

Translated excerpt

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Als ich jung war

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Norbert Gstrein
When I was young

Translated by Julian Evans



I

THESE PLEASURES

CHAPTER ONE

After the accident there thirteen years ago I would never have imagined wedding receptions ever taking place up at the castle restaurant again, even less that my brother would be the one offering them. Until it happened, and for a year afterwards (because that was when it was up), our father held the lease. For months afterwards no one could be found to take it over, then someone came along who wanted to cater for a completely different clientèle, who opened a pizza restaurant, installed a bowling alley in the basement, and hung up a pair of dartboards, and by doing so banked on the story of the dead bride either fading from people's memories or, quite the opposite, turning the locale into a macabre visitor attraction. When the lease came up for renewal again a year ago, my brother was preferred over several other would-be tenants, and he had lost no time in returning the restaurant to its former incarnation, publicising the fact by putting out stories to get it back on the map all over the region, which was also

why he wanted to bring back the whole wedding thing and the tradition of holding receptions there.

All through my childhood we usually left our hotel in the mountains two or three weeks after Easter, when the winter season was over, and moved down to the restaurant, which was when the wedding season started too, weekend after weekend, often with two weddings, one on the Friday, one on Saturday, all the way through to September, sometimes even the beginning of October. In the summer our hotel stayed closed; our father would drive up there every couple of days to see that everything was all right, and it wouldn't be till after All Saints' Day, by which time it was often already snowing, that we packed up our stuff, locked everything up, and went back home. That was how I grew up: winter, hotel and ski school, summer: wedding factory. Our father was the first to coin that phrase, ironically, then everyone called it the same, in all seriousness, without the restaurant's popularity suffering at all. People got married 'at the castle', although it wasn't really a castle at all, people got married at my father's, he having at some point in the past taken on the role once and for all. Hardly anyone from the local villages ever turned down the chance to have their reception there, and people came out from the city too to select one of his three packages, standard, medium, or exclusive, allowing themselves to be guided by our father, who offered his personal guarantee for everything, except for the couple's happiness. He sold them a reception at which he would assure them, faintly suggestively, that he would relieve them of everything he could relieve

them of, so they would have their minds and hands free on their happy day for everything he could not do for them. And because he even promised them the sun would shine and that if it didn't he would give them a handsome discount, they would select a small extravagance or two, an open carriage for the winding drive up to the little plateau from which the so-called Schlossberg ('Castle Mountain') rose with its ruined fourteenth-century fort, or an angelic guard of honour in the shape of the children's choir all wearing wings, or a dance of the veils. The last thing was something our father only offered in the very last few years of the business, and it was a fairly dubious performance to experience, as an actress from the regional theatre company twisted and writhed on the floor as if she'd lost her mind.

I was fifteen, at boarding school, and had never kissed a girl when I started to work at the receptions as wedding photographer. Two years earlier, our father had given me a camera for my birthday, and because he saw everything with an eye to business and had no false respect for the false arts – his name for them – I wasn't terribly surprised when one day he came up with the suggestion that we could offer inclusive photography, and I could carry off the role of wedding snapper. At first I resisted the idea, the same way I'd resisted helping serve in the hotel and demonstrating the basics of skiing to the beginners at the ski school, but just as on every other occasion there was no getting away from him. He got his way, and I added wedding photographer to my other roles as part-time ski instructor and occasional waiter. He toggled me out for the role in a dark blue suit with a subdued, dark blue tie with white spots.

It was an outfit that would not have looked out of place at a funeral, and anyone seeing me booted and suited would have found it easy to overlook that I was still at school and on Saturday mornings found myself fighting an urge to sleep during lessons, because I had so often been working on the Friday and our father could not call and say I was ill, because he had already done it on so many weekends before.

I owned a Leica, but everything I knew about photography I'd taught myself, so the lucky thing when I started was that the couples on the other side of the lens weren't much less embarrassed than I was, or maybe they were just distracted and so they hardly noticed they were being photographed by a trembling amateur. I'd take the first pictures as they arrived, as they got out of their car or stepped down from their coach, looked around the courtyard, and glanced up at the ruins of the fort or back down at the valley they had come from. I'd try to fix in my head an impression of their likely happiness or unhappiness. By the time I took the final pictures, which was usually long after midnight, my suspicions had either been confirmed a long time before or been proved wrong. Almost all the couples also had a religious ceremony, which took place in the Chapel of the Sisters of Mercy; its nunnery was only a stone's throw away from the restaurant. Blinking, they would emerge from the tiny church that stood in the landscape like a child's toy, with its nuns' cemetery all around it that looked quite deliberately like a military cemetery, and would step, as though blinded, into the daylight. My standard composition at this point was to photograph them within a whisker of the rows of wooden crosses, sometimes so

