



SHORTLISTED FOR THE EBRD LITERARY PRIZE (2025)

SHORTLISTED FOR THE MOST PRESTIGIOUS NATIONAL LITERARY AWARD (2023)



Life After Kafka

by Magdaléna Platzová



A novel inspired by the fate of Kafka's fiancée Felice Bauer

Life After Kafka reimagines the life of Felice Bauer, Franz Kafka's former fiancée, focusing on her experiences after their relationship ended.

Set against the backdrop of 1935 Berlin, Felice flees with her children from the rise of Nazism, seeking refuge in the United States. The narrative delves into her personal journey of survival, exile, and the complexities of memory, especially concerning the letters Kafka wrote to her.

While taking the measure of literary fame's long shadow, *Life After Kafka* depicts the magic and poison of memories, and what we cling to when all else is lost.

"Franz Kafka is a universe that resists any attempt at interpretation. Magdaléna Platzová's novel offers a new key to Kafka's world: we look at it through the tender and sorrowful gaze of the people whose fate had been marked by him personally. An utterly touching book!"

— Agnieszka Holland

"Striking... Incredibly evocative... *Life After Kafka*, with its mix of research and imagination, arrives at an auspicious moment."

— *Words Without Borders*

June 2022

240 pages

Magdaléna Platzová (b. 1972) is the author of the novels *The Return of the Girlfriend* (2004), *Aaron's Leap* (2014), *The Anarchist* (2013), *The Other Side of Silence* (2018), **and the short story collections** *Salt, Sheep and Stones* (2003), and *The Recycled Man* (2008). She has also written two children's books. Platzová grew up in Prague, was educated in the United States and England, and holds a master's degree in philosophy from Charles University in Prague. She worked as an actress and translator, and later as an editor and journalist at the monthly *Literární noviny* and the weekly *Respekt*. From 2009 to 2012 she lived in New York, where she taught a course on Franz Kafka at New York University. She currently lives in Prague.



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THE INTERNATIONAL PITCH

Life After Kafka

Magdaléna Platzová

He became a literary legend.
She still had a life to live.

Felice Bauer has escaped Nazi Germany with her husband and children. In America she must find work, keep her family afloat and survive the loss of the world she knew. Meanwhile, the man she once planned to marry has become a literary icon. Kafka's letters, hidden for decades in a shoebox, make her private past a matter of public fascination. A stranger's claim to be his son turns the struggle over those letters into a literary mystery.

LITERARY FICTION / EXILE, MEMORY AND A WOMAN'S OWN STORY

Moving between Europe and the United States, Platzová restores a full human life to a woman too often reduced to a footnote in a famous man's biography. Historical research, imagined scenes and the author's own encounters with Felice's descendants create a novel about both survival and the making of literary history.

WHY THIS BOOK TRAVELS

The novel connects Kafka's worldwide readership with stories of displacement, family loyalty and women's independence. Its central questions reach beyond any single literary figure: who has the right to tell a life, what does exile leave intact, and what do we keep when almost everything has been lost? The documentary thread gives the intimate family story the momentum of an investigation.

INTERNATIONAL PUBLICATION

Original Czech edition: Argo, June 2022; 240 pages. The US edition was published by Bellevue Literary Press on 6 August 2024, translated from Czech by Alex Zucker; 256 pages. [View the US edition.](#)

READING MATERIAL

An extended English synopsis follows, then the opening reading sample in Alex Zucker's translation. The sample has 41 pages of text plus its cover, title page and copyright page, and ends at a chapter boundary.

American critical response

“A tantalizing mystery.”

The New York Times Book Review

Quoted by Bellevue Literary Press · [View the source](#)

“As Felice Bauer receives her spotlight, Platzová deserves one, too.”

Publishers Weekly

28 May 2024 · [Read the full review](#)

“She has an incredibly evocative sense of scene.”

Cory Oldweiler, Words Without Borders

1 August 2024 · [Read the full review](#)

“It is a meticulously researched, vividly envisioned work, written in language both restrained and piercing.”

Marilyn Oser, Washington Independent Review of Books

14 August 2024 · [Read the full review](#)

“Affecting.”

Library Journal (starred review)

Quoted by Bellevue Literary Press · [View the source](#)

The New York Times Book Review and Library Journal quotations are reproduced on the US publisher's page. All excerpts refer to *Life After Kafka*.

A life beyond Kafka's shadow

Who was Felice Bauer beyond the woman preserved in Kafka's letters? Known to generations of readers mainly as a lover of hearty food, heavy furniture and precise watches, she has rarely been granted a story of her own. Platzová's search begins with Felice's descendants in the United States and opens onto the lives of others in Kafka's circle: Grete Bloch, Ernst Weiss, Max Brod and Salman Schocken.

In 1935, Felice and her husband Robert, a private banker, have fled Hitler's Berlin with their children Joachim and Lily. They are living in Geneva and preparing to leave for America. A visit from Grete Bloch, who has also left Germany, becomes a farewell gathering. Through fifteen-year-old Joachim, the reader enters the family's domestic world: meals, music, old friendships and the growing awareness that the Europe they know is disappearing.

By autumn 1938, Felice has settled in Los Angeles. Robert travels to Paris in a last attempt to return to finance, but suffers a heart attack. Felice crosses America and the Atlantic to bring him home. Paris, between the Munich Agreement and Kristallnacht, is crowded with Jewish refugees. A meeting with Ernst Weiss forces her to confront both the wreckage of Europe and painful memories of Kafka. She returns to the United States knowing that her Berlin is gone for good. Robert's illness leaves him unable to support the family, and Felice takes on the role she knew in her youth: the working woman who provides for everyone.

