he cannot recall their name. Just as he is unable to remember where he could have seen them before.

As he turns back around, Rippler is standing before him in the doorway, fiddling with a letter opener.

“Weber! You look good! The Swiss climate apparently agrees with you.”

He steps aside and asks Weber to come in. They stand in front of each other for a moment, Rippler half a foot shorter than Weber. He gives off a scent of soap, and Weber is unsure if that was always the case. A childlike scent, he thinks. Rippler's face has turned gray. Weber feels he is standing too close to him, inappropriate after all these years. Rippler, too, steps back from Weber and into his apartment.

Weber asks Rippler if he still remembers Bauer. Who also worked on Wilhelmstraße. Not where they did, but, if his memory is correct, in Unit IV. "I happened to bump into him on the train today, of all days."

Brightness floods all around him. It falls upon them from an overhead light, gets reflected from all sides – the walls of the cloakroom Rippler has led him into are covered in mirrors. "Please, you can take your things off here." Weber sees himself standing right in front of him, a coat, too light in color, in his hand. Yes, the coat really isn't dark enough – or is it the rays of light that are fooling Weber?

Weber picks up where he left off, telling Rippler that Bauer wants to apply for a position abroad, and nearly hangs up his coat on the hook's reflection. He turns to look at Rippler, who, however, didn't notice anything.

Weber doesn't see Bauer standing much of a chance, as far as the foreign appointment goes. Surely Rippler agrees.

Rippler nods. Running his hand over the furniture as he passes, Rippler leads Weber through a white hallway and a white salon into a white living room with fireplace.

"Not only on account of his qualifications," Weber elaborates, stating that there were a few things that weren't entirely acceptable. "Bauer was, of course, in Poland as of '41. You know what I mean. I'm only saying that... I'm not trying to insinuate anything. I'm only saying..."

"Of course, my friend. Of course." Rippler points towards a wooden chair with armrests carved into white cats arching their backs. "Custom-made in Milan! Weber, I tell you, it wasn't cheap. But a man has to know how to live."

Weber makes a point of saying how elegant it is, how very elegant and contemporary, too!

He finds the furnishings to be as cold and plain as a lab coat. The chair is merely the tie that doesn't match.

“Have a seat,” Rippler offers. “Cigar?”

Weber says he doesn’t smoke.

“Of course. I forgot.”

Weber looks out the window. Leaves are tossing about in the wind, waves of green. And behind that he hears voices; he sees someone coming towards him. He watches Palmer, hair combed tautly back, striding in his military boots.

“May I offer you a cigar?” He responds that he doesn’t smoke.

“Then let me pour you a glass of champagne.” But he doesn’t drink, either.

“Do you do anything, Weber?”

“He’s Protestant. You know them and their rules.”

“I see. Protestant.” Palmer raises an eyebrow. He hands Weber’s wife a glass of champagne and lifts his own in a toast to her, adding, almost in passing, “So how religious are you really, Weber?”

With Anna’s arm around his own and Palmer standing in front of him, Weber does not know how to respond. He balances on a champagne bubble floating to the surface, about to burst at any moment.

“Weber, what’s wrong? Can I offer you anything to drink? An aperitif? A glass of champagne? It’ll give you a boost, believe me.”

Weber mumbles that he doesn’t want any champagne. Just water. He feels his hands gripping tightly around the cats’ arched backs. He wants to get up, but, apparently, really could use a boost because he falls back into his chair, a caricature of Hammurabi’s throne.

Carafes, glasses, and patches of light burnished in the crystal all clink in Rippler’s hands. It sounds so clear. Ethereal tones, a little Scriabin perhaps, Weber thinks. But then Rippler turns around and hands him a glass, proclaiming, “Cheers, Weber! To old times!” Their glasses strike.

Weber wants to know what times those would be.

Rippler, emptying his drink in one gulp, does not respond.

On the phone, interrupted by static in the line, by a telephone wire swaying in the wind somewhere between Bonn and Zurich, Rippler had assured him, “Weber, it will be a piece of cake. You have no idea how hard it is for them to find people who are only half as qualified as you.”

