

Translated excerpt

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The incommensurables

Translated by Alexandra Roesch



Chapter 1

VIENNA

It was six thirty-two on the 30th July 1914 when 17-year-old farmhand Hans Ranftler was rudely awakened by a broom-wielding employee of the imperial Austrian-Hungarian railway after barely half an hour's sleep.

The empty carriage of the Tyrolean Northern Railway in which he had spent the night still smelled of onions and paraffin oil. The previous evening, the Romanian family he shared the compartment with had bustled around, noisily unpacking bread, saveloy sausage, stuffed cabbage and pickled gherkins from the luggage nets.

As the train set off, Hans had tried to make himself tolerably comfortable using the loden overcoat he had stolen from the farmer's cupboard, and had envisaged that the darkness already falling over Innsbruck would soon lull him to sleep, when the man had poked him in the ribs and placed a glass in front of him. '*Țuică*' the woman said.

Hans had shaken his head, without knowing whether he was responding to an invitation or a question – but the glass had already been filled. The children, a boy and a girl, were dangling from the luggage net, squealing.

'Trebuie sa beți, austrieci!' the man said toasting Hans, who, in his embarrassment, downed the entire glass. He shuddered as the cheap booze burned his throat, and the entire family burst out laughing. At first Hans joined in their fun, but he didn't know whether or how to thank them, and soon turned away towards the window. The hard wooden benches in the third-class compartment put paid to any hope of sleep anyway.

'So endlessly vast,' he thought, as the deep Tyrolean valleys slowly merged into mossy greenery; the massifs of the Tux Alps had given way to the exposed horizon as though a partition had been removed.

He had not left his valley for seven years.

When his father had been killed by a stack of falling fir trees at the age of twenty-eight, the lawyer at his father's company had announced that Hans would be sent from Imst to the lowlands. After a gruesomely long mass, during which *Lord Jesus Christ, thy precious blood* accompanied Hans' silent pleas that the lawyer's horse and carriage might be stolen, he was loaded up like a recalcitrant commodity. The farm where his mother was presumed to be was so far away from the nearest grammar school that the owner of the farm didn't even have to declare that his education was over with immediate effect. Sombre faces at the hay tedders and field rollers stared at him as his fate was announced to him without a single word

– by gestures alone and the assignment of a pallet. He had been ten years old and had not left the farm for a single day since.

However, in contrast to the others on the farm, Hans had been driven by an irrepressible desire not to forget what he had learnt at school, and the tedium of everyday life had never been able to extinguish this hunger. When winter slowed down the work, he pulled out the newspapers that had been given to him to dry his boots and smoothed them out until he could read about the Lena massacre at Bodaybo or that Amundsen had conquered the South Pole. For hours, while forking manure, he repeated the words that he had just learned until they stuck.

Outside the window, the landscape fanned out as if freshly made: you could follow the Vltava to Prague over there – Hans had once seen the Charles Bridge as an engraving on a postcard. On the other side, much darker over there, lay Slavonia and Croatia, where sugar beet and maize flourished in the fertile lowlands between the Sava and Drava rivers better than anywhere else in the empire. He could almost reach out and touch the soil and hay and grazing Bestuzhev cattle, they were so vivid before his eyes. Absentmindedly, he started chewing on the raw potatoes he had stuffed into his coat pockets as provisions and tried to read Dante's *Inferno*, but he could not concentrate on Francesca's litany. He could not tear his eyes away from the landscape that opened up in front of him like an ever-widening bay.

There, where the sun would rise many hours later, lay Transylvania and Bukovina, where the forests of Robinia trees heralded the Carpathians; then finally his eyes fell shut.

Now as he woke, the Romanians were gone and the railwayman was preparing to dive under the benches with his dustpan, so that Hans could only just make out his hastily uttered '*Südbahnhof*'.

Trying to disturb the man as little as possible, he clambered around the intruding handle, and grabbed the sack, which he had fastened with a thick piece of fence rope, from the luggage nets. Then he stumbled through the yellow and black panelled carriages with the kind of heaviness that weighs you down after a lack of sleep. He pushed open the door and sobered up in one fell swoop. As he took his first step onto Viennese soil, in the train station that bore far too many flags of the double-headed eagle of the Empire, he felt as if the trumpets of Jericho wanted to tear the flesh from his bones.

People were shooting back and forth like projectiles; hailers, hat wavers, suitcase maneuverers, assisters, carriers and cursers. The wide expanse of the station that encompassed all these people tumbling against each other. Hans felt he was being engulfed up by the whistles and steam that rose up to the glass roof.

When he finally found the composure to let go of the rail, he was immersed in the Babylonian chaos. Czech workers surrounded him.

'*Rozdávejte dávky!*' shouted the one at the front, and Hans ducked down just in time before a bundle wrapped in linen sailed over his head, skilfully caught by a young man behind him. Biceps strained beneath the men's sooty shirts as they unwrapped the enormous loaf of bread, from which each of them in turn tore off a large chunk. Maybe stokers, Hans thought absentmindedly and looked around for the exit, when one of the large men pressed a fist-

sized piece of bread against his chest. Shocked by this generosity, he held it there against his shirt until the group had moved on. Only then did he dare to eat it.

He had lost sight of the exit again. A gleaming black locomotive puffed into the station, its gold lettering bobbed up and down in front of him. Pages in bright blue uniforms flung themselves onto the platform in haste as if their lives depended on it; sparks burst from their gas lighters and fell to the ground. Then they opened the doors, cigarettes in the corners of their mouths for effect, and heaved heavy suitcases out. Fascinated, Hans watched their effortlessly laughing faces – they looked boyish. They had to be younger than him.

No sooner had the luggage been loaded onto the hurriedly procured luggage trolleys, than the passengers slowly disembarked – men and women, dressed in such fine cloth that a single thread on their bodies had to be more valuable than everything Hans had ever owned in his life. A gallant gentleman held his arm out to his companion, who was oblivious to the goings on in the railway station, as if she were quite used to carrying out her morning routine in a busy thoroughfare. The couple kept their furs around their shoulders despite the oppressive July heat and were chatting in a language he didn't recognise, probably something Slavic; Hans continued to wonder until he finally noticed the shiny letters on the side of the train. 'Venice Express', he read, and remembered that he had seen a poster at the station in Innsbruck the previous morning, advertising the outrageously expensive tickets from Constantinople or Moscow to Paris. Perhaps they were a Russian couple?

