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The Beginning

My father's birth was a precipitate delivery. He and a fur coat were sacrificed to my grandmother's passion for bridge, since although her labour pains were beginning she insisted on finishing the game. Except for a single, dramatic occasion my grandmother had finished every game she ever played in her life; breaking off in the middle of a game was unthinkable. Consequently she almost missed my father's birth as she sat playing cards. Or rather, that was why my father almost came into the world under a green baize card table, which would in fact have suited his character and way of life pretty well.

Bridge was my grandmother's sole pleasure in life. She was sitting in the Café Bauernfeind with her friends playing bridge, as she had done almost daily since marrying my grandfather and moving from a small Moravian village to Vienna. It was her way of coping with a world which she very seldom liked. She closed her eyes to it, went to the coffee-house and played bridge.

On the day when my father was born the game went on a long time. More coffee was ordered. The pains didn't seem to be getting any stronger, and the ladies playing bridge with my grandmother weren't bothered about them anyway. When it came to settling up, the ritual argument between the players broke out. One of them never paid her gambling debts straight away but always asked for more time, thus creating confusion. Yet the money amounted to only a few groschen. Sometimes one of the players might win a whole schilling, but she was sure to lose it again next day. All things considered, the outcome was never of any significance, but all the same the ladies argued shrilly and were cross with each other. Two of them were not particularly good at arithmetic, and the other two, one of them being my grandmother, had poor eyesight but wouldn't admit to it.

The lady who always totted up the winnings was one of the two who were poor at arithmetic. She often mixed up the columns, whether from lack of concentration or dishonesty no one now knows, for she got the sums wrong to her own disadvantage too. In addition, she had very crabbed, ornate writing, particularly with figures.

The third lady, the one who always wanted credit, was prepared to pay only her debts of two days ago. She had lost money the day before too, but she lost more then. And she lost most of all on the day of my father's birth, so she wanted to pay that day's debts least. I don't know anything about the fourth lady.

The head waiter in the Café Bauernfeind was a long time coming to be paid for the coffee. He was a dashing fellow known all over town, and the ladies, with the exception of my grandmother, use to conduct childish flirtations with him. My grandmother never flirted. Something in her had frozen over early; she was a pale, sandy-haired beauty who never showed the world a face of anything but stern irony. She ranted and raged only at home. Her bosom was fabulous. The head waiter at the Café Bauernfeind treated her with particular courtesy. He was at least ten years her junior, and as for what the bridge-playing ladies imagined him and my grandmother doing, they wouldn't for the life of them have said it out loud, not even in private to each other. Yet the head waiter at the Café Bauernfeind probably felt nothing but respect for my grandmother's unapproachability, and she may never even really have noticed him. All she did notice, with annoyance, on the day of my father's birth was that the waiter was slow in arriving with the bill. The ladies rummaged in their purses and fidgeted on the plush seats. My grandmother was jittery. It was getting dark, and her pains were growing stronger.

My uncle, who was seven years old at the time, woke up when the light came on. He slept on a narrow sofa placed crosswise at the foot of his parents' double bed. He woke up because it was suddenly bright in the room and because his mother was shouting. She was lying across

the matrimonial bed in her fur coat, a black Persian lamb. My grandfather was shouting too, but from the doorway. In addition my father was shouting, having just slipped out and spoilt the fur coat, as the story always went later.

My father was shouting because that's normal for a new-born baby. All his life my father would conscientiously try to act in what he considered the normal way, even if his efforts were seldom in point of fact successful. Indeed, my grandmother's attitude to this last pregnancy of hers, and the birth itself, called for particularly normal conduct on his part so far as possible. For my grandmother, already over forty, had not wanted a third child. She had tried to get rid of it by means of knitting needles, hot hip-baths and jumping off the table. Afterwards, she liked to tell this story.

But my father had avoided the knitting needles, and clung on tight when she jumped off the table, that's how it must have been, my family always said later, nodding. No one mentioned the hot baths. Then my father tried to please her by slipping out quickly and painlessly, but it was rare for anyone to be able to please my grandmother at all. My father had ruined first the bridge party and now the black Persian lamb, one of the generous gifts with which my grandfather tried to atone for his countless infidelities. My mother deigned to accept these gifts without a word, and went to the coffee-house to play bridge.