The story then moves to San Donato Val di Comino in 1944. Grete Bloch, now fifty-one, is interned in the Italian mountain town with German, Czechoslovak and Austrian Jews. Exhausted but determined to survive, she seeks refuge through friendships, faith and whatever protection she can find. She has only months left to live. Contemporary documents and the work of researcher Anna Pizzuti enter the narrative as Platzová investigates Grete's fate and her vanished luggage, said to contain evidence of a child whose father might have been Kafka.

The struggle over the letters

In the summer of 1944, Joachim is an army doctor training as a military psychiatrist on Long Island. His first love and marriage lead into postwar New York, its restless energy and the growing fame of Kafka, whose books are now quoted even by bartenders. Six years later Joachim has established a psychiatric practice in Manhattan and has a wife and two children.

One day a stranger arrives in his office claiming to be the son of Grete Bloch and Franz Kafka. His presence turns the uncertain history of Kafka's circle into a personal problem for Felice's family. What begins as a claim about parentage becomes entangled with the fate of Kafka's letters to Felice, and with the question of who may possess, interpret or profit from another person's past.

After the deaths of her husband and sister, Felice grows old in Los Angeles, running a knitting and sewing supplies shop. Her quiet life is disturbed by a letter from Max Brod in Tel Aviv. Letters to Milena have been published, Kafka's reputation is growing, and Brod wants her to sell her correspondence to the publisher Salman Schocken. To him, the world must not be deprived of this literary legacy.

Schocken makes an offer. Joachim wants his mother to accept: she is ill, her medical bills are mounting, and the money would help. But Felice refuses. The letters were written to her in confidence, and surrendering them would betray both their writer and the life she has kept private. She reads them for the first time in years, returning to the old relationship as the demands of the present close around her. The self-proclaimed son of Kafka reappears with claims of his own.

Joachim visits his mother in Los Angeles to discover whether the letters still exist. They are kept in a Bata shoebox, tied in bundles. His practical concern for her future collides with her determination to retain control of the past. She considers destroying them, yet cannot bring herself to do it. The negotiation exposes the gap between a mother's memories, a son's obligations and a publisher's conviction that literature has a claim on private documents.

What survives

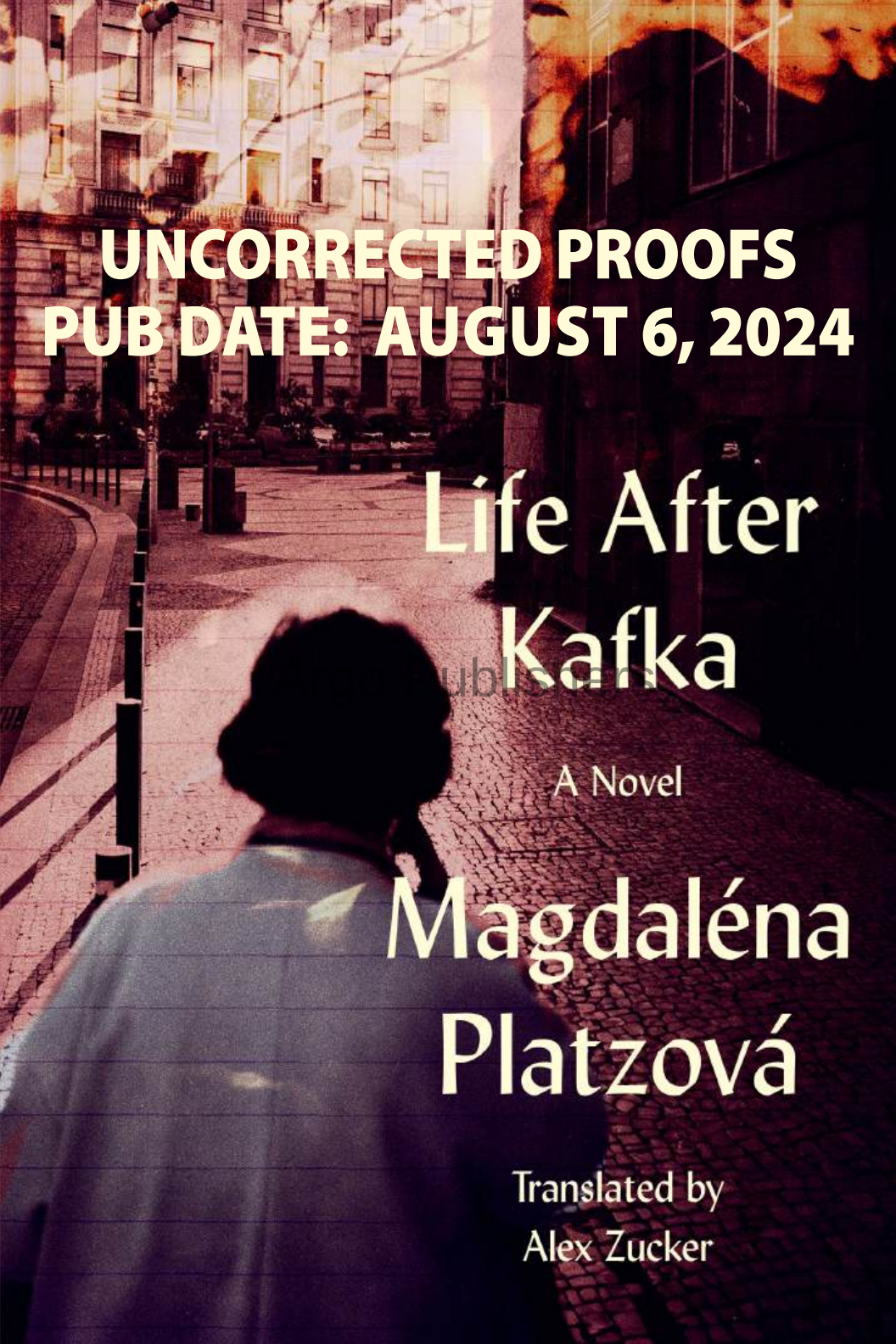
Felice finally agrees to sell the letters. Schocken comes to Los Angeles to collect them, while Max Brod celebrates in Tel Aviv. Their triumph is inseparable from her loss: what has belonged to one person is now a public literary inheritance. The sale offers financial relief, but it cannot resolve the conflict between preserving a writer's work and respecting the intimacy of the person to whom it was addressed.