A rotund Italian man scolding a girl he was dragging along behind him jabbed Hans in the side. He quickly moved on; he was suddenly ashamed to linger among all these worldly people with his chunky boots, his linen trousers and brown braces. He cast aside his wide-brimmed hat. Where was the exit? He almost stumbled over a woman who was feeding a baby next to the tracks – ‘*sajnálom*’ – and how were you supposed to tell all these different nationalities apart? How to tolerate all these sensations? An acrid smell: two boys were cooking something over an open fire – a fire in a railway station! – and a steward approached, shouting loudly that they should put the flames out. Hans slumped down by a flower trough and covered his face with his hands.

Essentially, he knew nothing. No-one he knew had ever been to Vienna, and he hadn't told anyone of his plans or left a note before riding to *Telfs* around midnight. He had dismounted there and smacked the mare, at whose side he had tilled the field year in and year out, on the croup, so that she disappeared into the summer night that was filled with the sound of crickets chirping. The horse knew the way home; he was not worried about her. He, on the other hand, didn't even have enough money for the return trip. That was to say, he had exactly four crowns on him, which would pay for the train journey and two hot meals; it wouldn't be enough for a place to sleep. He wore a silver locket around his neck with a picture of himself inside. It had belonged to his father – he would rather die than pawn it, that much was certain.

‘You have to go to the *Ring*,’ a voice close to his ear said. A young man had sat down next to him to offer him a cigarette.

‘What?’ Hans asked absentmindedly, reaching for the proffered packet.

‘To the Rossau barracks,’ the young man said. He seemed to be of the same ilk as Hans – he had a leather satchel with him and spoke in a broad Salzburg accent.

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ Hans said quietly; but the young man from Salzburg, as if it were the most normal thing in the world for a stranger to do, gripped the back of Hans’ neck and pulled him in close like an old friend.

‘Surely you are going to sign up?’

The other boy had gripped him so tightly that Hans had to hold the burning cigarette away from his body.

‘The general mobilisation is to be announced tomorrow after the Tsar has ordered the Russian troops to move in. And by the time they are mobilised, the two of us might be comrades in the same regiment.’

‘But I don’t want to sign up,’ Hans finally said, and the young man from Salzburg immediately released him.

‘But what else will you do?’ he asked, his eyes wide.

‘This is where I want to go,’ Hans pulled out the newspaper clipping, which he had carefully tucked into the inside pocket of his jacket. The young man snatched the piece of paper from his hands.

‘Helene Cheresch,’ he read out loud. ‘Psychoanalyst, specialty mass hysteria and parapsychological affects. *Landesgerichtstraße 32,*

[...]

Hans didn't know whether it was the July heat or the excitement that the mighty buildings had generated in him, but his sweat-drenched shirt was clinging to his ribcage the way it only usually did when he ploughed the fields in the afternoons. He felt as if he had grated himself along the *Ringstraße* as though on a hard cheese grater; pieces of him were left behind on the facades like sleet.

Servants chased from one house to the next with telegrams, horses reared up, and newspaper boys shouted out events from all over the world to the city. Hans had to escape the flow of the street; constantly changing crowds of people kept pouring into it: *Landesgerichtstraße*. He found number 34 easily. His spirits were briefly revived at the sight of the silver plaque nailed to the façade: 'Helene Cheresch,' he read. 'Psychoanalyst. By appointment only. Wednesday to Friday 12-2pm.' There was no bell. Hans sank down onto the steps as if they were a bed someone had left for him. He didn't know what time it was, but he was certain that he needed to seize every opportunity to rest if he wanted to present his case convincingly.

He pushed the sack with his belongings under his legs and then put one of his feet through the loop. He had spotted the beggars shuffling back and forth around the corner, waiting for an opportunity. The fact that he had absentmindedly kept on his coat during his entire journey now turned out to be very unpleasant, as he realised that it was damp with sweat when he tried to put it under his head to sleep. In fact everything about this position was uncomfortable. Whenever he was about to drift off, he thought he felt something tickling his calf, and jerked up because he feared one

of the beggars might have followed him and was now tampering with his sack. There was never anyone there. When he shot up for the third or fourth time ready to fight, he decided that this time he would actually sleep, and hugged his bundle closely in his arms.

He felt himself drifting into dizzying heights when someone touched him on the shoulder. He carefully opened his eyes. The sun was broken by the silhouette of a woman. She wore a white silk blouse and a floor-length black skirt. Her hair was gathered into a loose chignon, from which a few strands had come free and hung around her face. He recognised her as Helene Cheresch, without knowing how. She looked to be under forty.

‘Please get up,’ she said. ‘This is not the place to loiter between lectures.’

‘I am so sorry, I was waiting for you,’ he said, embarrassed at being mistaken for a student.

‘This is where I see my patients,’ she said, as if she hadn’t heard his protestation. She was about to push him aside with her foot like weightless rubbish, but paused and waited. ‘So, what now?’

Hans wanted to take advantage of the brief slipstream of the question and immediately said: ‘My name is Hans Ranftler. I have come to Vienna because I have a gift, the description of which you, and the exploration of which I, will have the greatest interest in.’

‘A gift?’ She looked at him intently, and he realised that he might have overdone his feigned self-confidence.

‘Well, perhaps more an aptitude,’ he corrected himself. ‘I don’t have any money, but I can work hard in whichever area you might require my help, in lieu of payment for a session.’ To his amazement, Helene Cheresch did not seem remotely surprised by his

overture. She shrugged her shoulders and shook her arms and head, generally indicating how indifferent she was to it all.

‘Well,’ she said after a moment’s thought, ‘all right. I have patients all day and who knows if we’ll still be alive the day after tomorrow?’

She readied herself to enter the building, but first she had to persuade the door. The lock was as resistant as if the building were in constant danger of being invaded by armed troops. She turned back to him once more.

‘It’s ten to twelve. You have five minutes upstairs to tell me about your case. My first patient is arriving any minute.’ By then she had turned and was gone.

[...]

On the way out, the smell that emanated from the walls seemed almost familiar to Hans. He had just sat down on the steps, where Helene had come across him earlier, in order to consider his options. Essentially he didn’t have much choice. He could continue to roam through the city and curl up under one of the hedges he had seen in the *Burrgarten* at night, but he knew that sleeping in public was a criminal offence in Vienna, and if you didn’t have anywhere to go, you would be sent back to your home province immediately. So he would have to stay awake another night, and if he was awake, then he might as well work. At least he had accomplished the main purpose of coming to Vienna in the first place, and he allowed himself to have a ten-minute rest on the steps before moving on.

Hans had just got comfortable in the same position as before, when, just as he felt he was about to doze off, a female figure appeared in front of him.

'I am sorry, Ms Cheresch, I was so terribly tired,' he slurred, but when he opened his eyes, it wasn't Helene who had disturbed his slumber.

'Don't get up,' said a young woman, who, before he could reply, sat down next to him on the steps. 'I have an hour to kill.'