My grandmother was shouting because the midwife wasn't there yet. Because the baby was still attached by the umbilical cord and there was blood everywhere. And because my grandfather seemed unable either to get the older child, my uncle, out of the room as my grandmother thought proper, or to put on his outdoor clothes and go to fetch a doctor or the midwife.

My grandfather, whose preferred tone of voice was in fact a low-voiced, morose mumble, was shouting because my grandmother was shouting. Otherwise he would hardly have made himself heard. In addition his own nerves were all on edge. The picture presented to him on his matrimonial bed was both grotesque and fascinating. It must have been slightly

reminiscent of Greek mythology, not that my grandfather was familiar with the subject: a creature that was half human, half a black sheep seemed to have been born. For from a sense of modesty in front of her husband and her son, my grandmother was holding her fur coat firmly together over the lower part of her body. She lay half curled up on her side, her body around my father, whose head was all that emerged from the coat. He looked particularly blood-stained and new-born against that black, furry background.

"It's all your fault," shouted my grandmother, "you fetched me too late!"

"Where's my scarf?" shouted my grandfather from the doorway. "You should have come home sooner!"

"You landed me with this baby!" shouted my grandmother. "In the cupboard by the door."

"I suppose you absolutely had to get to the end of the game," shouted my grandfather. "Which cupboard?"

"What shiksa were you gadding around with?" shouted my grandmother. "Are you blind? The cupboard beside the door, I said."

"Oh, give it a rest," said my grandfather in a tone of resignation, having found his scarf and preparing to go out. For as everyone who knew him even slightly was aware, his mistresses were invariably Jewish and most of them were married into the bargain. He was intimately acquainted with only a single shiksa – the woman he had married.

It was in these circumstances that my father came into the world, the son of a Jewish commercial traveller in wines and spirits and a Catholic Sudeten German woman who had left the Church.

A few weeks later Aunt Gustl, one of my grandfather's sisters, came to take a look at the baby. Aunt Gustl had married a rich Christian, and thereafter acted the great lady. Her father, my great-grandfather, had already kicked up a tremendous family row about his son my

grandfather's decision to marry out. Although my grandmother came from near Freudenthal and not Bratislava, whenever the conversation came around to her he would begin to declaim, disapprovingly, the old rhyming couplet: "A goy for Vesuvius left Bratislava, she was planning for free to get hold of some lava." Only the most essential contact was maintained. My grandfather's parents, who came from Tarnów, had stayed where immigration brought them: on "Mazzes Island" close to the Augarten, in one of those grey streets where it's chilly and damp even in summer, and the stairwells smell of mould and cabbage. "Fishmongers and pious folk," said my grandfather scornfully, "tasteless, cheap and vulgar." He moved to Döbling, the district favoured by doctors and lawyers, notaries and operatic divas, property owners and silk manufacturers. The fact that he could afford only the outskirts of Döbling, near the Gürtel, made no difference. It was Döbling all the same.

When Aunt Gustl told her father about her forthcoming marriage she felt confident that the loud and terrifying rages of the old days would by now have died down to a small, depressed residue, for Aunt Gustl had been an extremely tough character from her youth. "Is he a Jew?" her father asked, and at that moment he must have appeared to Aunt Gustl delightfully weak and helpless. She was wearing around her shoulders her new fox stole with its shiny little eyes, a recent present from her wildly enamoured fiancé, and she was both inwardly and outwardly triumphant. "He is not a Jew, he's a bank manager," she replied, a saying that became proverbial in my family and has been used ever since for those regarded as harmless fools. For such, it soon turned out, was kind-hearted Adolf "Dolly" Königsberger, also known as "Königsbee", who died young.

After their wedding Aunt Gustl's hubris came into full and succulent bloom. As her first and unequivocal step, Bank Manager Königsberger's wife changed the coffee-house where she played cards, for there were class differences between coffee-houses. She was no longer to be seen in either the Bauernfeind or the Zögernitz, she was said to sit at the card tables in the Ringstrasse, where the good life had swollen the wives of senior civil servants

and the widows of manufacturers to such corpulence that their pearl necklaces rested horizontally, in several strands, on their white-powdered décollétes. Aunt Gustl was not quite so opulent yet, but she was tending that way.