Schocken, nicknamed "Bismarck," does not live to see the correspondence published. The contract stipulates that the letters cannot appear until five years after Felice's death. He dies of heart failure in 1958 while staying in Pontresina in the Swiss Alps to write his memoirs. Felice dies in 1960 in Rye, New York, following a series of strokes and years of declining health.

The story ends in Central Park in 2000. Two old men meet: the man who calls himself Kafka's son and the son of Felice Bauer. The argument over origins, inheritance and literary fame gives way to something quieter. What remains is the memory of Felice's scent and her caress, and a sense of connection to something "infinitely high or deep," as Kafka describes it in a letter to her.

The author's own search runs through the novel. Interviews with descendants, archives, uncertain evidence and imagined scenes make visible both the possibilities and the limits of recovering another life. Felice and Grete are already literary figures because Kafka wrote about them; Platzová gives them histories, relationships and inner lives that are not exhausted by his version of events.

Life After Kafka is a novel about exile and identity, about the magic and poison of memory and the long shadow of fame. Above all, it honours a form of courage that rarely becomes a public story: the patience and perseverance of a woman rebuilding a life, supporting her family and continuing after the world she knew has been destroyed.



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A Novel

Magdaléna
Platzová

Translated by
Alex Zucker

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New York
October 15, 1975

Dear Mr. Canetti,

I read your book about Franz Kafka and my mother, Felice, née Bauer. I wish I had never gotten hold of it. Unfortunately, there is always some “friend” who comes along and hastens to inform me of the latest achievements in Kafkology (or is it Kafkography?), which evidently—to judge from the number of titles at least—is a highly profitable business.

I will not dwell here on the personality of Franz Kafka. I have nothing more to add beyond what you yourself quite accurately described in your book. Whether he was a great writer, I honestly cannot judge. What I know beyond a doubt is that he was a neurotic, a masochist, and, in regard to his relationships with women, a sadist as well.

Every one of the letters that you quote from so extensively would, in my opinion, be worthy of psychiatric evaluation, and any one of them would have been reason enough for my mother to break up with him as quickly as possible.

Why she did not, I truly have no idea. I have not yet had an opportunity to explore this aspect of my mother’s personality. I expect the fashion of the times may have played a role, an echo of fin de siècle decadence. My mother adored Strindberg, who, as you will admit, is also quite morbid in some respects. But even I only found out about this “love” of hers from Kafka’s letters, when I read them—along with everyone else—after my mother’s death. My parents were from the old school and maintained a certain distance from me and my sister. We knew very little about their inner lives. But enough that I feel it necessary

to object in the strongest possible terms to the way you dealt with my mother in your rash and sensationalistic book.

Already the false, pseudoscandalous revelation on the opening page betrays the superficiality of your approach: So, at long last, we know the name of the woman who until now has been hidden behind the initial F.!

Dear sir, if you had actually cared to find out, you could have known my mother's full name years ago, even without the use of any detective methods. You had only to read the readily available biography of Kafka written by Max Brod, of whom I also have no great opinion, but at least one cannot deny his goodwill and—at least as it relates to my mother—a certain sensitivity.

My mother was a woman of many talents. She leaned more toward a practical orientation. A no-nonsense person, as they say in this country. Yet she was always deeply influenced by art. Literature, theater, and music as well. My father, a banker by profession, was an excellent pianist, and had circumstances in his youth permitted, he would have devoted himself to music.

Art was one of the “charms” with which Kafka impressed my mother. He was, after all, a published author, as people say nowadays. That certainly played its part.

My mother did not receive a formal education. At the age of fifteen, she had to leave school and take on employment, by her own efforts working her way from the lowly position of typist all the way up to head of sales. But she always took great pleasure in reading and enjoyed being enlightened. When we fled in the thirties, first from Berlin to Geneva and then to America, instead of valuables, she took books with her. She had a special collection of volumes dedicated to her by Kafka, which she kept grouped together, some sixty titles in all. There was even a copy of the Bible among them. After her death, I sold them to the Fischer publishing house in Germany. It was the only money I made on Kafka at a time when every Tom, Dick, and Harry was making a killing on him.

My mother was very emotional, a warm and generous woman. When she was still single, she cared for war orphans at the Jewish Home in Berlin, and even after she was married and had a family, she maintained close relationships with them. Her “girls” would come to visit, and she helped them in all sorts of ways.

She was enterprising, resourceful, optimistic, and cheerful. She refused to let anything break her. Anyone who knew her couldn’t help but love her. She had a talent for organization and business. In the end, it was she who supported the family after our immigration to America. Especially the last twelve years, after my father suffered a heart attack and could no longer work. I, too, did my best to help, of course, to whatever extent I was able, tutoring other students, getting scholarships, and so on.

My mother took courses in massage and hairdressing and opened her own beauty salon. She also baked and sold cookies with her sister, eventually expanding the range of products they offered. Then she opened a yarn store, selling knitting supplies and notions. But it never, I repeat *never*, would have crossed my mother’s mind to try to make money from Franz Kafka’s letters, which she kept hidden away in secret for forty years.