Fascinated, Hans realised that she was very beautiful. Panting, she hoisted onto her lap an enormous pile of books, which she had removed from two canvas bags she had carried over her shoulders, and started, without another word, distributing hieroglyphics across a pad of paper.

What strange women there were in Vienna! She was so intent on her work that she paid no attention to the way he was looking at her from the side; she was extremely busy, and her energy immediately reminded him of Helene.

'What are you doing?' he blurted out, without asking himself whether this was a good idea. He wanted to retract the question, but that was impossible – and fortunately, she turned to him straight away entirely matter of fact.

'I am working on my *defensio*,' she said and as if automated, her hands continued to fly across the page.

'Oh,' said Hans, much louder than he had intended. He didn't want her to realise that he didn't have the remotest idea what she was talking about.

'And you just had a therapy session?' she asked. 'No, Helene has only just opened up her surgery and now Adam is in with ...'

'I am not a patient yet,' Hans quickly corrected her.

'But with a bit of luck I will be from tomorrow onwards, and now I just wanted to have a brief rest here. Please don't let me disturb you.' Hans thought his reply had probably made him sound entirely suspicious, but she had already stretched out her hand towards him and shook his vigorously.

'My name is Klara.'

Her softly curled brown hair, the firmness of her gaze, her smile ...

'Hans,' he said quickly, 'and to be perfectly honest, I must admit that I don't know what a *defensio* is. I only arrived here today and I am seeing the city for the first time.'

Meanwhile, three men came out of the door behind them, resolutely stepping over Hans and Klara without hesitation, as if they had been expecting just such an obstacle. Hans flinched when one of them stepped very close to his leg, but once again, his impression that everyone in the city must be used to this sort of bustle was confirmed, because Klara didn't stop talking.

'*Defensio* is the public presentation of your doctoral thesis,' she said. 'And tomorrow I will be completing my studies of mathematics at the University of Vienna.'

Hans wanted to reply and show how bedazzled he was, but it seemed she was not looking for admiration.

'I hope I haven't miscalculated my subject, my head is so horribly full of the preparations for the oral exam. I am writing about proving irrational numbers, and about special relationships pertaining to these numbers.'

'Oh,' said Hans. 'What were irrational numbers again?'

'They are infinite, sometimes transcendental and yet can be drawn by any child with a triangle.'

'And do these numbers have a particular name?' Hans asked. She didn't reply for a moment, and Hans saw that he did not need to be intimidated – she was just as tired as he was.

'They do,' she said slowly, as if she too had to think about it first, too. 'They are called: incommensurables.'

'The incommensurables,' Hans said, having to concentrate so as not to trip over his tongue. 'And why are you interested in that in particular?'

'I am fascinated by the philosophy of mathematics. I want to find out how we access the objects that we use to calculate. From an epistemological point of view. It is so strange that we are able to see transcendental numbers.'

She put her papers back into her bag.

'The theory of numbers has become so complicated that it's practically impossible for a single person to keep track of it. Some fields are so esoteric that two people – A and B – can immerse themselves in adjacent fields, with A coming upon a result that has been proven in B's field for years without them knowing of one another.'

'That sounds incredibly complicated,' Hans said.

'And so mathematics would be eternally doomed to rediscover lost results, with constantly changing personnel and in different specialised fields if it weren't for the observation from the bird's eye perspective. People who are not specialists, but who study general movements. And, irrationally, well, that seems to be me. And a few others. Are you studying too?'

'Oh no, I have barely finished compulsory schooling,' Hans quickly said.

'Well, if that's the case, you certainly have a good way with words, my dear. Although I can't talk; no-one in my birth family even finished primary school.'

'I read like a mad man,' he said, and, as if to prove it, pulled out the three books he had brought with him.

'*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, well, well. So you want to finish secondary school here?'

'Goodness, no,' he exclaimed, sounding more startled than he had intended.

'So what brought you to Vienna then?' Klara asked.

'I don't really know,' Hans admitted. 'It's probably more what made me leave Tyrol. Seeing one of Helene's advertisements was the arrow that showed me the direction to go in.'

'Well put. Can I tell you something that might potentially sound chauvinistic? I think you speak immaculate High German for someone from Tyrol.'

Hans felt himself blush and his chest swelled.

'My father felt it was important that I expressed myself well. He dealt with people from all over the world in his wood export business. He died when I was ten.'

'That's terrible,' said Klara, who suddenly seemed quite embarrassed.

'Oh, it's not that bad. I just need to find somewhere to sleep,' he said quickly.

'We'll manage that,' Klara said.

The door behind them groaned, and a wave of the smell that had washed over him earlier spilled out of the building again. But Hans was still so focused on Klara that he barely noticed as the gaunt figure, whom he had inadvertently almost flattened earlier in the waiting room, weaved in between them and stopped in front of them.

‘A very good morning to you, comrade,’ Klara said lightly and offered the young man a cigarette from a silver case. ‘You look as if you’ve been on iron rations over at Palais Jesenky for three days.’

The young man immediately lit the Gibson with stiff fingers. Hans tried with all his might to find him irritating, as he had interrupted his and Klara’s conversation. But there was barely anything about the young man to direct emotions against. For one thing, he was almost translucent. Even standing a hand’s length away from Hans, he seemed to dissolve against the shimmering backdrop of the city. His pale skin had cream on it, and everything else about him seemed to be combed back. He had to be at least four years shy of legal age, no older than 19 – and yet he had used all means at the disposal of a young man like him to make himself look older. He had even grown a moustache, which, at best, could be described as fluff. Gold spectacles rested on his nose, and he looked over the top of them as he urgently dragged on the filter. They were nickel-plated with plain glass in them, obvious to any fool, and, like the long coat, it only made his boyish features look even younger. His hand shook so violently that the smoked ash fell to the floor without needing to be tapped.

‘Is everything all right, Adam?’ Klara asked, getting up to take the instrument case he was carrying from him.

'I am being drafted the day after tomorrow,' he said after a brief pause and looked down at the ground. 'Papá told me at breakfast.'

'What?' Klara stood motionless like a pillar of salt, while the electric tram screeched in the background.

'The general sent Kopecek a telegram this morning; I am to be posted to Belgrade straight away. Supposedly to honour the Fatherland, but I think it is more to honour my father, Klara.' His hand trembled.

'My suitcase is packed. I've just poured my heart out to Helene. The day after tomorrow,' he said once again and took a drag of the filter that was long devoid of tobacco.

Hans blinked. Had he been mistaken? Yes: the young man was an old man, he just had very rosy skin – when suddenly he returned his gaze.

'Adam Jensky,' he held out his hand.

'Platoon Commander Adam Count Jensky of Kezmarok,' said Klara, half ironically, half seriously. 'Reserve Sergeant in the third Cuirassier Regiment. Adam, I ran into Hans on the street and he has nowhere to sleep. What can we do about it?'