She seldom went to see her parents in the little street near the Augarten either. Instead, she attended the opera and the theatre on smart, silly Dolly's arm, and she went to Baden to take the waters. She aimed to join the upper middle class, she played rummy and dice poker with impoverished baronesses, and for tactical reasons she sometimes curbed her ambition and let the baronesses win. She was employing both cunning and brute force in an attempt to move up two classes at once, instead of accepting, as my grandfather did, that to climb one step, from Mazzes Island to Döbling, from immigrant book-keeper (the father) to Vienna-born commercial traveller in wines and spirits (the son) was the maximum humanly possible. But what infuriated my grandfather most was the showy crucifix set with precious stones that she now wore around her neck, "that sanctified millstone", as he called it. She really had worn it from the day she married Königsberger the bank manager and not just, as ill-intentioned members of the family said later, after the Nazis marched in.

So Aunt Gustl bent over my father to deliver her opinion, coming so close that her crucifix dangled just above his little nose, and said, "Looks like the head waiter from the Bauernfeind." My father gazed at her with his baby-blue eyes, which were to stay that colour all his life, grabbed the crucifix and tore it off.

Then my grandfather refused to pay for the broken chain, because he thought it impossible for a baby to tear apart a chain which didn't have at least one defective link already. She should be glad the child had torn it off and she hadn't lost the millstone in the coffee-house, he told his sister, because how did she know how honest her Christian friends were? On the other hand, he said with derision, she'd probably have heard the clunk of such a great lump of metal falling anywhere.

Later, when the conversation came around to Aunt Gustl, he always said, “Yes, well, a chain is only as strong as its weakest link.” Judged by my grandfather’s usual standards, this was almost shockingly close to cliché. He said no more, because he didn’t like to talk about Aunt Gustl, not after she passed him by without a word once during the Nazi period. And the gold crucifix on her bosom had been clearly visible, so my family always said.

My father’s first years of life were fairly ordinary. He went to the coffee-house every day, holding his stern and beautiful mother’s hand, was made to sit down with my grandmother’s bridge partners, who noticed nothing anyway except their hands of cards – and out of the corners of their eyes, the head waiter – and was told off for swinging his legs. In between games, when the attention of two of the players could be temporarily devoted entirely to the head waiter as he skipped around the café, while the lady totting up the winnings was writing her tiny little figures without concentrating properly, my grandmother would sometimes hiss, “Sit up straight.”

My father was a quiet, friendly child. He could play bridge before he could talk. According to family legend, his first word was “rubber”. The extremely un-childlike concentration with which my father followed the fortunes of the cards for hours on end was extraordinary, and would have attracted attention in any other family. In ours, however, anything else would have been considered disastrous.

At the age of four my father had his own pack of cards. A year later, when he made his first attempts to give my grandmother’s bridge partners tips on the sly, by rolling his eyes when they played certain cards, his brother was forced to look after the smaller child in the afternoons. So my uncle reluctantly took my father to the nearby Beserl park and its small, untidy stretches of green turf. While my uncle and his friends went off to play with a home-made football, my father sat on the ground dealing out games of patience. Sometimes he managed to interest another child in his cards, and then they played snap together. Of course

there was always some small prize at stake. With his charming, baby-blue smile my father, who always won, ended the game by raking in marbles, groschen and Manner brand toffees. At the age of six he began organizing snap matches in the Beserl park. Girls a year or two older than he was particularly liked to play. My father could never understand why girls were strictly excluded from all the boys' games in the Beserl park. He liked girls from the first, and was both patient and friendly with those whom he taught to play cards. He didn't even seem to notice that this made him look ridiculous to the other boys. Beaming, he would invite anyone who was interested to join in his card games, asking them to put their stakes down first. The older boys, my uncle's friends, just laughed at him and his cards. But once he was rather well off for childish treasures, his pocket bulging with marbles, they tried to win something back from him. When they couldn't, they almost admired him for a brief while, but in the end, and in a higher sense probably correctly, they decided that he was a scamp. They beat him up soundly and took his winnings away by force.