close that I had to crop them later, and show their surprise and unselfconscious expressions in all their divine joy. Next I would photograph them in the meadow next to the chapel, where they'd need no encouragement to sit on the grass, then in front of the fountain that belonged to the nunnery, where without a word from me they'd start splashing each other, then at the edge of the forest, and on we went, through every wedding picture trope. Whether they gazed deep into each other's eyes or into the distance, whether they kissed or not, whether the bride bared a leg or ran a hand through her hair, whether the bridegroom clasped her arm or placed his hand in the small of her back like a dancer or just lifted her up, they conscientiously followed an unchangeable script. Afterwards they were really almost indistinguishable from each other.

Although I suggested to all of them that they should climb up on the ruins and pose on the walls, hardly any of them wanted to, because the climb was too steep and they weren't wearing the right shoes; unconsciously they were also afraid of the gloomy atmosphere. Our father had organised a room over the restaurant – to start with it was just for the exclusive package, later it was for everybody – to which the couple could retreat to relax after they had been out in the open air with me, and it became a tradition that I would snap them again just as they re-emerged from the room. Then, I'd try to read from their expressions what their smiles meant, or ask myself why they would make it so obvious to me – a fifteen-, later sixteen- or seventeen-year-old – just what they had been doing for the last half an hour behind the locked door.

After that shot, there was a place I'd always take them to. You walked out of the restaurant, it was just a narrow path through the forest, and you'd come across another little clearing. Here I would position them all in exactly the same spot and shoot from a slightly elevated position by standing on a tree stump, because from that angle you could see clearly, in the background, the figure of eight made by the river and autobahn far down the valley, and that was my trademark: a glimpse of infinity. To get them standing in the right place, they had to walk quite close to the edge of the cliff, far enough away for it to be safe but near enough for them to be aware of the potential danger. As they did so, they left behind the stillness that reigned in the shadow of the Schlossberg and were instantly assailed by the noise of the long lines of articulated lorries that ground north and south along the autobahn. At that moment I could read volumes into the look in their eyes, and almost all of them followed it up with some exclamation or question, even if it was only to ask me if I wanted to kill them on the happiest day of their lives.

When I was young, I believed in almost everything, and later I believed in almost nothing at all, so at some point during this period I must have lost my faith, my belief. Obviously this is me presuming, but the first time it struck me that a bride, considering her own situation objectively even for a second, would have no alternative but to literally run for her life, it was like a dam broke inside me, and then every wedding after that I could hardly stop myself thinking about it. As soon as a woman had a man at her side – any man, it didn't need to be the wrong sort – she immediately looked much more mortal; and if only they had

realised that, all of them could have had a few more years in which they weren't so blatantly entangled in the inevitability of events as they were with these marriages they entered into, their eyes wide open or blind to the consequences, from one day to the next.

Another thing: it was usually the bride who, having peered over the edge and shuddered, would say to the bridegroom, 'You could still get rid of me,' which I found revealing about the power and submission dynamics, the oppression and survival strategies of a couple. It was hardly ever the bridegroom, who would hug the woman but as though on command, as if he had either just had exactly that thought or was too naïve to have thought any such thing. At this point I'd quickly, and as coolly as possible, get my pictures. Later, in the prints, I could see everything in their faces again, the pain and making up as if they had had a row, their tension and relief, thoughtfulness and preoccupation, their panicky trusting to fate and involuntary rebellion against it. I hardly ever failed to achieve the minimum objective, which was just that they all wanted to look better in their photos than they did in reality, but it didn't take much, I only needed to use the cheapest tricks, or just photograph them while ignoring their imperfections and fallibility.