[...]

Chapter 3

To My People!

Hans felt like he'd survived a trip around the world when they finally crossed the magnificent *Freyung* square with Adam's injured body slung over their shoulders. Yellow baroque facades stood in the sun like prettily decorated cakes.

Across from the bank association building, they finally entered the pleasantly cool walls of Palais Jesenky. It was an almost underwhelming experience at first: Hans had imagined a palace where the servants would come out to greet them, bowing and scraping. Instead, they now walked up the stairs of the three-storey building, which in Hans' eyes was not much more impressive than the building where Helene had her surgery. The floors were made of stone and the staircase was unpleasantly low, as if the building wanted to remind one in an uncomfortable way not to lose one's humility. They stepped up to a wide double door on the middle floor. Instead of pulling out a key, Adam knocked four times, immediately stood on his own two feet and wiped the crusted blood from his mouth. An elderly lady opened the door – black apron, white lace – and even Hans realised that she must be a cook who came from Vienna. Judging by Adam's erratic gestures, Hans had expected her to reprimand him or – quite rightly in Hans' opinion - to confront him about who he had got in a fight with. But instead she backed away from him as if in the presence of a prince. Hans looked down at

Adam's wretched silhouette in disbelief when the woman did a proper curtsy and hurriedly escorted them inside. But she did not only curtsy to Adam – she curtsied to Hans as well. And in one wonderful fell swoop, he realised that although he might have been a farmhand yesterday, he was not any longer.

When they entered the apartment, everything suddenly seemed like a fairytale: the medieval staircase had just been a shrouded antechamber to Olympus, which unfolded in the living space. It was said that old money does not show itself willingly – it hid behind heavy fabrics and ducked away in alcoves, it leaned far back in hackney carriages so as not to be seen from the street when going about its business.

As they walked behind Adam, new rooms kept opening up that revealed themselves in ever more bold unfoldings: a drawing room with a grand piano and ceiling fresco depicting playful clouds; a dining room whose table could seat thirty people or more; and Hans could only vaguely imagine the delicacies that weighed it down daily. Then they entered a room whose entire floor was covered by an immensely valuable-looking carpet, while an impressive writing desk stood out from the mint-green walls.

'That's an ottoman,' said Klara, who had noticed his gaze, pointing to the floor. But everything happened so fast: a gold-adorned staircase covered in red carpeting led them upstairs. Had the house not looked very low from the outside in comparison to the other facades? A gallery of portraits, probably Adam's ancestors, covered the walls, all of them officers. Serious and, despite the surely flattering paintings, rather small men, who, unperturbed by the cannon fire in the background, placed their hands on their lapels.

Hans could not help but feel uplifted at the sight of them: *Battle of Leipzig*, it said beneath the portrait of a man wearing a wig and riding a rearing black horse on the battlefield. He had a sense of the same vague notion of heroism and the will to sacrifice that he had felt when *Prince Eugene the Noble Knight* had been read to him as a child, and this combined with the likenesses of young men, some of them in armour, others in modern uniform coats. *Milan Jesenky with Uhlans Regiment*. Hans gently placed his hand on one of the frames. Painted narratives of the Turkish siege and the multi-ethnic army, Hungarian hussars and the Pragmatic Sanction of the indivisibility of all Habsburg hereditary lands hurtled through his head, and he felt a yearning whose reference he could not find.

‘What are you doing, Hans? Come along.’ He wheeled around and ran down the corridor after Klara. Now and then a servant would appear from one of the rooms, but at the sight of Adam’s desolate condition was immediately driven away by his need to serve. It was obviously not appropriate for the household to witness the state he was in. Finally Klara pushed open a door with the side of her foot, and then entered Adam’s bedchamber.

‘Lie down on the bed for a moment, I’ll run you a bath,’ she said, and laid the audibly groaning Adam on a dark-green divan before she ran off. Hans tried to look around inconspicuously so as not to show how curious he was about the décor of the room. The furniture was put together like a rebus puzzle; completely disjointed but also coherent in an abstract way. [...]

When he turned around, his friend was lying curled up against the wall with his eyes closed.

‘Is everything all right?’ Hans asked, leaning over him.

‘Yes, I am feeling perfectly fine,’ said Adam, who managed to smile with considerable effort, and turned around. [...]

‘Give me one,’ he said to Klara, who had dipped a handkerchief into a small pot of iodine to clean the lesions, and started to work on the deeper cuts.

‘It seems you have experience with these things,’ she said in that same tone of voice – the teasing, chivvy tone.

‘There isn’t a day that goes by on a farm where someone doesn’t get hurt; you city folk are not used to it,’ he said cheekily.

‘Yes, that’s true,’ Klara replied.

Adam had closed his eyes – probably as Hans had done in his own encounters with the pungent iodine, so as not to show any pain reaction.

‘Right, the bath should be ready now,’ Klara finally said. ‘I will come and get you out of the tub in half an hour. We will put some ice cubes on your face and treat it with some heparin so that your black eye disappears before your father makes an appearance.’

‘Did the bath run itself?’ As gently as he could, Hans picked up Adam, who wrapped his arms around his neck, and Klara joined them. The two of them supported him and helped him to a marble bathroom, in the middle of which stood a pristine white bathtub. What splendour! They left Adam, whom Hans hoped would not fall asleep in the tub and drown, in the foam and went and sat down on the divan, both equally exhausted.

‘That must have been quite a surprise for you,’ Hans said.

‘Oh, I am quite resilient about these things. It’s not as if this is the first time Adam has got in a fight.’ She plumped up a pillow. ‘But are you doing all right, Hans Ranftler?’ She lay down on her back. ‘I think that after all you have experienced today, you should go to bed and use the time to have a nap. If you are going to be forced into meeting Mr and Mrs Jesenky in a few hours, you will be grateful for every bit of rest that you can arm yourself with.’

‘That bad?’ Hans asked, sinking back onto the pillow; she was right, he did feel shattered.

‘Worse,’ she replied. ‘I’m going to take a short nap as well if you don’t mind.’ And so they lay there, stretched out alongside each other. Hans closed his eyes; he already felt heavy and ready to drift off, when a thought jerked him back up.

‘Klara,’ he uttered. ‘What was that about earlier?’

‘What was what?’ she asked quietly.

‘Something happened to Adam, earlier in rehearsal.’ He was sitting bolt upright.

‘Happened to him?’ Klara repeated.

‘The reason, you know, the reason that the fight started was Adam himself. Something happened to him,’ Hans said once more, because as much as he contorted himself mentally, he could not express himself any better.

‘Can you be more specific, Hans?’ Klara admonished him.