To which Weber replied that he hoped that was the case. Or replied that that would be ideal. Or replied in a whisper – but only once, as he felt in a strange Monday mood, having just returned from the doctor – that that was only fair.

And even just a few days ago, talking on the phone shortly before Weber’s departure: “It will be a piece of cake, Weber!”

Now, Rippler is silent. Weber does not understand why he doesn’t interrupt what he’s been saying, why he doesn’t come out and say, “Weber, it’ll be a piece of cake!” Has all the whiteness around him devoured his words? Is it the city that doesn’t allow you to speak up?

Weber asks how many fully qualified lawyers there still are in Germany and, out of them, how many possess the requisite skills enabling them theoretically – and he points out that he does mean theoretically – to enter into the Foreign Service. Languages are the easy part, but what he would like to know is who has sufficient knowledge of the European economy? Who has an understanding of an ambassador’s role? Who possesses the necessary etiquette? How many can there really be? Weber answers his own question – Not many – before asking how many they could, de facto, appoint? “It’s ridiculous. Most of them were so busy wallowing around in the mud that they can’t even be sent to some provincial consulate in Latin America, even if it were located in the darkest jungle!” He calls to mind that he, on the other hand, is fresh out of Switzerland and has people who vouched for him. “It must be part of my Milan personnel file.”

“You never know what’s in a personnel file.”

Weber counters. He knows for a fact that it was entered into the records at the time. “It may have been used against me then, but it can only speak in my favor now.”

“There’s one thing, however, you mustn’t forget, my dear friend,” Rippler finally interrupts Weber’s recital. “Back then there was a warrant out for your arrest.”

The crackling of telephone poles swaying in the wind, the swishing of swinging wires, a branch that raps against Rippler’s window. Rubbing his brow, Weber asks not to be

reminded of the incident. “The fact that I was considered a criminal was very disappointing for me. I’d almost like to say demeaning.”

“Weber, the people who called you that were evil!”

He responds that he was forced to feel like a criminal.

“What about that guy Heldt?” Rippler notes. “If we could get him to serve as a witness for you.”

With a dismissive wave of his hand, Weber tells Rippler to forget about him, maintaining that the whole thing is utter nonsense, completely overblown. “Don’t even bother with Heldt.”

He runs his hand through his hair, smoothing down a curl sticking out on the back of his neck and adding in a softer tone, “It should suffice as it is. They want to set up a new office after all. Not only has our chancellor shown himself to be absolutely unyielding in this matter, but it’s simply a fact that a former SS man cannot be sent to Paris. The entire Rippentrop department had little to do with the diplomatic spirit,” Weber points out. “The bottom line is that no one was qualified, except in rattling off party platform.”

“Not even all the envoys were without blame, Weber. Not even them.”

Weber concurs, saying that a similar individual was put in charge of him as well, a real Party hardliner whose only reason for being was to exert control over him. “He couldn’t manage a thing by himself. Not only did he not have a law degree, but his general capacity to perform was less than adequate. You could hardly appoint a worse person to the job.”

“That’s what I mean, Weber. Not even the former ones.”

“That’s like comparing apples and oranges! Apparent rapprochements, sure. Perhaps as a way of preventing another position from being lost. Or to avoid being pushed aside even more. Those were mere tactics, not conviction.”

“Whatever you say, Weber. Whatever you say. I still foresee problems with some of the former diplomatic staff.”

Weber concedes that a portion of them were indeed inept.

“What consulate were you even thinking of?”

Weber explains that he wasn't actually thinking of a consulate. He glances towards the window and brushes his hair back, that one curl that keeps sticking up. "More of an embassy."

And then Weber says: Rome.

Weber says Rome with a resoluteness that surprises even himself. And Weber explains: Italy. Weber explains: several years of experience, exceptional knowledge of the country, perfect language skills. He explains: it's either him or no one. Because: the position in Rome is made for him.

"Yes, of course, Rome..." Sluggishly, Rippler gets up and walks over to his desk. Leafing through some documents, he comments, "Let me see. Rome. That must be a level B3..."

Weber corrects him. "Either a B6 or one salary grade above that."