The bride that died would have stayed in my memory even if she hadn't met the end she did, because she said something else on the clifftop, something completely different from the others. At the time I hadn't been photographing weddings for a pretty long time and had only stepped in on a couple of occasions that autumn because the professional photographer who had taken

over from me was off sick and hadn't been able to find a stand-in at short notice. The day I got my *Matura*,¹ I had told our father that he would have to do without my services, because I'd seen enough weddings to last me a lifetime. Since then I had mostly held out against his efforts to persuade me, but I had got soft. I had given up studying medicine a long time before and had started a German and English studies course with no enthusiasm, so in the event the distraction was welcome. It was supposed to be just the once, but because that occasion had been fun, contrary to expectations, and because in contrast to what had always happened before I had been paid properly, a few weeks later a second opportunity presented itself, so I became the photographer at the wedding of the dead bride.

Obviously she was still alive as we walked up to the clearing to take my 'infinity pictures', but she had only sixteen hours left to live, give or take an hour, depending on how you interpreted the subsequent witness statements and the forensic pathologist's findings. She had already had one row with her husband, in which she had tried to involve me, as if she was warming up for the main attraction, which was about showing him in a bad light, actually, even, humiliating him. At the agreed time, I was waiting outside the relaxation room and could clearly hear their voices on the other side of the door when she suddenly stormed out, her white, sequin-spangled dress gathered to her knees with both hands, her high stilettos kicking savagely at the air, and snapped

¹ The Austrian equivalent of A-levels (Br.) and 11th / 12th grade exams (USA).

viciously back at him, 'Of course we can drop it if you like. Your mother, your mother, your mother. If you mention her one more time...' At that exact moment she spotted me and stopped. Her eyes were dark, almost black, and she had a mole on her upper lip that made her look, to me, as though she had a third eye. Her face was flushed, and the complicated arrangement of her hair was unravelling. She laughed, as though for her my presence instantly changed everything into a sitcom.

'How many times have you done this?' she asked me, as she turned back to her husband, timidly following her, his hands flapping helplessly and reminding me of an orchestra conductor who had just turned in a performance full of wrong notes. 'You really marry anyone and anything here.'

She raised her voice so that he didn't miss a word of it, and so he definitely didn't miss that I wasn't missing a word of it.

'How often has it happened that, at the last minute, a woman has had second thoughts?'

'Never,' I said. 'Not a single time.'

'And how often have you come across a man who's said to his bride on their wedding day that he's actually married to his mother?'

She wanted to make a scene, wanted it so badly that any audience would have done, and the more she could embarrass her husband, the more she wanted it. I didn't know what had taken place between them behind the locked door, but it must have been something that made her feel justified in her extreme behaviour towards him. He came up to her and tried to take her hand, but she

shoved him away. He was a small-boned man with a markedly receding hairline and a paunch only just held in check by his waistcoat; he was in his late forties and therefore fifteen, maybe even twenty years older than her, and he couldn't think of any other way of defending himself from her rudeness than by gazing at her imploringly and begging her not to cause a scandal.

‘Iris! Iris!’ he kept saying, in a resigned, almost inaudible whisper. ‘You promised you’d behave yourself.’

I suggested we might take the planned pictures later, or that we could drop the session at my favourite place altogether, but she insisted on sticking to the official programme, as she put it, we mustn't deviate from it, unless we wanted the whole thing to be screwed up from the beginning.

‘You lead the way,’ she said. ‘I’ll follow you. My husband will have to decide for himself whether he wants to join us or whether he’d prefer to go crying to his mummy. Let’s surprise ourselves.’

She said it as if she really meant it, fumbling in one of the folds of her dress and taking out a packet of cigarettes as she turned to face me.

‘Would you like one?’

She pointed at her husband.

‘He doesn’t like me smoking.’

I didn’t react. She had not even placed her cigarette fully between her lips when a lighter materialised in her husband’s hand in a very old-school show of gallantry, the gesture of a man who could not do otherwise than be at her service.

‘Do you have to, Iris?’

She rummaged in her dress again and triumphantly brandished a small hip flask, holding it out to me. I shook my head.

‘I promised I wouldn’t spoil his mother’s day,’ she ignored his objections and took a gulp from the flask, her eyes shut. ‘Obviously I’m going to be a good girl.’

We had set off by now, and when we reached the little clearing she stepped right to the edge of the cliff without hesitating. It had rained a few hours before, the air was clean, it smelt of damp and moss, and the noise that rushed up to us from the autobahn seemed even louder than other days, a sustained roar that meant you practically had to shout to make yourself understood. The wind was up; to begin with it just tangled her hair, then it lifted the heavy material of her dress a couple of times before letting it fall with two, three flat slapping noises onto the still wet forest floor. She looked over the edge and then back at her husband and me, and her face had a new, strained expression, as if she was making a difficult calculation and not one that would lead to a satisfying outcome.