‘It’s nothing,’ he said sheepishly. ‘The conversation was about all sorts of political upheavals, but that wasn’t the odd thing,’ he said, breathing laboriously. ‘It seemed more as if he could see inside the other person, as if he had looked inside Bunic.’ He realised how strange that sounded. ‘Inside his memory, inside his innermost secrets.’

Secrets which he himself only thought of clearly at that very moment; Adam broke them down, dissected them. But that wasn't the worst thing about it,' Hans added hastily. 'It was his spitefulness.'

A shudder ran over him – he pictured Adam before him in greater horror than in the actual situation. Klara turned about on the divan with such force that he was briefly lifted off it.

'Just look around you,' said Klara. 'He has always had issues with his aggression. You would too if your entire existence revolved around the exploits of a Count Radetzky or Schwarzenberg and you had to rein in your every passion to comply. But the whole thing about being able to read people is something else again. It is Adam's malaise. A malaise is an affliction.'

'I know what malaise means,' said Hans. 'Don't think I am not a reader just because I had to graft on a farm. But it seemed more like a skill than an affliction.'

'Depends on how you see it. He picks up on other people's memories.'

'You say it as if it were something normal.'

'Well, you'll have to excuse me; for a while we had a sort of *jour fixe* with a whole collection of Helene's patients, and Adam really was the most harmless of the lot.'

'Keep it down, he can hear us.'

'Oh we talk about it all the time.' Without paying much attention to how important the subject was for Hans, Klara turned back onto her stomach, as if she wanted to sleep, but carried on talking.

'In Adam's case, the matter – yes, by the way, in public we call our abilities *matters* so as not to draw attention to ourselves...'

‘Because of the attacks, right?’

‘...started much earlier than it did with me. At the age of seven or eight, in the middle of primary school. He once told me that it started with him when he refused to go up the *Kahlenberg* with his instructor, claiming that it was an unfavourable position because the Boers knew their way around there much better. Since no-one knew what he was talking about, they apparently questioned him. And it turned out that he believed he had taken part in a battle there a few days before. He was able to list the weapons, very specific models, entirely impossible to guess. Brands of shotgun, muzzle-loading models, whatever. And then they discovered that Adam could name every single fort in Heidelberg.’

‘But there was no battle in Heidelberg?’

‘No, Heidelberg in South Africa,’ her voice sounded from among the cushions.

‘That makes even less sense.’

She rolled over towards him, her face scrunched up. A few strands of damp hair hung across her face, and a fine film of sweat had formed on her neck, over her collarbone, above her cleavage.

‘So they found out that Adam has memories of battles from all over the world and that he – like an act of absorption – carries his father’s memories of the first Boer war encapsulated in him.’

‘But perhaps he simply listened to these stories?’ Hans asked, getting up so that Klara wouldn’t notice him looking at her.

‘Of course, that was the simplest explanation, and the story only begins where Adam’s recollections diverge from the accepted version of things. It’s the same in scientific modelling. If a theory can clarify something about the empirical ... am I boring you?’

‘Not at all!’ He put back the book that he had pulled out as a distraction.

‘There were things about Adam’s recollections that were more plausible than what was written in the history books. They checked it. Adam’s father invited a British army officer over whom he knew and inquired about some of the geographic features in Pretoria that his son had described.’

‘And?’

‘Well, they were all correct.’

‘So he essentially has something very similar to me,’ Hans said and touched one of the shining medals on the wall. *National Defence Service Medal*.

‘I can’t judge what it is exactly that you have, but what Adam can do is extremely strange. He doesn’t just know these things, they are not reported to him. He genuinely *remembers* them. They are part of his identity, his genesis. It’s unsettling, right? It’s no wonder that he gets into fights.’

‘What? He actually remembers being there himself? I mean, surely he can’t, he wasn’t really there.’

‘Well,’ said Klara, and gave Hans a sign that he should lower his voice because they could hear noises coming from the bathroom now. ‘Sometimes Adam remembers things from current political events, like when Aleksander Obrenovic was murdered in 1903 – that was one of his most vivid memories.’

‘As the murderer?’

‘As Obrenovic,’ she whispered. ‘His family has a – how shall I put this – double-edged relationship with these matters. On the one hand, Adam has to keep silent, under threat of death, about the fact

that a Jesenky is undergoing analytical treatment for a psychological condition, while on the other hand – and I am telling you this in confidence – on the other hand, Adam disappears time and again for days, sometimes weeks on end. Sometimes he tells me how some of the officers question him in detail in the presence of his father about his recollections.’

‘So they are using ...?’

‘Quiet,’ Klara said. Now Hans had also clearly heard the footsteps, and a moment later the door swung open. But it was just a servant woman who hurried into the room, not Adam himself. She carried a tray with cakes and coffee, and cutlery, which Hans suspected was real silver.

‘At Mr Adam’s behest.’

This was the woman who had opened the door for them earlier. Hans looked at the cook’s hands. They spoke of her hard life – spoke of hauling sacks of potatoes, spoke of hundreds of small burns and cuts, if only you understood the language of calluses. And the way she stood there! How many servants had he learned to identify in his life by this very posture – the bent brokenness that resulted from never being allowed to leave the space of existence assigned to you. The pain in the back, the pallor in the face. And just as he recognised her, the cook also recognised *his* standing. Perplexed and overwhelmed, they looked at each other for a moment – equals and yet strangely enough, he was now on the other side of circumstance.

And all at once, Hans understood how fortunate today’s providence had actually been.

'Bring some milk,' he ordered the woman, and watched, elated, as she turned on the spot and hurried away.

A moment later Adam came through the door. He looked even more desolate than before; the bath water had softened the soft tissue of his face and darkened it.

'Come here,' Klara said and turned her bag upside down, pouring out an entire household: make-up utensils, booklets, pens, small pots, a magnifying glass, bedroom, kitchen, study.

'At your service,' said the old cook who had returned with the milk.

'Put it over there,' Adam instructed the servant; all at the same time Hans pushed a doughnut into his mouth and Klara powdered his forehead to cover up the bruising.

'The bathroom is free now,' Adam said, under the fierce strokes of Klara, who applied the colouring as if she were painting a bare façade. 'Towels are there, take what you need from the cupboard. And yes, take this too ...' he escaped the make-up session for a moment and pulled out a pile of clothes from a chest of drawers.

It was time to get ready for the first *dinner* of his life and if he hurried, he might even get the opportunity to stretch out on the divan for an hour or two beforehand. [...]

Chapter 4

Demi Monde

Then the evening light broke in: deceptive and oppressive and sudden.