I myself only came to know of their existence from a relative, when I was eighteen. Before then, I had no idea that my mother had had a relationship with anyone named Kafka. I only knew his name from the spines on the books we had at home, which I had given a cursory glance, but they had never captured my interest. Brod’s biography of Kafka, published in Prague before the war, didn’t find its way into my hands until the fifties, when it was reissued in expanded form in Germany. Like everything else that had to do with Kafka, I didn’t discuss it with my mother. But I do know for certain that she read Brod’s biography, as well as Kafka’s diaries and *Letters to Milena*. What she thought of them, I have no idea. I can only guess.

You, sir, wrote that my mother “had the heart to sell the letters.” In this way, you indirectly accuse her of being insensitive

and self-serving, even mocking her. How heroic! Taking swipes from a safe distance at a woman about whom you know not one whit and who cannot defend herself.

How could anyone know anything about my mother when the recipient of her letters so carefully destroyed them, whereas she preserved every postcard, every telegram, even letters that didn't belong directly to her and weren't written by Kafka but touched on their relationship in some way. Like the letters Kafka's mother, Julie, wrote to my grandmother Anna. I've often wondered why she saved everything so meticulously.

It's true, my mother was very fastidious. Every scrap and sheet of paper had its place with her, carefully labeled and classified. It was a habit, a passion of sorts, probably one that she took home with her from the office. Reading Kafka's books, it even occurred to me that this fascination, one might call it, with modern bureaucracy was something the two of them had in common. Yet each approached it from a totally different perspective: my mother from the standpoint of efficiency and reason (though every passion also exposes the irrationality within itself) and Kafka from the standpoint of madness. Which did nothing to change the fact that he was a very capable clerk, as all of his contemporaries attested to. But I don't mean to dabble in your profession. You are the one who's here to interpret Kafka! I'll stick to my mother.

It also occurred to me that maybe for her that bundle of letters was sort of a legal document. Whether a defense or an indictment, who knows? Probably both. But either way, it had to be complete.

As I already said, she never spoke to me about Kafka and their relationship, even when I was an adult. But from the way she clung to the letters, it was obvious it wasn't a dead issue for her—that unhappy five-year period shaped the rest of her life in a fundamental way.

For most of her life, my mother enjoyed complete anonymity. Nobody took any interest in her; nobody knew who

she was. It wasn't until a few years after the war, when Kafka began to get famous and a mad dash was unleashed for every word he ever wrote, that she began to worry, and rightfully so, that some information she regarded as intimate might be made public. She had made up her mind to destroy the letters before she died, and she truly wanted to go through with it. But she couldn't work up the courage, so she kept putting it off.

In the end, she did dispose of some of them, which I know not from my mother (who at the time suspected me of conspiring with Schocken), but from her best friend.

She clung to Kafka's letters with an incredible stubbornness, and it wasn't easy getting her to sell them. Mr. Schocken and Max Brod spent years trying to persuade her. Ultimately, she gave in. Not for the money, although she was sick and in need of funds, but at a certain point she realized that she wouldn't be able to destroy the letters as she had planned and, if she died, she would lose control over them.

I explicitly threatened to sell her letters once she passed away. And the truth of the matter is, I coerced her into selling them.

Her pang of conscience at betraying Kafka (no one could ever convince her that it wasn't a betrayal) were presumably mitigated by Schocken's promise that he would donate the letters to the National Library in Jerusalem after they were published.

Alas, Mr. Schocken passed away in 1959, a year before my mother, so he was unable to honor his promise. Whether or not his heirs kept his commitment, I have no idea. I would have hoped they would have let us know.

I am not happy to return to all this and would just as soon have forgotten it. But I must stand up for my mother. If not in front of your readers, then at least in front of you.

No, my mother did not, as you wrote, have the heart to sell Kafka's letters. Not only that, and I say this only to you, with shame and great pain, but I believe the loss of those keepsakes killed her prematurely.

My mother had actually been dying since 1955. She suffered her first stroke, with only minor consequences, in 1953. In 1956, she had another stroke, but even after that, she still had a partial recovery and came home from the hospital. My mother had a very hardy constitution. But she was no longer able to live on her own, so I convinced her to leave L.A. and move in with us, in New York. She had been with us several months when she suffered the third, fatal blow, from which she never recovered. She was hospitalized in Rye for a year and a half. We couldn't keep her at home, since she needed constant care.

In those final months, she was unable to speak or move, though she was lucid and understood everything. She was literally a prisoner in her own body. What must have been going through her mind?

That, to be frank, is the hell I inhabit on nights I cannot sleep.

An efficient businesswoman, eh? A woman without a heart.

In Max Brod's melodramatic book about Kafka, I learned that Kafka, too, was unable to speak at the end of his life, due to tuberculosis in his throat. Unlike my mother, however, at least he was able to write, as long as he could still hold a pen.

So you see, there is some hint of symmetry; I wouldn't call it justice. The meaning of which escapes us, of course.

I end with the wish that the facts I have shared with you here will burden your conscience enough to ensure that you will be more cautious in your fabrications next time.

I cannot write either "Respectfully" or "Cordially," let alone "Yours," so you will have to make do with my signature.

Joachim M.



New York
May 18, 1987

Dear Mr. Canetti,

Consider this note of mine an addendum to the letter I wrote you twelve years ago, to which I never received a reply.

As you may recall, I wrote you about the promise Salman Schocken made to my mother, which was what finally convinced her to entrust her letters to him. Namely, that he would donate the manuscripts of Kafka's letters to the National Library in Jerusalem.

I have just learned from an article in the paper that my mother's letters were auctioned off at Sotheby's in New York for \$605,000. Reportedly a record-breaking sum, at least so far as manuscripts go.