‘You’re a weird guy,’ she said, as she noticed me watching her. ‘Has anyone ever mentioned that there’s something a bit strange about you?’

She walked back to her husband and let him take her in his arms, suddenly becoming exaggeratedly docile for a few seconds, only to start winding him up again a moment later.

‘If I pushed you over the edge, our photographer definitely wouldn’t betray me. I could say that you just went too close and stumbled, darling. He’d back me up. You probably haven’t noticed but he’s fallen a little bit in love with me.’

She turned back to me, her expression suddenly mischievous, the mole on her upper lip moving each time the corners of her mouth twitched, her eyes wide with playful expectancy.

‘You have, haven’t you?’

So that I didn’t have to expose myself to her teasing for very long, I took no more than a handful of pictures, and later, to my amazement, there wasn’t the faintest trace of any of this to be seen in the prints. If the woman had really looked furious, as if all she wanted was an excuse to go off on one, her anger was wiped clean on the pictures, replaced by an all-round niceness that had definitely not struck me in reality. Her expression as she gazed at the camera was gentle, her round cheeks gave her a girlish appearance, and when her husband put his arm around her, she clasped his hand on her shoulder in an almost affectionate gesture that immediately cheered him up. He lost his abject expression and timidity; on the basis of the pictures I could imagine, for the first time, that he might have been the one for her. The images were a bit dark, because I hadn’t taken account of the clouds that had rolled back in after a short sunny interval, but his eyes were shining, as if they had caught all the light in the picture.

Then, on the way back, *she* had put her arm around *his* shoulders, and walking behind them I clearly heard her say to him how happy she was, which was something that the investigating inspector who turned up bright and early the next morning certainly did not want to hear. Because I was a student and didn't have my own bedroom at home any more, I had slept in the relaxation room that night, and so I'd walked straight into him as I was going down to breakfast and he was just arriving. I'd been the first person to be questioned. I had spent barely half an hour alone with the couple in total, just long enough for the woman's crazy scene, before we all went back to the reception and bride and groom were welcomed with a loud cheer while I melted into the background and carried on taking pictures; but the inspector was convinced that something decisive had happened while I was present, and all he had to do was find the key to it. He went over what I had witnessed minute by minute – I'm pretty sure he would really have preferred me to be able to account for every second – and he was right to point out that it just wasn't logical how the woman had first of all made her husband look a complete idiot and how she had then literally, with almost no time elapsing in between, behaved like a purring kitten.

To begin with I kept to myself what she had said about me having fallen in love with her, because it seemed too ludicrous, and when I finally mentioned it, after he kept digging and digging, asking whether I didn't remember anything else, whether I hadn't forgotten something that maybe seemed unimportant to me but might possibly be of the greatest importance, he stared at me and wanted to know if I had had the impression that she had been drunk or on drugs or just

plain crazy. That was when I looked at him properly for the first time. He stared back at me. He was overweight, not old, but he had tired eyes, hair cut in a fringe, and a mouth that he kept pressing into a thin line so that it didn't slide off in all directions: a disappointed mouth, I thought, the mouth of a woman waiting too long to find happiness.

‘She actually said that you had fallen a little bit in love with her?’ he said. ‘And she had never seen you before? The two of them hadn't even been married for twenty-four hours. What's that all about?’

They had found her only an hour and a half earlier, her neck broken, at the foot of the Schlossberg, but he expressed his belief that he would be able to solve the case before the day was out. He would examine everything systematically, account for every step she had taken, who had been the last person to see her and who the last person she had been seen with, then go through the guest list and one by one identify the guests, who were still asleep wherever they were staying and as yet had no idea what had happened. Even the bridegroom didn't know. He had supposedly been carried back to his hotel, dead drunk, at about three thirty a.m. and immediately fallen asleep, without even missing his bride. The inspector wanted to call on him first, as soon as all the fingerprinting and photographing of the body had been done, which the forensics team was working on now, he wanted to bring him the news personally and watch how he reacted to it. He asked me to hand over to him all the film I had shot of the wedding, which I did, and only saw the pictures myself a fortnight later, when I got the negatives back. In the first one I'd taken it was

actually only the bride who was visible or, to be exact, only her leg and stiletto and the billowing material of her dress as she stepped out of the flower-bedecked limousine, a cliché for sure, but always a welcome one. In contrast, in the last one she was sitting, hours later, laughing by her husband's side with, in the background, jostling to get into the picture, the four men who had already tried to kidnap her once and were now trying their luck again, not letting themselves be put off this time. A few minutes later they would put her in their open-topped car and drive her away, their music turned up so loud you could hear them zigzagging their way round the hairpins all the way down the hillside.