Twilight had caught the city mid-movement; had seized people's sweat-damp arms, which were now overrun by a spray of goose bumps. The unyielding canopy of a sluggish summer had arched across the sky all season, thunderless and full of residual heat in the evenings. Carefree hours spent dressed in loose clothing in the tavern gardens. But then the hands suddenly came tumbling down the clockfaces and, surprised by their own momentum, swung around past nine. The stars and the sultry reflection of the summer's day stood in the sky at the same time and scared each other.

People tried to drown out the thunderclaps in anecdotes. The drapery of the light turned evermore black. Soon reddish, soon already on the stucco ridges of the *Seilerstätte*, the evening gathered over them. All of a sudden, the excitement broke like a sighing crack, and it was clear to all. The ultimatum would expire the next day.

Volley fire, turret strike, it was war.

But the curfew was not yet near, it would not show itself until the next morning. More and more people crowded into the bars and restaurants whose outdoor tables were long filled to breaking point. So people settled on the streets, as if to show the outside world that their own bodies were no longer their own, but public property. That which was rationally delayed for one more night, was already a done deal taken for granted: *one* body of the people, *one* body of war.

The groups formed as if it had all been predetermined for a hundred years: young people, standing on fruit crates, became public speakers; others had sneaked into taverns under cover of darkness to steal barrels of beer to drink in the street. They were reprimanded by smirking gendarmes. There was drinking, ordering another round and charging to account, and the waiters put up with it, even though they knew that the debts of that night would never be repaid.

At that moment society was still a smooth fabric that just ruffled a little at the edges – and which, when the wind cut in, was prevented from flapping with wine glasses and ashtrays. The brass band played *God Save*, but the noise from the taverns distorted the singing into something unrecognisable. Strangers fell into each other's arms. People were finally no longer themselves. They were finally Austrians or even German-Austrians, and they would not cease being so for a long time.

Now hundreds of people up who had been sitting smoking in the streets like highwaymen jumped up, wanting to celebrate with schnapps and flags the passing of the ultimatum that Emperor Wilhelm II had given to the Tsar. Each man felt entirely at peace with himself, as he rushed to *Penzing* or *Simmering* or *Favoriten*; thought himself to be following his own intuition as he nervously banged on the door behind which a long-worshipped woman waited to be wrested from a strict prospective father-in-law. And in sudden leniency, thousands of those fathers-in-law agreed that tomorrow morning, before the trains started rolling towards the Galician front in the afternoon, this insignificant cadet (but he was a cadet at least, in the Imperial Austro-Hungarian army!) would be allowed to drag

their daughter to the nearest altar. A million nineteen-year-old widows would soon populate Europe.

But hush! Tonight there would be no talk of that. Instead there would be hasty and clumsy lovemaking, sleepless and sweaty in the July night. They thought they had drawn at least once on that which tomorrow would belong to the emperor: these still childlike boyish and girlish bodies. That would make it easier to die – because they imagined dying – in August, which would bring they knew not what, and about which they would later sing songs – as the most vibrant thing possible. I am I and will have been forever – I as an individual in the history of mankind.

What a delusion! Nothing was individual about anyone any more. The last night of humanity was a collective event, and the more each person felt themselves to be an individual, the more they became a part of the Absolute.

This was also exemplified by the fact that no-one could bear to be alone. All those who had no-one, or those who had come from Salzburg, Sipolje and Petrinja and who had received their call-up orders in their miserable hovels in Vienna – yes, they now had to help themselves in a different way. Tens of thousands of girls put on make-up by candlelight as if this was the last time they would be doing so, and just as many baby-faced boys put on cologne. They were driven by the hope that the prostitute they were seeking to lose themselves with, would remember the blonde boy with the call-up badge over the coming months. Revealingly, the people didn't just head to the bars and cafés in their existential search for pleasure.

Now that it was almost ten, the music halls and brothels opened their doors. In the brief shadow of world history, the

profession that is usually hidden away came to light. The screens were quietly erected in the *Raimundtheater*, to provide a little privacy to those whose longings were not satisfied in the usual establishments. The nightlife venues on *Wienzeile* opened their doors – some of them barely more than elevated sewage pipes. Connectors and interfaces, that linked the world of the living and the sewer.

The silent masses that had never been able to fully integrate into society now poured in: to the *Royal* and the *Perlmutter*, to the *Neuwien* and the *Meininger* in the *Wieden* district, which had not quietened down for days now. And when the police-enforced curfew was called on *Karlsplatz*, then the prostitutes staggered into *Rosa Mayer's*, who every night planned to close her doors at three in the morning. But business was business: since the girls were followed by young men – and here, in these districts, the men even followed the men and the women other women - it was usually too late to lock up at nine in the morning. The staff, consisting of the boss lady and two waitresses, lay down on two mattresses in the storeroom around lunchtime, woke at six and had a quick wash before the week-long shift continued. In other words, just as the landlady was pushing open the cellar door, a gust of wind tore it from her hand and smashed it with full force against the bare stone wall.

Hans was startled for a moment when the sour smell gushed towards him.

‘This is it?’ he whispered to Klara.

‘Yes, why?’

She and Adam entered the musty basement tavern, and Hans followed sceptically behind.

It was more a cave than a tavern that they had descended into via some small steps. Heavy, brackish-smelling leather furniture stood beneath damp walls as if it were the plan for the interior to go mouldy. Yes, it was damp like the end of a huge rain gutter leading into a wall. The plaster was peeling off everywhere – more or less covered by dusky pink velvet on the walls. A smell lay over it, as if an entire century had vomited here.

‘At ease, Ranftler! This is practically our living room, you don’t need to impress anyone here,’ said Klara, who had stretched out on one of the benches with her shoes on.

‘Yes, I quite like it,’ Hans replied and realised to his own amazement that it was true. It was lighter outside the wide-open door than inside. Groups of soldiers walked by, smoking. They briefly draped their arms around girls who pulled away laughing. Now a few of them came down the stairs and retreated into the scarred corners of the tavern; Hans was irritated to see that Klara greeted them.

‘Do you know everyone here?’ he asked.

‘Almost. It just accumulates over the years.’ She lit a cigarette.

Hans tried to keep an eye on the soldiers, but they dived straight down into the souterrain, shouting and grinning in their craving for pleasure. So was there another floor under this cellar, a sort of anti-mezzanine floor?

The place was slowly filling up. Those who came in glanced left and right, as if no-one really wanted to be seen here. ‘Demi monde’ – the term came to Hans’ mind while his senses immediately corrected the impression: most of the guests were beautiful, well-dressed people. In fact, it was a veritable mixture: bourgeois, hung

with heavy pocket watch chains, even if syphilis shone from some faces. Or perhaps, he told himself, it was just what he imagined syphilis to be. There were thin Lolita types, who sat unashamedly on the laps of those who placed champagne flutes in front of them, fat men in singlets with pomaded hair.