"B6?" Rippler scratches his chin. "That's steep. Before you were a – what was it? A14?"

Weber wants to know why before should even matter.

"That's fine," says Rippler with a wave of his hand. "B6? Are you sure?"

"I haven't found out exactly. I first wanted to speak to you."

"Are we superstitious, Weber?"

Superstition? Weber explains he is far from certain whether he really wants to return to the Foreign Service, on account of everything he went through. "It's not easy to get over it. You wouldn't understand." Weber gazes out the window while smoothing his hair down in back.

Rippler clears his throat and leafs through the documents. "Weber, I find Rome to be a fabulous idea. We'll ask around this evening to see if anyone has been considered for the position yet. Talk to Blankenhorn. In the end, he's the one who makes all personnel decisions. Our chancellor trusts him. He doesn't have enough time for distrust."

Gazing at the city through his taxi window, Weber is struck by how little things fit together anymore. He sees a prelate of the nunciature trying to take a walk along a stretch of newly constructed buildings, but Weber realizes how futile it is. The prelate remains removed from the buildings, like a figure that has been superimposed into a film.

Weber fears that some things may have become obsolete. Some things he considers essential may have become obsolete, he thinks.

And yet a lot functions as it always has. Weber can pay his fare, and as soon as he enters the hotel lobby, a bellhop hastens to assist him. “May I take your bag? What floor shall I take you to, sir?” No, he hasn’t lost touch with the times yet. And before the elevator door even closes, leaving him alone with the hotel employee whose sole mission in life is to press one of eight buttons with his white gloves, Weber recognizes his face on a mirrored wall, lit faintly by a Tiffany lamp. He hears voices. Italian, German, English sentences. Laughing, giggling, coughing.

Weber looks at the reflection of his face: his wavy hair falling across his forehead, his wavy eyebrows, his chin, his neck composed of waves, small ripples overlapping, breaking against each other, his tie knotted in water. Below him the tiles of a pool, a reflected rectangle, dark lines sectioning his face. His eyes an eddy. Weber watches his face sinking in the waves. He hears voices around him, a flood of sounds and obligations and the elderly countess:

“Consul, have you met Sir Richard already? A fabulous man!”

A dog barks somewhere, or a car puts on its breaks, a bottle of champagne is uncorked with a pop, and Weber’s face melts away in a pool reeking of chlorine.

No, Weber hasn’t lost touch with the times yet. He hears the liftboy breathing and the belts winding in the shaft above him. A little light illuminates the number 6 on the elevator wall. The door glides open.

“Level six, sir.”

As if he couldn’t see for himself!

In his room Weber finds, just as he had requested, two bottles of non-carbonated mineral water and a little pot with oil, which he likes to take in small doses to calm his stomach whenever on trips. He can never be certain whether chefs really adhere to his dietary specifications, even if they always assure him that they do. Nobody knows the actual state of his health. Everybody thinks it’s a tic.

As Weber goes into the adjoining room to dress for dinner (tails, white vest, top hat), the phone rings.

“A long-distance call for you.”

From Bremen?

“No, from Milan.”

From Milan, Weber repeats, leaning on top of the desk. A stack of papers tips over, fluttering down to the hotel carpeting like a flustered flock of birds.

He apologizes. He says he is not available, repeating several times that he is in a hurry. He asks that the caller be told he cannot be reached.

“Are you sure?” the bemused voice at the other end asks.

He informs the desk clerk that he is generally sure of the things he says. “In fact, it may seem outdated, but I still consider that to be a virtue.”

“Naturally, Dr. Weber, of course. Please excuse the disturbance.”

Weber hangs the receiver on the hook. As he looks up, sunlight hits him square in the face. He squints and rubs his eyelids. A drumming pain extends from his eyes to his sinuses. With eyes closed, he reaches across his desk. Another stack of papers rustles to the floor. Weber feels his way along the wall, crumpling paper underfoot. His knee knocks against a bedpost. Carefully, Weber lets himself drop onto the mattress. He feels his pulse beating too rapidly. His mouth is too dry, his head is spinning, and he cannot be sure: Is he the one teetering, or is it the world teetering around him, around Weber, around one of the last representatives of the placid old order of things?