That had been just before midnight, and when they came back again four hours later I had been in bed, asleep, for ages. They hadn't parked in the big car park out at the front but gone around the restaurant and stopped the car at the back, directly under the open window of the relaxation room. They had turned the music down but it was still loud enough to wake me up, and when I got out of bed and looked from behind the curtain I saw they had closed the car's hood. The morning was cool, and it was raining again, but the dawn's first light was already breaking over the nunnery of the Sisters of Mercy.

The car sat there for a while and nothing happened, though with the best will in the world I couldn't tell the inspector how long it was. Then the driver's door opened. When the bride climbed out, the white of her dress seemed to fade into the darkness. She hadn't been at the wheel when they drove away, she was sitting in the back, but it didn't surprise me that she had changed places, and now her voice was audible and I could hear her asking the others if they were

going to stay there. Laughter erupted inside the car, followed by the laboured speech of someone who was drunk.

‘Wouldn’t you like to go and see if your husband has gone to bed yet, and we’ll wait here?’

‘Don’t be an idiot!’ she said. ‘He’s not going to kill you.’

She stepped into the light shining from the lamp hanging above the back entrance, and in the sparkle of her sequins I saw her face for a second, and the mole on her upper lip.

‘We’ll say the car broke down.’

The passenger door opened and the drunken voice was audible again, slurred and rasping, with a deliberately suggestive tone.

‘Broke down? We might as well say your grandma died, Iris! Who’d believe us?’

The figure lumbered clumsily out of the car, took a few steps towards the building, and supported itself against the wall directly underneath me, its arm over its head.

‘Better if we make ourselves scarce.’

‘No way,’ the bride said. ‘You’re staying!’

She squeaked distinctly.

‘What are you doing?’

I leant forward, but I couldn’t see anything.

‘Don’t tell me you’re doing that, Michi!’

At that moment I heard the sound of splashing against the wall, and as the smell of urine reached my nostrils she protested shrilly.

‘Ugh, that’s really disgusting! Who are you trying to prove, Michi? I can’t believe you’re doing that!’

As she was speaking, the others were heaving themselves out of the back of the car. They lined up in front of it, each with his arm round the shoulder of the man next to him, the three of them looking like the remnants of a defeated football team after a penalty shootout, and observed their friend. Their sniggers were the sniggers of drunken louts, and as I instinctively stepped backwards the only thing missing was them cheering him on.

The episode lasted barely more than a minute, but the inspector made me repeat again and again the words that were said, then he wanted to know exactly how late it was.

‘Before or after four?’

‘I couldn’t say.’

‘For god’s sake!’ he said. ‘You said that you looked at the time. Around four’s no good. Think hard.’

Then he started banging on again about the question he had already asked me once and hadn’t expected an answer to.

‘Did that lout really pee against the wall in full view of the bride, while the others looked on laughing?’

At that point I didn’t know who they were, and I’m fairly sure most of the wedding guests didn’t either, possibly not even the bridegroom, but it soon

turned out that all four were former suitors of the bride's, as the saying goes, and at least two of them had been her lovers. She had invited them, and the gentlemen had teamed up to form a club of the dumped, who vulgarly boasted that they were only reasserting their rights by vanishing with her into the night. They were all offspring of 'good' society, if the expression still has any sense or ever has had any sense, men from good or at any rate well-off families, who by that definition could pass as attractive individuals, and actually wherever I had caught them in my pictures they seemed to radiate that quality. They stood, champagne glasses in hand, in a circle, clinking glasses with the bridegroom, chatting with the bride and dancing with her, or they were to be seen in a group over here or over there, young men who would definitely have burst into loud laughter if anyone had told them that, at least for a few days, they would be viewed as the main suspects and later continue to be regarded as implicated and therefore not completely innocent parties in a case that remains unsolved today.