He watched one of the girls. She had a very pretty if naïve face that was framed by long dark hair, and wore a silk cloak. A very tall, lanky soldier in uniform had his arm around her shoulder and was fondling her breast while continuing his conversation with the man next to him, quite unperturbed. And then he realised: it was not a she – the girl was in fact a young boy. Hans looked away hastily towards the two musicians who were just setting up on a small stage, when Adam grabbed him by the shoulder.

‘...do you want a drink, Hans,’ he said, overarticulating as he got up, as if he had posed the question several times before.

‘Drink?’ Hans asked.

‘Beer, wine, brandy, liqueur?’ The cellar was so full now that you had to make an effort to understand anything being said. The huddled bodies hung over the bar as if hung out to dry; the haze of the oil lamps gathered above their heads.

‘Liqueur then,’ Hans replied.

‘What is this place?’ Hans asked when he was alone with Klara.

‘The *Meininger*,’ she replied and lit another cigarette on the candle that the waitress had just placed in front of her. She had not smoked during the day; now she was a chain-smoker all of a sudden. ‘It’s my home, so to speak, at least I grew up here. Before I tried to

succeed in, shall we say, the real world. Now I just come here for pleasure and to do the things that could lead to problems out there.'

'Oh, things?' Hans asked as casually as possible. Everything about this speech had puzzled him, but he definitely didn't want to let on. 'What do you mean by grew up?'

'Oh, Hans,' Klara said and smiled. 'If I were to tell you that I have a troubled relationship with my parents then that would be a lie. I have no relationship to them, we are incommensurable.'

'You are what?'

'We have no common ground. We just don't talk to one another, there is no talking that would be talking for us, I mean, it's not even a question of what to say. I have had no contact for nine years. Instead, I was socialised here.'

'Never!' He couldn't imagine anything more improbable than a young person *here*, among the sooty stools, among the shady ladies and the, the, whatever was going on a few tables away from them.

'Yes, I was,' said Klara. 'I helped out behind the bar for a few Kreuzer a day and was allowed to sleep under the tables.'

'That's awful. I didn't want to make you say all that...'

Hans said. He felt as though he were somehow to blame or had at least forced her to bring everything back up that she had worked through. 'I was just surprised because you are a mathematical genius.' Klara laughed; she wasn't in the slightest bit angry.

'I am no genius, Hans. What are you talking about? And it is not as bad as you think, well, at least not if you knew my real background.' She blew out smoke. 'I feel sort of nostalgic here, and it is a lot better than the women's hostel where you have to sleep on your things at night so they don't get stolen from under you.'

‘So your parents threw you out?’

‘There was no definitive break. I was always out and about and finally just stayed away altogether, from around the age of twelve. All us children had to bring money home, even during primary school, earlier than is legal here. But I refused, do you understand? I wanted to go to school at all costs, and finally made it into the preparatory course of a grammar school. From then on, I was a dead weight for my parents.’

‘At twelve,’ Hans repeated softly. ‘And how long did you sleep here under the bar?’

‘Roughly until I met Helene.’ Klara leaned back and reached for one of the lamps with a green shade on the side of the sofa. She placed it between the two of them so that its waxy light lit up both their faces. It was true – this place was her living room.

‘I met her here as it happens, at a Youth Cultural Movement regulars’ table,’ she said matter-of-factly as if it were not necessary to explain that you might encounter a lady here, and a psychoanalyst at that! ‘Perhaps it was even more serendipitous for her than for me. A girl who switched from being a bed lodger to attending a Genia Schwarzwald school. A poster child for the women’s club. And not bad for me either, of course – they paid my school fees.’ She blew out smoke.

‘And now you have been living with her for a few years,’ Hans said carefully, because he was not at all sure whether this was something he was allowed to admit to knowing.

‘Well, of course I don’t really live with her, it’s two separate maisonettes. I am her project. A patronage scenario, as she likes to put it.’

‘And what does she get out of it? She is rich. Do the two of you get on well?’ He himself was unsure why this sounded so awkward.

‘Well, she gets quite a lot out of it.’ Now – for the first time since they had met – Klara blushed. ‘You know, we used to spend every single minute together. That was a revelation for me coming from a home where you can’t imagine such things.’

Where you couldn’t imagine what things, Hans thought to himself. Education? Women who taught? Conversations about the parapsychological? Or about ...

‘You seem much more distant from her now,’ he said carefully.

‘There comes a moment when you realise that an eighteen-year-old girl without means can’t be an equal to a forty-year-old grown woman and that you have to meet certain demands.’

[...]

‘The music is *the* reason I am here!’ Adam was back and placed three glasses on the table. Hans took a big gulp, which made him cough. Cheap stuff.

‘What they’re playing – what *they’re* playing, Hans – that is the future. Not like what we performed this morning. A broader notion of the future, swing music from America, hardly anyone knows that here, and those who hear it for the first time are puzzled. That is a mark of quality!’

‘So why are they playing it here?’ asked Hans, whose head had already been befuddled by the brandy. Hadn’t he actually asked for liqueur?

'You've got it all wrong. It's not in the official places that things happen in Vienna. Well, some things do – hello Riebenbauer!'

He slapped a sailor on the shoulder – yes, an actual *sailor*, Hans assured himself. Or was it an actor wearing a theatrical costume? 'But the really essential stuff, the stuff that changes the world, happens when people are willing to *try out* the changes on themselves.'

'Try out sounds like we are objects in a study.'

'Well, we are, in a way. The study is called the 20th century.'

Change was a fine word for it – he saw a woman who had to be in her seventies wearing a long taffeta gown and kissing a young boy. No-one cared.

But the more he drank, the more he felt at home in the place. He was no longer surprised by the unspeakable crowds of people who kept pouring down the stairs, surging down onto a spontaneously opened dance floor. He had become accustomed to the mental overload; he settled into it.

Now the music played. Dizziness and tiredness from the day's exertions blunted all impressions. Vortexes of feelings, smell and colour. The burn of the alcohol, the warmth in his stomach.

'Klara, a message came for you.' The waitress who had been standing behind the bar earlier had come over to their table, and Klara jumped up without explanation and followed her.

'What message?' Hans asked Adam.

'It's Helene.' His glass slipped from his hand and banged loudly on the small table.

'What? Is she here?' Hans wheeled around.

'No, of course not. Although, she sort of is. She telegraphs Klara when we go out because she wants to know where she is.'

'But that is – that is messed up,' Hans said but immediately regretted his vehemence because he suddenly feared that everything might be a test.

'Completely obsessive. But I understand Klara. She is dependent on Helene's support and she doesn't want to forfeit it. Do you know what happened to us once?'