When my father and my uncle went home after a day of this kind they feared the fuss my grandmother kicked up. She would blame my uncle for not looking after his brother well enough, calling him a "useless good-for-nothing" and a "dangerous ne'er-do-well", and she would seize my father by the shoulders and shake him roughly because he had got dirty. She would tell him he was "filthy as a guttersnipe". She would take my grandfather to task for "landing her with these two little pests". My grandmother was very creative in her domestic tirades. Right at the end of her life, when she could barely tell her children and grandchildren apart, let alone the countless different tablets she had to take, when she was kept alive only by her rage against the world she was preparing to leave – and she held even that against it – her art in delivering inventive insults attained its height. She reserved her harshest words for the nursing nun who in spite of all her cutting and nasty remarks looked after her in the most exemplary way, who fed her, washed her and put the bedpan under her. My father, whose natural desire for harmony assumed exaggerated dimensions as he grew older, took the nun

out of the room with a murmured apology. Outside the door he spoke to her imploringly, fiddling with one hand at a hangnail on the other and looking at the ground like a schoolboy; in short, he was the picture of misery and embarrassment. Back in my grandmother's room he said reproachfully, "Oh, Mother, and with all she does for you!"

"What does she do for me?" snarled my grandmother.

"She washes you, she looks after you, she's very good to you," said my embarrassed father, who found my grandmother's malicious treatment of the nun just as unpleasant as having to remind his mother of her physical fragility.

"Good, is she? What do you know about it?" snarled my grandmother. "She's a snake in wolf's clothing!"

These were the prospects the two boys expected as they made their way home. My father was crying, because he hated physical tussles more than anything else in the world. He didn't like coming close to other boys or men at all, a characteristic later deplored by some people and severely criticized by others, because this timidity represented the only but considerable bar to the development of his astonishing talent for football. As he walked along beside my uncle, who was silently cursing him – my uncle never said much, often not even when he was asked a question – he kept his head bent and looked down at his feet. At every step he took a strap torn loose from his sandal flapped on the cobblestones . His ankle was scratched. The hem of his trousers was torn. His right knee was bleeding and his left knee was bruised. But worst of all was that he had lost his cards, all but one. The boys beating him up had demonstratively torn most of them to pieces, less out of sadism than to add the last emphatic touch to their grim determination that no more cards should be played in the Beserl park. When he finally managed to tear himself free and run away he had been obliged to abandon the rest of them, including the pretty snap cards showing acorns and bells,. It must be said, to my uncle's credit, that he had defended his little brother as heroically as was in his power.

But even as a child my uncle was particularly small and slight, and he stayed that way. In his wedding picture he still looks more like a twelve-year-old Frank Sinatra than the much-decorated jungle fighter that, remarkably, he really was at the time.

My father had only one card left. He had clutched it tight in panic and without thinking, and even during all the kicking and punching he hadn't let it go. By the time he opened up his clenched fist on the way home, it was little more than a small dumpling sodden with fear. Once he unfolded it, however, it turned out that he had managed to save the Queen of Hearts. He took that as a good omen, for up to that year of his life, his eighth, my father was an optimist.

When they got home nothing was the same as usual. Fiery-eyed Aunt Gustl, a rare visitor, passed them on the stairs. Without a word of greeting she hurried down to the front door of the building, borne on a cloud of perfume, but from the doorway she gave them a last glance that was almost human. Their mother was sitting in the kitchen, and looked as if she had finally frozen solid. She stared at the two of them for a little while, and only then, automatically, did she begin to tell them off. But somehow she didn't have the strength for it, it was as if she were telling them off out of a sense of duty, to keep a tradition going although for the last half-hour it hadn't existed. She told people off even on that day, my family said later, both appreciatively and with a slight shudder, and then they would smile and nod.

My grandfather was at home too, pacing nervously up and down with his order book under his arm, for no real reason and solely out habit, that suddenly superfluous book which until a few days ago he had been carrying around from coffee-house to coffee-house, from corner shop to corner shop, from inn to inn, to take down orders for wines and spirits. Outwardly he was the same as ever, well groomed, his hair combed while damp, in a freshly ironed made-to-measure shirt with a monogram, always with something of the look of a dandy, a playboy about him. But his nervous restlessness was far greater than usual.

From that day on my uncle, who until now had wanted nothing to do with my little father, assumed responsibility for him entirely of his own accord. He took off his brother's ruined shoes, washed his knees and put him to bed.