Over a half million, sir. And they gave my mother eight thousand! The deal of the century, don't you think?

The buyer was neither a library nor an archive. Where would a place like that come up with that kind of money? It was a private party, whose identity was not revealed. The letters have vanished into a private safe, maybe forever. So that's the end of the matter. They cheated my mother even in death. What a disgrace. She was absolutely right to want to destroy Kafka's letters. Pity she didn't succeed.

Regards,
Joachim M.

1935

Geneva

THE THIN MASTS OF SAILBOATS bristle at the end of the street. As the wind blows from the northeast, strong and steady, every line in the anchorage whistles at a different pitch. The boy stops and listens. Sharp white-crested ripples play across the lake, the sky pale, clear, cool.

For four years he has been walking home from school the same way, twice a day. In the other direction, he usually runs. He knows the lake in every weather and time of year, at twilight, in the dark. Darkness falls early in winter. The scraping of wood. The hollow lapping of water against the boats' flanks.

His mother and aunt have already begun to sort and give away the things they won't be taking with them. The only thing going in the suitcases is clothing; books, porcelain, paintings, silver, rugs, and furniture will make the trip later, once they have settled in. Moving from Berlin had been worse; even his mother had cried then. But his father had insisted, and now he was dragging them away yet again. Away from Europe, where the ground was disappearing underneath the Jews' feet.

The street leads along the park, the surface of the water hidden behind the trees. He turns the last corner. Their apartment building has the air of a seaside hotel, with its long, decorative balconies, colorful shutters, and niches galore. They have

already moved three times since leaving Berlin. When they first came to Geneva, his father rented a villa. Then his mother was badly missing Berlin, so they returned there for a while. That turned out to be a mistake. The second time they fled, they lost a lot of money, having to pay a special tax to be let out. Next they rented a smaller apartment in the center, and it was only when his grandmother came to stay with them that his father found the place on rue de Montchoisy, by the park near the lake. The rooms weren't large, but at least they offered some privacy. And now, since his grandmother had passed away, there were seven of them at home: Father, Mother, Joachim and Lily, Aunt Else, cousin Hana, and Berthe, the maid. They didn't have a governess or a cook anymore.

On the third floor, outside the door to their apartment, Joachim catches the aroma of roasted meat. All of a sudden he realizes how hungry he is. He presses the round doorbell button. There are voices from inside, but no one comes to open the door. After the second ring, he hears the sound of sharp footsteps, followed by silence. The door slowly opens.

"Oh, come on!" he says, throwing himself on his sister.

"Stop that. And don't shout. Mom has company from Berlin."

"Who?"

"Some lady named Margarete. We're supposed to call her 'Aunt,' but I don't remember meeting her. She won't stop talking. They shut themselves in there."

Sunlight streams through the glass panes of the drawing room door, casting dapples of blue, red, and green on the white wall. The parquet floor creaks, the colors dancing before his eyes.

"Home already?"

His mother has on a dark blue dress with a low-waist pleated skirt and a string of red coral beads wrapped twice around her neck. Her dark blond hair, graying at the temples, cropped just below the ear, blazes ginger red in the sun.

A petite brunette woman in a light-colored dress rises

from the sofa behind her, outstretched hand holding a lighted cigarette.

“Why, you must be Joachim!”

He has to walk over and say hello. The top of the woman’s head barely reaches his chin, but she tugs him down toward her and plants a kiss on both his cheeks, leaving behind a trace of red lipstick.

“You’re all grown-up! Do you still remember me?”

She ruffles his hair with her hand.

“We used to be practically neighbors. I lived on Sedanstrasse, a little way down from Hilda Hildebrand, the famous actress. Professor Einstein lived near me, too. He’s in America now. Everyone is running away. Maybe you’ll be a Hollywood actor. Such a handsome boy! He takes after Ferri.”

The visitor gives a loud laugh, takes a drag on her cigarette, exhales a cloud of smoke. She smells of sweet perfume and the herbal liqueur his mother likes to offer guests before lunch. Two cut-glass tumblers containing the remains of an electric green liquid stand next to the ashtray on the table, one on either side, like an honor guard.

“I’ll go see what’s happening with lunch,” his mother says. “The children have to get back to school. As long as you aren’t too hungry, we’ll wait for Robert to eat. I’ll have the table set in the dining room.”

“Oh, I’m never hungry. Look at me. I couldn’t gain weight if I tried.”

How could he not remember her. She always talked too loudly and had never missed a party that his mother threw in Berlin. That nervous, high-pitched laugh of hers reminded him of honking horns. He was shy around her and didn’t like her. Especially the way she embarrassed his mother in front of other people. Apparently, his mother didn’t mind, though, since she kept inviting her over. No dinner party on Viktoria-Luise-Platz was complete without her presence. The red beads were also a gift from her.

"Excuse me for a moment," his mother says. "Play something on the piano. Or have a look at the latest fashions, I have a whole stack of magazines there."

"Don't you worry about me. I won't be bored. I'm too busy counting my losses." Again that obnoxious laugh. Grete takes a drag of her cigarette and walks to the window. "Pity you don't have a view of the lake."

The only person home when Joachim and Lily return from school that afternoon is Berthe, the gloomy-faced servant girl. She warms up some milk for the children and puts a plate of buttered bread out on the table, then rushes straight back to the stove.

Usually no one cooks in the afternoons at their place. Lunch is the main meal, and for supper they make do with a piece of bread with lard or a bowl of soup from lunch. But today, apparently, there is a feast being prepared. They can smell their aunt's pulled strudel from the oven, and Berthe is angrily banging pots around.

"What am I supposed to do when they leave me all alone like this?" she grumbles. "I'm not some fancy chef from Berlin."