Adam's eyes were swimming in their sockets. 'We went hiking six months ago with a friend of Klara's in *Reichenau*. We were sitting in front of the guest house one evening, smoking, drinking tea – when a very conspicuous carriage drove by. Green velvet, completely out of place in the mountains. We didn't think anything of it until it reappeared the next morning – 500 metres higher up – can you believe it, on the gravel track in front of the last hut on the mountain. Klara smelled a rat.'

'Helene followed you?' The heroic image that Hans had had of Klara and her circumstances when they first met evaporated abruptly. He turned and looked around at the other tables – he suddenly felt as if he were being watched.

'All the way. She slept in the carriage for two days so we wouldn't spot her. If that's not pathological ...'

'That's absurd,' Hans said and Adam, who felt vindicated, looked around as if he had remembered something very sensitive.

'Shall I tell you about my theory? It is probably not true, but some thoughts have come to mind, do you understand?'

'No,' Hans said truthfully.

'I wondered if Helene might not have invented this whole dream cluster thing, or shall we say used it in order to be able to see Klara every day. To justify an obsession. How high is the probability that the very girl that Helene picked up here by chance turns out to be the centre of the phenomenon that she is studying?'

'Or else,' said Hans, 'it is exactly the other way round.'

But his words were drowned out by the saxophone. Klara also returned at that moment, with two young women in tow.

'This is Elisabeth and Marie,' she called out – you could barely hear yourself speak over the music. 'And that is Hans, he's just arrived in Vienna. He's from Tyrol.' The two women shook his hand. They were no less beautiful than Klara.

'What a time to move to the city!' exclaimed the one who had been introduced to him as Marie. 'Yovovich said that there will be another protest tonight. You can come along, you'll be in for a surprise!'

'What's going on there?' Adam intervened.

'French Embassy. Yesterday someone climbed up the façade and cut the flag down and replaced it with a yellow and black one. Pretty ugly if you ask me,' said the other girl and turned to Hans to explain. 'We are involved in the objectors' faction, of course.'

'As if this nationalism doesn't make everything even worse. This obsession with the Prussian.'

Klara brushed a strand of hair from the dark-haired girl's face.

'We are going to go and cause some trouble. Will you come too?'

'Of course,' said Klara, who seemed a little embarrassed now.

Hans had never felt overly self-conscious in front of women. He had flirted with the maids at lunchtime and had even kissed one of them at the annual fair. She had been a tall, strong girl. After his attempts to impress her with his sparse erudition hadn't worked, he had simply surrendered to her lead. Smelling of beer, she had grabbed him firmly and pulled him behind a pile of wood where no-one could see them. After a few attempts at kissing that felt like the caresses of two fish that had been washed ashore, he had grabbed her by the hand, which, in contrast to the rest of her body, was still quite childlike. They had ducked down and run over to the farm and, jumping across the creaking floorboards, into the bed chamber. He had pulled open the bed drawer that he slept in in the barn, and wordlessly slipped under the covers with the girl whose name he did not know, while the small altar and half a dozen pictures of saints stared at him from the chest of drawers.

No, he had never reacted to women with the embarrassment that others struggled with – but something about *these* women moved him in a different way. They were beautiful without wanting to seduce, yes, without even considering the possibility of such seduction. There was something disarming about them, without you being able to say what it was. Perhaps it was the fact that they wore trousers, he thought for a moment – but some of the girls on the farm had done that too. Only these women wore their trousers entirely *differently*.

‘Also from the district group,’ Klara whispered into Hans’ ear when she noticed how attentively he was studying the two women. Caught off guard, he turned away.

Fortunately, the band, which had expanded to three members with the addition of a clarinet, started playing with newly awakened vigour a moment later. There were three idiosyncratic figures that started bouncing around as if strung up on invisible ribbons. The first was a long-faced, tall fellow. Borne by the flittering glissando of his violin, which had begun a strangely fast melody, he seemed to float. Now the people around Hans started to stamp. There were shouts of encouragement, and people spontaneously formed couples that rushed over to the stage. They wanted to be part of it – but part of what?

[...]

Wasn’t it all just tremendous? Hans thought and finally relaxed enough to start swaying to the beat of the music, when his gaze fell beneath the table.

In a blind spot that no-one else could see, Klara had placed her hand on the thigh of one of her friends, the one called Elisabeth. Hans’ heart raced. For a moment he explained it to himself as a moment of female familiarity. Now she moved her thumb, her fingers spread and stretched into the other girl’s lap. Not deeply into it – rather, held back by the fabric of the tautly stretched skirt, her hand could only tease the very ends of the nerves without fulfilling any of its promise. Then, retracting again, her index finger descended to the knee, drew a few circles and found the hem of the skirt that lay there

neatly, edge to edge. His indignation turned to horror; that this was really happening – in public! Hans could not avert his gaze.

Now Klara's finger, as casually as a deft hand ties a shoelace, had pushed the girl's slip right up. A garter, he saw it under the table. Quite simple, made of linen, black, nothing special – but here an almost insurmountable hurdle, as Klara and Elisabeth, whose face remained tensely neutral, could not bring this struggle out into the open.

Compelled by an irresistible force, the thigh bobbed up and down as if to rub against something that was not there. Finally the tip of the index finger penetrated beneath the nylon and now Hans saw that both women's chests were rising and falling fiercely. He could not really look, but certainly couldn't look away: Hans could sense, in his own body, the overwhelming feeling of engorgement and the shocking touch of the feather-light fingertip.

Again and again, Elisabeth shifted her weight, writhed in slow motion, as if a heavy weight were resting on her pelvis. But the quality of this movement slowly began to change. As the other four fingers moved millimetre by millimetre across the inside of the thigh, they seemed to have more counterpressure. This tense, desperate lap that now had a will of its own twisted and changed position again; seemed at times to caress this finger more than the other way round.

Klara hid what she was doing, which no-one but Hans saw, with normal gestures – she tried to bring the glass to her lips and move a millimetre closer at the same time. But what a difference that millimetre could make! When Klara, while feigning to sip from her glass, ran her hand fleetingly over the spot where Elisabeth held her thighs pressed tightly together, this was the moment at which her

resistance completely gave way. Then she inhaled sharply and deeply. Her legs, which had been as though armoured, suddenly softened.

Once again, he saw their faces in profile, saw that the seeming fascination with the music was just a veil that they held in front of them, trembling in the gusts of their breaths, which had become synchronised with each other.

It was only when they turned, away from him, that he became aware how greedy he had become at this sight. All at once he felt caught out, betrayed by his impertinent gaze – but the two of them could not have been further away from noticing him.

They got up quietly and made their way to the toilets. Even before the door closed behind them, Klara had her hand in Elisabeth's hair.