They had to move in two days' time, they hadn't been given long. Herr Hermann, who lived on the ground floor with his wife and son, had delivered the message in courteous and correct tones. Herr Hermann had once been a footballer. My grandfather, one of the most fervent football fans ever born, had seen many of his games. Josef Hermann, known as Pepi, had played in the "miracle team", admittedly only as a defender, but still he had been in it. In the sports papers that my grandfather read avidly at the coffee-house, they used to say things at the time like: "Pepi Hermann has always been considered a useful, good, honest and fair player, but in Sunday's match he showed yet again that he is one of the ablest tacticians we have." However, it was not so much these comments as Pepi Hermann's rock-like invincibility in his own penalty area that, in my grandfather's knowledgeable eyes, placed him somewhere in the middle ranks of footballing gods.

After the end of his playing career Herr Hermann lived quietly. Unlike my grandfather, who travelled to the Hohe Warte by tram to see the match every weekend, he went to the stadium only rarely and on special occasions, usually when the functionaries of the First Vienna Football Club obsequiously invited him to sit in the VIP grandstand. Herr Hermann probably required some financial inducement. His wife was in poor health and his son had no talent for football. "Does he play?" he had replied indignantly on the stairs when my grandfather asked that question. "He most certainly plays! But guess what, he plays the violin!" It was this Hermann-Pepi, to give his name turned back to front in the Viennese manner, who had brought them the news, and on the same day he also brought them Herr Eisenstein, who ran his leather goods business in a basement a few buildings away. Herr Eisenstein was very old, at least in the eyes of my eight-year-old father, but very amusing. It wasn't just that you could always borrow money from him in the last resort when it had run

out at home and all other resources failed; Herr Eisenstein had long been both an ardent and a hopeless admirer of my beautiful but cool grandmother. It was claimed that he was the only person who could sometimes make her laugh. No, what my father never forgot about Herr Eisenstein was that he had once shown him, at least in theory and with the aid of a few patches of leather, how to stitch a football together.

All at once the world had become an adventure, a game of chance that he didn't yet know. Lost in reverie, my father sat high up on the van taking the family's furniture and a few crates through the city, far away from the Beserl Park on the Gürtel and to a district where there were wonderful big green spaces but the narrow streets smelled of mould and cabbage. He had already forgotten the expression on the face of Hermann's non-sporting son when he suddenly turned up in the apartment with his violin case, looking embarrassed and yet showing a touch of hurtful self-confidence that was visible for the first time that day. And he would soon forget those few dismal months with his grandmother in her apartment near the Augarten too, the lack of space, the lamentations of the old lady, who had only recently been widowed – "A bit of luck for Grandfather anyway," the family used to say later – he forgot the unpleasant smell emanating from her many black skirts, and how he couldn't help wanting to laugh when he thought that fat, black-clad and asthmatic as she was, she could hardly climb the five floors up and down and thus couldn't leave the apartment any more. He was allowed to go to the Augarten now and then, closely guarded by his brother. Soon it got too cold for that. He forgot the evening whisperings of his parents, who no longer went to the coffee-house, and the tearful visits of his big sister Katzi, who had always seemed to him less like a sister than a beautiful, far-away, affectionate goddess. But he never forgot that his brother, my uncle, was always making him approach Katzi's stout fiancé to beg for pocket-money for both boys. Most of it, however, he forgot for decades, and some of it for ever,

since my father used to forget the less pleasing aspects of life very quickly, or alternatively he made a witty joke of them.

On the day before her two sons left, my grandmother had them photographed at the Purr & Kubla studio. In the photo, she was as cool and straight-backed as ever. The children wore suits and perfectly knotted boys' ties, and my grandfather had secretly had monograms embroidered on their shirts, an unauthorized and completely unnecessary expense, and my grandmother had made him pay for it with her usual reproaches. Unfortunately there was nothing to be done about my father's jug-ears, and my uncle, whose ears were set neatly beside his head, as my grandmother noted with satisfaction, looked hardly any older than his brother, although he was already fifteen. The photographer treated my grandmother with deference. Her clear, correct manner of speech, without a trace of dialect, made him take her for a German, as many others would as well, which was an advantage at the time. It was the only reason why she had been able to make an appointment at all, that and the fact that the wife of Königsberger the bank manager was a regular customer, or it would hardly have been possible so soon before Christmas.