"You're doing just fine," says Lily, trying to calm her down. "Do you know where my mom is?"

"The ladies went for a walk in the park," Berthe hoots. "In this wind! And you, young master, had better be careful, too. Your cheeks are blooming red. This springtime sun is fierce."

"Did they tell you how long that lady was staying?" Lily asks.

"They just told me to make up a bed in your grandmama's old room. I haven't got round to it yet, seeing as I've been shut up in the kitchen all day. But those are some right big bags she's got. Looks to be she's moving!"

"I hope not in with us," Joachim blurts.

A door slams and the sound of voices carries from the hallway.

"They're back." Berthe breathes a sigh of relief. "Now maybe the madam will help me out with supper."

The boy quickly finishes his milk and carries his empty plate, along with the mug, to the sink.

As he walks out the front door, he almost collides with his mother.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Can I go out for a while?"

"Don't you have homework?"

"It isn't due until Monday."

Tobacco smoke wafts from the half-open door to the drawing room. With the sun shining from the west now, the colorful panes of glass have dimmed.

"Supper is at seven."

"Can I eat at the Weinbergers'?"

"No."

"Please, Mom? They invited me."

"No, we have guests."

"All right, Mom."

He slips past her and hurries out the door. It's five o'clock; he can still catch the evening service at the synagogue.

The only part of Shabbat that Joachim's family still keeps is lighting the candles, which his mother does before supper. Apart from that, Friday evenings in their home are the same as any other.

But at his best friend Leo Weinberger's, the family has a silver cup, over which his father, wearing a yarmulke, recites "*Baruch ata Adonai, eloheinu melech ha'olam, boreh pri ha'gafen*" before passing it around. Then he says the blessing of the hand washing and the sweet challah bread, and only after that do the Weinbergers tuck into their meal. And how cheerfully they eat, even though they really have no reason to be happy.

Mr. Weinberger had told Joachim the story of how they

escaped the first time, during the war, fleeing the eastern front and the pogroms, to Berlin. Mrs. Weinberger was pregnant with Leo at the time. There they survived both the postwar flu epidemic and the inflation crisis, but no sooner had Mr. Weinberger, a teacher by profession, found a better job and begun to bring home some money than Hitler came to power. They didn't want to give up everything all over again, so they missed the right moment and got to Switzerland just as the laws against refugees, whose numbers were constantly growing, began to appear. Among other things, they weren't allowed to work. Mr. Weinberger taught Hebrew clandestinely, his pupils paying him in cash, one class at a time, and Leo's mom worked as a cleaning lady. Leo shared a room with his two younger sisters in the small dark apartment, near the synagogue, where the five of them lived.

Yet the mood there on Friday nights was always more joyful than it was in Joachim's household. The only time it was cheerful in the splendidly furnished dining room on rue de Mo tchoisy was when their father wasn't home.

On those rare occasions when their father was away on a trip or eating dinner out, their mother and Aunt Else spoke at a higher volume, reminiscing about their childhood in the town of Neustadt in Oberschlesien and moving to Berlin. They told stories about their crazy uncles and aunts—there were plenty of them in the family—and going out to dance in Berlin, all the different dresses they had and the suitors who tried to woo them. They would laugh, though it wasn't clear what about, and after dinner they would play games: hide-and-seek; duck, duck, goose; red light, green light. Or Aunt Else would sit down at the piano, which she didn't dare do in front of their father, and play Viennese waltzes and old Jewish songs and also a few Hungarian tunes, which she'd learned when she was still living with her husband in Budapest. They rolled back the rug and their mother taught Lily and Hana to dance. They tried to convince

Joachim, too, but he refused. He didn't have to skip around like a madman to feel happy.

Grete isn't the only company they have today. Seated at the table is another old friend from Berlin, Herman Eisner. Even the children are allowed to call him by his first name, as "Uncle Eisner" hardly seems appropriate in his case.

Herman is a psychiatrist, originally from Prague. It was he who scoffed the most on September 15, 1930, when their father announced to the guests one night, during a dinner party on Viktoria-Luise-Platz, that the next day he and Felice and the children were leaving for Switzerland.

"Forget Switzerland, Robert. Just come stay with me in Grünewald. It's much closer." The room exploded with laughter. Grünewald was where Herman had his private sanatorium for the mentally ill.

They dined on stuffed quail and drank champagne for their farewell supper that evening.

Herman Eisner believed in German humanism and democracy, and was convinced that Hitler and his gang of convicted criminals, as he referred to them, were not to be taken seriously. No one could force dictatorship on the nation that had given birth to Goethe and Heine. And if anyone wanted to try, they would have to be of higher caliber than an uneducated psychopath with an inferiority complex.

Having deftly assembled a diagnosis of the Führer, Herman predicted that soon he, too, would end up in Grünewald. They all laughed over their quail.

As late as January 1933, Herman wrote an essay for a newspaper in Berlin about the invincibility of German democracy. Less than two months later, on March 6, just before midnight, he was pounding on their door in Geneva. He had come to apologize.

This evening they dine on chicken soup with dumplings, then stuffed veal, with a light Burgundy to accompany it. They are celebrating the arrival of Grete, who just the day before (was that even possible?) had still been in Berlin. They reminisce about their favorite cafés, bakers, and tailors, milliners, pastry chefs, waiters, even benches in the park. The city's fabric of faces and places, creating a feeling of safety and home.

Much of it even Joachim remembers. For example, the zoo, where he used to go with his nanny. And the aquarium, where he'd stood gazing at the colorful fish darting to and fro, and the delicate sea horses with their elongated noses and curlicue tails, fluttering up and down in the glass tanks like miniature fairy-tale dragons.