He phones Bremen before leaving the hotel room to join Rippler in the back of the limousine and ride through Bonn’s artificially illuminated evening.

He asks whether anyone has heard anything new.

“Not a thing. But you’re still going to go, aren’t you, Konrad?”

“Isn’t there a single new name? Haven’t you been able to find out anything?”

“You know I would tell you.”

Weber opens up a folder and runs his finger down the list of names.

He wants to know if she definitely called the places he indicated.

“Konrad! You know I would tell you.”

Weber circles a few names. He then shuts the folder with a whack, mumbles something unintelligible into the receiver and hangs up.

Weber enjoys the uniform murmuring of the conversations. The strange dialect he grew accustomed to in Switzerland is gone. A chandelier sprinkles light across the room, and in the mirrored doors a waiter rushes through every now and then, Weber spots them all once again, disbursed over the parquet floor: Mehring, Kobus, Miss Schnoop. Weber swaggers through the festivities, his coat-tails flattering animatedly. A mating dance, and Weber flirts with an entire flock.

“Weber! How wonderful it is to see you back home again! Are you finally venturing into our new republic? I promise you, quite a bit has changed.”

“And, Weber, business going well? You’re with the Federal Holding Company in Zurich, am I right?”

“You just left. I often asked about you, too. Simply vanished! You shouldn’t give me such a scare.”

“Well, well, my dear Mr. Weber. Your name came up every once in a while. You’re now active in the foreign exchange trade, isn’t that correct?”

“Do you realize, Weber, how good you have it? Have you heard what Gruber is doing?” Beerbeck, a fragile little man who worked in Florence during Weber’s days with the consulate in Milan, clucks with his tongue.

Weber has not. “What’s he doing now?”

“He’s in fish food.”

“Really? Logistics?”

“More like field research. Hard to say precisely. His head and torso were fished out of the Spree River around the Hackesche Höfe. It’s unknown what the rest of him is doing. Like I say, fish food. And to think, he survived the war. For two whole weeks, then his neighbor got hold of capsules from somewhere, and Gruber paid a fortune for them. He must have moved the sofa next-door with his neighbor, along with the cabinet and a piano that was only slightly damaged from an air attack. A few scratches. Something a cat could’ve done. They also moved over a rug. That’s what he got the capsules for. There wasn’t anything else to take. While Gruber was in the bunker for the last time,

somebody walked off with the silverware and took advantage of the opportunity to smash the paintings, mirrors and crystal. That foolish neighbor agreed to trade for the piano, and yet you have to ask yourself, who at that time even needed a piano? If the neighbor had asked himself that, Gruber's head and torso wouldn't have been pulled out of the Spree." In the mirrored doors Weber notices a pair of patent leather shoes standing too far apart. Wide stance, he thinks. Then, as they tromp across the floor towards the buffet, he thinks: the gait of military boots. He turns around to see the original of the mirrored scene: heads, manicured fingers snapping in the air, Mehring, Kobus, Miss Schnoop. But he cannot find Palmer.

"But you know, Winkler made out even worse. Two days after the end of the war he's wandering through Brandenburg and comes across two Russians who think he's a Wehrmacht soldier in disguise. They haven't heard anything about the capitulation yet and order to stop. But since our dear old Winkler never learned Russian, he's not sure what they want. So he tries to dodge them by cutting left, but by then the skinnier one has already fired. Winkler stumbles in the mud. He probably survived until he hit the ground, but he may have already died while falling."

A chandelier swings above him, and Weber pictures Palmer, two patent leather shoes standing too far apart. But that can't be right. Palmer! He shakes his head and stares at the floor, where two white canvas shoes are approaching him. What are canvas shoes doing at a reception like this?

"Remember Heldt? You know what became of him?"

Weber looks Beerbeck square in the face. That's impossible, he thinks. How could Beerbeck know Heldt? He looks at Wendler. Yes, he's certain. Those are Wendler's pianist hands flittering over the buffet. Above them, on the reception hall ceiling, there are rods sticking out of the chandelier. Metal rods, caging. Wendler, sucking on a cocktail cherry, remarks, "Let's hope he was luckier than Winkler and Gruber, right, Weber?"