Purr & Kubla was a well-known studio and produced handsome, stiff-looking pictures. So it must have been the haste and the way the appointment had been quickly fitted in, or perhaps the master's mind was not entirely on the job because of my grandmother's majestic appearance or the turbulent times, but be that as it may, the photographs show the two boys looking scared to death. These last pictures are a little blurred around the edges too.

Next day they went to the rail station, the Westbahnhof. They took a taxi, yet another entirely unnecessary expense, these days too, but this time my grandmother had opposed it only as a reflex action. My father immediately and forever forgot the moment when he said goodbye to his parents in the station concourse, because crowds of other children were already waiting on the platform, apparently just for him. He began playing with them at once, with a wide and confiding smile on his face. Suddenly some of them turned rough and pulled

at the tassel on his warm, pointed cap – “They wanted to pull off the woolly ball on the end of it,” he said later – he defended himself, he wept, then he uttered a piercing yell, and finally my uncle forced the worst of his tormentors to go away. In the end, when they got into the train the tassel had somehow disappeared anyway, pulled off and left behind somewhere on the Westbahnhof platform. My father was soon laughing again. The train hissed. He was sitting in a compartment next to a pretty little tear-stained girl, and he enticingly took the cards with the pictures of bells and acorns out of his pocket. The little girl had never played snap before. She had nothing to bet on the game either, no marbles, no buttons, no Manner toffees. After a brief pause for reflection, my father played with her all the same. She was pretty enough. It was true that he won game after game – “Well, what would you expect?” he used to say later in comparable cases, when he had preferred beauty to talent – but in the end he even gave her a Manner toffee, as a kind of comfort. Outside, Austria passed by. The people looking after them were solicitous, the older children, including my uncle, were upset and depressed. My father noticed none of that. In a station far from home, improbably kindly women handed fruit and chocolate in through the windows for the children. The German they spoke sounded funny. My father was enjoying himself, and waved like mad. The women smiled back.

My father woke up in a hospital, burning with fever. Nurses in tall white caps spoke to him, shook him, shouted at him, but he couldn’t understand a word they said. All the children had disappeared, including his brother my uncle, and so had his cards. For the first time in his life my father was alone, and desperate. He shed baby-blue tears. He bit his lips nervously. When one of the nurses saw him doing that she slapped his mouth with the palm of her hand in passing, and when he anxiously asked about a little need of his, she didn’t understand and turned away. So my father wet the bed. That was not to be the worst of it. The nurse soon detected the worst because of the smell. Then, at the age of eight, he was sitting on a

toddler's potty among all those tall beds. The cross nurse's wooden clogs clattered up and down on the stone floor between the long rows of beds. She left him sitting on the potty as a punishment. His bare feet were icy cold. A hundred years later, when darkness had fallen, he was found by a nurse on night duty doing her rounds. She shook her head, made some noises that sounded kind, and put him back to bed. She even warmed his little feet with her hands for a moment.

My father had unusually small feet, even when he grew up. "The best footballers have small feet," he liked to say, and we children would always take our shoes off and compare our feet with his. Even at the age of ten my brother had bigger feet than my father, and that was the start of one of the many childhood traumas he was alleged to suffer. When he was a student, and for his first seminar on philosophy wrote an essay on the relationship between utility and beauty, my brother managed to work in a paragraph about the mutilation of Asian women by foot-binding. "Anyone who has ever seen the severely crippled feet of Japanese geishas will realize that the attempt to impose ideals of beauty by force leads straight to totalitarianism," the nineteen-year-old wrote fervently. "We human beings are all equal, but we do not look the same. We all serve society in our own way. The foot is for walking and running, and if it can no longer do those things it is useless. Furthermore, its size and shape say nothing at all about the worth of a human being." "Very good," his professor wrote in the margin of the essay; he knew nothing about football, and was one of the few who didn't ask my brother questions about his name and the family relationship it suggested.

My sister had medium-sized feet and claimed, on those grounds, that she would be a medium-good footballer. "Girls don't play football," said my father, baffled and shaking his head, "better take your tennis racket and knock up against the wall."