Grete says there are some parts of town they would hardly recognize now. New buildings have sprung up all over Berlin, and what with the preparations for the Olympics, the city has turned into one big construction site. Hitler is determined to dazzle the world.

The two women had changed outfits for supper. Grete now has a lacy shawl thrown over her shoulders.

To her right sits Joachim; to her left, Robert, with Herman seated in between Lily and Felice.

"How long will you be in Geneva?" Herman asks.

Good question. Joachim gives Lily a kick in the shin under the table. Now, at last, they'll find out.

"A couple of weeks. I need to enjoy some time with Felice before she vanishes over the ocean. Who knows when I'll see her again."

"And after that?"

"I have a brother in Palestine."

"In Jerusalem?"

"No, Tel Aviv. You might have heard of him. Hans Bloch. He's a doctor. We're very proud of him."

"When did he leave?"

"Two years ago. But he wanted to leave much sooner. Hans is an ardent Zionist."

"Do you intend to stay there permanently?"

"Please, what is permanent nowadays?"

Grete takes a sip of wine and languidly lights a cigarette. The serving of veal on her plate is untouched.

"Of course, silly question," says Herman, turning red. "I ask mainly for my own sake, since I myself don't know where to go next. I can't stay in Switzerland. I haven't got enough money and I need to work, which I'm not allowed to do here. The problem is, language is key in my line of work. I don't know Hebrew, and while there may be plenty of people in Palestine who speak German, I'm not so sure they would want me. Does Palestine need psychiatrists? Or just bricklayers, peasants, and soldiers? What do you all think?"

"You don't know Hebrew yet, Herman. Not yet."

"For once, Robert, you're an optimist, but in this case I'm afraid your optimism is misplaced. Maybe you can learn English still, but Hebrew? Me? Hardly. I've never had a head for languages, and Hebrew's just too different. Reading and writing from right to left?"

"I speak English," says Grete. "I led the foreign sales division at Adrema. You may have heard of them."

"Typewriters."

"That's right. I was with them nineteen years. That's a long time. Not having a job feels like not having hands to me. Like the death of someone close. Or a divorce."

"What are you going to do in Palestine?"

"Does Palestine need typewriters? Or just shovels, hoes, and rifles? What do you all think? Typewriters are all I know. I can support myself as a typist. If nothing else, it will be warm there. We were frozen solid today by the lake."

Shivering, she pulls her shawl tighter around her shoulders.

"You were the one who insisted on going for a walk, Grete."

“Yes, Felice, and it was gorgeous. The snowy mountains in the distance, the blossoming trees, the ripples racing over the surface . . .”

“I’m considering Italy,” says Herman. “Everyone is fleeing to France, but I’ve heard Mussolini is treating the Jews decently.”

Grete exhales a puff of smoke. “Good idea, Herman. I have an invitation to Florence. A former colleague of mine married an Italian, a lawyer. They own a banking house. She has a gorgeous villa overlooking the city. We could go there together and pretend to be engaged.”

“You aren’t afraid of Mussolini?”

“Oh, Bob!”

The boy’s ears turn red. He can’t believe that lady is calling his father “Bob.”

“Mussolini isn’t Hitler. And after all, there are Jewish fascists, too. The Italians don’t much go for all that Nordic race talk, you know.” She arches her back like a cat. “I simply adore Florence. I went there on vacation right after the war, couldn’t wait. Everyone warned me how much they hate Germans, but they were utterly sweet to me. I don’t think the Italians even really know how to hate, not like the Germans. That former colleague of mine had Mussolini and his mistress over to her villa. And his mistress, who was a journalist, was actually a Jew.”

Else’s strudel appears on the table. The warm sour-sweet taste of apples, walnuts, raisins, and cinnamon, enfolded in a delicate doughy crust, baked to a golden brown, yet white and soft at the center.

After dessert they pass into the salon, planting themselves on the sofa and armchairs around the low-set table. Berthe offers coffee and tea; Robert, cognac. Grete makes a request for Robert to play Beethoven.

“For old times’ sake.”

He takes a while to be convinced but then sits down to the piano and raises the lid.

The opening strokes of the *Pathétique*. Joachim studies his father's face. When they lived on Viktoria-Luise-Platz, he used to play every evening after supper. But here in Geneva, he rarely sits down at the keyboard, almost as if he is avoiding it. Maybe he doesn't like the pianino as much as the grand piano they left behind in Berlin.

The boy reflects on how little he knows the man at the piano. How different he is from his father, demanding, strict, and, more often than not, morose. For the first time in ages, at supper tonight, he had laughed the way he used to, his laughter rumbling pleasantly through his square-shouldered body.

Now he sits playing, eyes closed, with an almost imperceptible smile, fingers moving rapidly up and down the keys.

The boy remembers how last year at the synagogue his father beamed with pride when he, Joachim, read his Torah section without stumbling once.

Yet the boy had had to beg for a bar mitzva. At first, his father didn't want to hear of it. It was only after several long discussions with his mother, who laid it out in practical terms, that his father finally gave in, even paying Mr. Weinberger to teach Joachim Hebrew.

He justified it to himself as a farsighted investment in his son's future rather than a concession to obscurantism on his part.

Palestine wasn't for him and Felice; he was clear on that. That would have been like jumping out of a frying pan into a boiling pot. But who knew where his children might end up? And if his son had a desire to study, it was important to support him in that, whatever subject it was. But he drew the line at buying him pants for the ceremony. On that he would not budge. He didn't care if Joachim could get married at thirteen under Jewish law. Under the rules of civilized Berlin society, of which he considered himself to be a part, you didn't buy a boy his first pair of pants until his fourteenth birthday. And so, on

that famed Saturday when Joachim was to become an adult, he walked into temple in wool shorts and knee-high socks. Luckily no one made fun of him. He recited his text flawlessly, and after the ceremony he could see with his own eyes how moved his father was. He didn't give Joachim a hug, since Robert never hugged his children, but he patted him appreciatively on the shoulder and smiled the whole way home.