Weber nods. He feels funny. He looks up at the ceiling, above Wendler's jet black hair, which, Weber is certain, used to be lighter. And there, above Wendler's hair, died black as crow feathers, hangs a cage in which two birds are going at it.

Someone grabs Weber's arm and leads him away from his conversation. Now, at a distance, he can definitely tell again: it is Beerbeck, without a doubt. "Helen Schnoop

seems absolutely wonderful today, don't you think? Ever since getting married. Wouldn't you agree?" Beerbeck calls out, still addressing Weber. Beerbeck, of course! What would Wendler have been doing here?

"Weber, what's wrong with you? You never used to waste you time like this," Rippler whispers to him. "Beerbeck doesn't have anything to say, not a single thing. He's just trying to get reappointed. But let me tell you, that'd be asking too much of any department. He's become too cynical – oh, Mr. Keetenheuve, greetings!"

And they dive back into the conversations. Weber shakes hands. Weber makes small talk. Weber tells a joke that highlights his humanistic education. And imagine that, that kid Daloff didn't get it. And he's being sent to Paris as secretary of legation?

"Yes, and Mr. von Zillner has been designated for Madrid. Apparently because no one else was in the running."

"Haven't you heard?"

"It's said that Wildbrand may be interested in the position. He could stand a chance."

"Mr. Weber, what's your opinion of that?"

"They say Kobus could soon be on his way to the United States."

"Bonn, well. Not everyone may agree with it. But have I told you already how glad I am it didn't end up being Frankfurt? Just imagine whose birthplace every state visit would have been required to take a tour of."

"Didn't you know that? Palmer is now in the legal department. Not a bad appointment, naturally, though lower than the consular position in Milan. He was supposedly somewhat piqued about not having been promoted. Didn't do him any good. A B3 is a B3."

Weber, baffled, can only stutter, "But – that's Palmer!"

Weber, you certainly don't want people to think badly of you.

"What do you expect, Weber? Did you think new diplomats sprout like weeds out of the ruins? Or get sent to us from the Americans by airmail? You were in Switzerland too long. Does the mountain air even appeal to you?"

Weber explains that Zurich's altitude isn't quite that high.

"What are you intending to do with your story?" Mehring asks.

Story?

“Come now, my dear colleague!” whispers Mehring, rubbing thumb and forefinger together.

Weber apologizes, but he has no idea what Mehring is referring to.

Weber hears the distant voice of a woman, as though coming from a deep shaft: *“There must be some mistake...”*

Mehring turns aside and gestures to one of the high-heeled girls balancing silver trays back-and-forth across the room.

“A glass of champagne, Weber?”

Weber shakes his head. He searches for Anna along the edges of the gathering, which is where she can always be found – but Anna didn’t even come with him on the trip. She’s sitting with her father in Bremen, crocheting hats for Caritas!

“The school, Weber! I’ll just say one thing: the German school in Milan.”

Weber smells the sweetness of champagne bubbles floating to the tops of their flutes and filling the air. He hears the tinkling of the chandelier crystals and the clattering of beaks. He sees a flock of birds taking flight and the sky darkening outside. He hears a train screeching as it enters a station. He turns around. He turns, or else everything turns around him.

But it’s nothing, right?

The clinking of the chandelier, distant laughter, a woman swaying her hips in a dazzling evening gown. Weber attempts to stop his perceptions from spinning. He hears a door opening, hears a man leaning forward in a squeaky chair, hears

how Brandes sucks in air through his teeth, as though he were suddenly bitterly cold, and explain, “It’s not that easy, my dear Weber.”

Of course not. He didn’t expect to have to reverse the money so soon. However, given the fact that -

“Do you still remember?” Mehring’s champagne breath. His voice bloated from alcohol.

“Excuse me, but what am I supposed to remember?”

“You’re joking, Weber. But you do a good job of it.” Mehring smiles at him and prances back to the group, to the others. Can it be that they don’t want to have Weber around this

evening? That they're turning their backs on him? And that Mehring, his former subordinate, is laughing at him in private?