As my father found out, the kind nurse, a young Indian girl, worked only at night. Next day the cross nurse was back. The clatter of her wooden clogs announced her arrival from afar. She brought food that my father didn't want. He turned his head away. She held

his chin in one hand, forced his mouth open with the other and pushed the food, a brown mush, into it. My father retched. She pushed the food down with the fork as if force-feeding a goose. He swallowed. At the fifth forkful he threw up. She asked him, “Did you like the food?” He stared at her, not understanding. She asked, “How are you, you little brat?” Then she asked, “How are you doing?” She said, “Say: Very well, thank you.” He stared at her. She shouted, “Say it! Say: Very well, thank you!” My father looked at the brown mush on the bedspread in front of him, and he looked at her fork. He felt ill. Any moment now he would start crying again. He said quietly, “Very well, thank you.”

Next day the doctors did their rounds, a great many of them, with glasses and friendly faces, accompanied by a murmuring white troop of nurses. One doctor bent over my father, felt his forehead and his cheeks, and asked, “How are you doing?” “His” nurse, the cross one, was standing in the background. My father could feel her looking at him. “Very well, thank you,” he whispered.

“Scarlet fever,” said the doctor to one of his companions, “look at him. No doubt about it. Scarlet fever,” he told my brother in friendly tones, “that’s what you’ve caught.”

“Very well, thank you,” whispered my father. The doctor smiled and patted his head. “Good boy,” he said.

The sentence became symptomatic of his life. He used it to his foster-parents when he was exhausted after standing for hours in the same place with a great many other children, waiting for someone to take him home too. My uncle described the whole process later as a sale of children – “No offence meant,” he said, “but that’s what it was.” However, it was my uncle himself who had drawn things out at length for my little father, because at first he absolutely refused to let him go on his own. Most of the couples who came wanted just one child, preferably a little girl. In fact many of them would have taken the little boy with the baby-blue eyes, but no one wanted two boys at once, particularly when the other one was already fifteen and past school age. There was a Jewish tailor who was looking for an

apprentice and spoke a bit of Yiddish German, and he finally won my uncle round. The tailor, who was reminded by my uncle's almost transparently slight figure and his thin fingers of his own early days as an apprentice, and who urgently needed help, pointed out that his little brother would be best off if he went to a family out in the country. He offered to wait around and be interpreter until a suitable family was found.

The suitable man was warm-hearted but awkward. He was "very rustic", as my father would probably have said of anyone else, but he never uttered the slightest derogatory word about his foster-father. The suitable woman was harder than her husband, with the cocky self-confidence that comes from resentment of one's own insecurity. The husband, on the other hand, was easy-going and kindly; the points on which he was pig-headed would show up only later. He bent down to my father, who was tired to death and had only just recovered from the scarlet fever, and asked if he would like to say goodbye to his brother now, and then go to Stopsley with them. "Very well, thank you," said my father.

My father entirely lost any sense of the general application of this remark, and could no longer say when he really meant it and when it was a lie. In cases of doubt he would always have assumed that the remark and he himself were truthful. To admit that it was often a lie would have meant recognizing the frequent incongruity between the facts and what was said about them, between the interior and the exterior. However, all his life my father loved congruity and harmony, so he used the remark to mollify not just a questioning environment but most of all himself. Nine years later, after his return home and when he was taking lessons from a sick old woman teacher to revive his German, he tried hard to find the right, the perfect translation for it in the patient monotone of her didactic utterances. If it was to be perfect it couldn't be literal; he was seeking the parallel German term for his real or apparent well-being. During his German lesson one day, the old lady's neighbour brought in some ration coupons as payment to the retired teacher for coaching her daughter. The woman rang

the bell, the tired old teacher opened the door, took the coupons, my father pricked up his ears as they exchanged words. "*Und sonst?*" asked the neighbour. How was she otherwise? *"Alles bestens, danke,"* replied the old teacher – everything was fine, thank you, she said – and she closed the door. So my father had found the turn of phrase he needed, and it proved much more adaptable than the original English. In good and bad times alike, he was now always anxious to show that "everything was fine". He learned to put it as a question ("Well? Everything fine?") in such a way that any other answer was practically impossible. When he hurried to hospital to visit my brother, who had broken his leg during a school skiing class, he found him weeping bitterly in his hospital bed. Still weeping bitterly, my brother pointed to his leg in plaster, stretched upright and hanging in traction. My father nodded sympathetically, glanced at the strapping Salzburg nurses, at the remains of a golden-yellow escalope still standing on the bedside locker. "But otherwise," he asked, "everything fine?"