In the fortnight afterwards there were almost daily reports in the newspaper, attempting not just to reconstruct what had happened at the wedding that night or rather in the early hours of the morning, but to dig up background and gossip about both the bride and groom and also the so-called suitors. The narrative was framed as 'the dream wedding' and even as 'the wedding of the year' that had ended so tragically. The bride was described more than once as a 'party girl' which, given that she had died, sounded fairly distasteful, and her profession was given as an event manager (which sounded hardly less depressing); the bridegroom was referred to as from Vienna, the heir to a fortune

and also owner of property and a forest estate in Steiermark and nephew of a long-standing member of the National Assembly of the same name. The suitors were said to be the son of a professor or heart surgeon, the junior partner of a Europe-wide haulage firm, the owner of a four-star hotel in a top location, and Michael ‘Michi’ Mattlinger, TV presenter, entertainer and – something that completely passed me by at the reception – as the printed version would have it, an insufferable pretty boy, with blow-dried hair, dimples and misty bedroom eyes.

I had to laugh at how worked up the inspector got at the idea of a ‘*jeunesse dorée*’. No one used the expression with more seriousness than he did, he felt, whereas the newspaper reports used it like cheap jewellery to adorn their descriptions. This fact alone was enough to get him particularly heated about all aspects of the press coverage.

‘The morons they get to write this stuff,’ he said. ‘The more foreign words they use, the more certain you can be they’re actually illiterate and that they spend their whole time painstakingly concealing it. So you get this revolting reek of provincialism and a readiness to admire everything they think is superior, until they’ve had enough of admiring and hate themselves so much for doing it that they have to smash something up.’

He had come looking for me a week after the accident to go over everything again. The facts, as far as they had come to light, were already overwhelmingly certain, and however much time he devoted to his enquiries, he had hardly added anything new. Both the bridegroom and his mother had long

since left the rest of the guests at the late hour when the bride reappeared at the reception with her suitors. The four men had loudly ordered a bottle of champagne, and when they started capering round our father and treating him as if he was just the manager and not the owner of his own restaurant, he stood up to them, ushering them towards the exit and telling them they should leave immediately if they didn't want to find out what he was capable of, that an abduction of the bride was all very amusing but not one that went on for four hours, that their lack of consideration had completely spoiled the wedding, then he had started pushing them physically towards the doors, and it came very close to turning into a brawl.

The inspector wanted to know if I had heard them drive away, but after they had arrived back I had closed the window, and in any case it was raining so heavily that the sound of the downpour had certainly muffled the noise of their engine. The bride had not gone with them. She had sat down at her parents' table for a moment while they belaboured her with reproaches, then driven off in a taxi. Needless to say, the inspector had located the driver, who had told him, in fact had sworn blind that he had only driven her as far as a point where they were out of sight of the restaurant and then in spite of the severe weather and her inadequate clothing had let her stalk off into the night, or rather into the breaking dawn.

'He might well have been the last person to see her alive,' the inspector said. 'Apart from her murderer, maybe.'

We were sitting facing each other in my student's room, and he had finally stopped examining my bookshelf as if he might find an answer there to all the unanswerable questions. I had gestured to him to take the chair in front of my desk and sat on my bed, and now I regretted that I hadn't thought a bit more about keeping my distance. Standing at my door he had immediately asked, almost aggressively, if he could come in, and I hadn't had the presence of mind to suggest we talked on more neutral ground. He was out of uniform, wearing jeans and a pullover, making an effort to look relaxed, as I remarked that they were saying in the paper that everything pointed to her having committed suicide.

'Don't believe what they say in the paper,' he said. 'You only need to see what they're interested in to be clear about that. Wedding rings from a studio in Paris, a sequined wedding dress covered in Swarovski bling, a metallic silver 150mph convertible. Even in a report about a fatal incident, all they manage to convey is their own stupidity.'

He waved his hand, as if he didn't just want to sweep my desk but the whole world clear of all the superfluous junk in it, and carried on pulling the journalists to pieces with relish.

'So today they'll happily call it suicide, then tomorrow they'll change tack as soon as they taste a single drop of blood. Their sycophantic scribbling will come to an abrupt halt and those suitors, once so looked up to, will be damned to hell with every crime hung round their necks that they can think of.'

There'll be no more talk about how only yesterday their favourite activity was kissing their feet.'

He cleared his throat, and it struck me that if we'd been outside he'd probably have had no hesitation in spitting to show his contempt.

'Jeunesse dorée!'

He made it sound as if his favourite pastime would have been to bust the suitors there and then, though he had nothing on them. They had been long gone when the bride set out in the pouring rain. As for her, she must have walked through the forest and by choosing a path away from the road have avoided the restaurant car park, otherwise one of the guests, in the general home-going, would certainly have seen her, and not just seen her but probably stopped her and asked her if there was anything wrong and where she thought she was going in the middle of the night. This however meant that she had probably passed under my window again, because it was the most direct way to get to the steep path up to the Schlossberg, and when the inspector pointed this out I would happily have provided him with a final sighting of her, her hair plastered to her head as if she had just washed it, a shadow scurrying past, a ghost in her white sequined dress.

'In the rain the path must have turned to absolute sludge,' he said. 'She was walking barefoot. My colleagues confirmed that she'd taken her shoes off. Her stockings were shredded on the soles of her feet, which were covered in mud.'

She wouldn't have stood a chance of getting up the steep path otherwise, but if something surprised me, it was that when her body was found she was wearing her shoes. She must have carried them and put them back on when she reached the top, threading the straps painstakingly through the buckles. That was how she had been found, filthy and drenched, but with all her clothing intact and her shoes on her feet.

What the inspector found most puzzling was that from the moment when the taxi driver dropped her at the roadside and the probable time of death as established by the pathologist, two full hours had passed.

'It's an eternity for that short distance,' he said. 'She could have reached the top of the mountain on her knees in that time.'

If this was an allusion to the Sisters of Mercy and their periodic night-time pilgrimages up to the ruins, he did not seem to be aware of it. He was taken aback when I asked him if he had spoken to the mother superior. Then the penny dropped, and he laughed.

'How would that help?'

'Maybe one of the sisters was out.'

'At five a.m.?'

'I don't know when they start their day,' I said. 'But at that time they would already have been up and probably have finished their first prayers.'

He conceded that that might be true, but it didn't get him anywhere. Was I suggesting that one of the nuns could have thrown the bride off the Schlossberg into the darkness? And was I now about to give him a plausible motive for that?

‘I’d be happier if you could think about what she might have been doing for all that time. Two hours, outside, in the pouring rain. That’s what I find baffling. There was no need for it. She could have achieved everything she wanted to so much more easily.’

He looked genuinely professionally tormented.

‘If she had decided to kill herself, she could have spared herself that arduous climb,’ he said. ‘All she had to do was go that short distance up to the clearing where you took your photos. There’s just as fine a drop from there. Why should she go right up the Schlossberg?’

‘Maybe she just wanted to be alone for a while,’ I said. ‘Maybe she wanted to see what daybreak looked like from up there.’

‘At that time of day in the pouring rain? I’d like to have your sense of humour. When she could have gone to bed long before, taking the unpleasant conditions into account, hoping the weather would brighten up and she would see the pink light of dawn in the distance?’

I was twenty-four when all this happened, mucking about with my studies, still young in a way I’d never been at any other age, and later when I was with people and I told them I’d worked as a wedding photographer and they asked me what was the best thing or even the maddest thing that had happened while I was doing it, I hardly ever talked about the accident. People expected to hear something uplifting, or maybe something a bit racy, and it was sort of what I wanted to hear too, I didn’t want to spoil the atmosphere with a grim story, and so sometimes I’d resort to random mishaps and mix-ups, but more often I used

to go back to the second reception which was actually the first one, a few weeks before, that I'd photographed that year, because there was a lot more justification for me saying that at that one I had fallen in love, although not with the bride, with her cousin. She was standing at the front of the church. She had a freckled, mischievous face, one side of her head was shaved up to her temple, the other side fell in thick curls, she was wearing an ankle-length dress that at first glance was white but on a second look was bright red with a big white lace collar and a white apron like the ones children used to wear, and she had just lifted her violin up to her chin. When I first saw her I raised my camera repeatedly and then lowered it, holding her in the viewfinder without pressing the shutter, and I found myself just listening to her and looking at her, the way she drew the bow over the strings and seemed to start to swing backwards and forwards herself, as if she was stroking her own body. She was playing Shostakovich, her eyes closed, moving as if she was under water, unafraid of surrender, of pathos, of guilt. For three months before that day, I had been going to the same café every evening because of a waitress, and her smile, and the unconcerned way she stood behind the counter and smoked when there was nothing to do, without having dared to talk to her, and at that moment I couldn't have dreamt that the wedding ceremony would finish, the guests would disperse, I would go quickly up to the girl and I would tell her that I had never heard anything more beautiful, and I would find out her name, which was Sarah Flarer.