His mother, Aunt Else, cousin Hana, and Lily had the table set and waiting when they got home. Lunch was a feast, and his aunt had baked his favorite walnut cake, with soft chocolate frosting and currant preserves. From his father he got a watch as a bar mitzvah gift.

Second movement, *Adagio cantabile*.

This must be good-bye, thinks the boy, looking around the room.

Aunt Else sits on the sofa, and sensing his gaze, she turns her eyes to him and smiles. She and his mom look alike, but his aunt Else is older, her hair already completely gray. Joachim has always been fond of her. His beautiful cousin Hana leans her head on her mother's shoulder. She isn't going with them to America, instead staying in Switzerland to finish medical school, which she just began a year ago. Grete sits reclining in one of the armchairs, head resting on the seat back, eyes closed. With the bluish shadows around her eyes, she looks like a cadaver. She has even forgotten to smoke for once, her motionless fingers clutching an unlighted cigarette. Herman stands at the piano, turning the pages of the score.

In the other armchair his mother sits, Lily at her feet. Lily's head, with its two thick, dark braids, rests against her mother's knees, her mother's warm palm caressing her forehead.

In two months, Father and I will be setting out on our journey, the boy thinks. His stomach tightens in excitement, the way it does every time the thought crosses his mind.

They will embark in Genoa. Spend a week aboard the ship, then another week in New York, where his father is hoping to contact some old friends. Then they will travel by train to Chicago, where his mother's younger brother, Ferri, lives. From Chicago, they will head to the West Coast, then down, via San Francisco, to Los Angeles, their destination. He and his father will travel alone. His mother and Lily will come afterward, once they've found an apartment. The last one to make the trip will be their aunt Else, who's going to have a hard time saying good-bye to Hana.

His mother's cousin and his wife had been settled in Los Angeles for a year.

"It's a simple life," they wrote to Felice. "Beaches, palm trees, sunshine, cheap housing—you'll save a lot on heating. You pay less here for a small house with a garden than for a one-bedroom apartment in New York."

Joachim sweeps his gaze across the room again, trying to impress it all upon his memory, like the boat masts and the lake earlier today, creating a collection of impressions to take with him. He learned at least that much from leaving Berlin.

He hadn't formed any impressions then, and as a result his childhood home, apart from a few fuzzy snapshots still lodged in his mind, had fallen into oblivion.

Not until much later, once Joachim himself was married and had secrets of his own, did it dawn on him that *he* had been there with them the whole time. His mother's whispering with Grete. A word frozen on Aunt Else's lips. Books that mysteriously appeared and disappeared again before anyone had a chance to get their hands on them.

He remembers precisely the day when he first found out about him. It was in 1938, in Los Angeles.

His aunt Sophie invited him to an ice-cream parlor on Pico, and as soon as they had ordered, she pulled a book out of her

handbag and laid it on the marble table between them. It was in German. The author, Aunt Sophie's brother, was someone Joachim had only heard tell of. He didn't remember the man's visits to their place on Viktoria-Luise-Platz.

"This book came out in Prague," Aunt Sophie said. "And your mom is mentioned in it."

Joachim picked up the book and leafed through it. The biography of a writer he had never read anything by.

"Franz Kafka was Max's best friend ever since they were little. He used to come over to our place practically every day. That was how he met your mom, long before you or your sister, Lily, were born. Your mother was on her way to visit your aunt Else in Budapest. Or maybe she was going to Vienna on business. I can't remember now. But either way, she was at our place for dinner, and Kafka happened to come, too—that was how they met. They began corresponding, and then they got engaged, but the war broke out and nothing came of the wedding. In the end, Franz got sick with tuberculosis and died soon after. And your mom got happily married to your father.

"Kafka was a kind man and very educated," his aunt continued. "Max always insisted that he was a genius, but that's not for me to judge. His books aren't for everyone, that I can tell you, though supposedly he's quite famous now in Germany. Mainly due to Max, who handles his estate.

"I wanted you to hear it from me, since sooner or later someone was bound to tell you about the book. I don't understand why Max felt he had to dredge up these personal matters. What is the point of dragging living people into literature?

"I'll have a talk with Lily about it, too," Aunt Sophie said. "I don't want you two to feel like your mom is keeping secrets from you. But it would be best if you didn't ask her or your father about it.

"You have no idea how brave your mother is," she went on. "All she did for her parents, and for Ferri and Erna and Else

of course, how much she sacrificed. You really need to honor her for that.”

It didn't surprise Joachim that before his mother got married she had had a courtship, as they used to say in those days. But he never would have taken her for the type to date a writer.

She had married at age thirty-one. A matchmaker in Berlin had helped her find a groom, and Felice was very grateful for the efforts she had made. She never forgot to send the woman a New Year's greeting card.

For Joachim and Lily, there was something fairy tale-like and mysterious about their mother's life before she was married. She had told them stories about her job at a company that manufactured office machines and how her boss had gradually promoted her from assistant typist all the way up to head of sales. How she had traveled to trade fairs and attended social occasions, more than once dancing the night away and then in the morning going straight to work in the office. How her mother, Anna, had scolded her for ruining her health, but she didn't listen. In those days she had strength for four and didn't need to sleep.

As for Brod's book, it was really none of his business.

It was the start of summer. And he was eighteen years old.

It was only after the war, when he lived in New York and all of a sudden his mother's old acquaintance was on everybody's lips, that he was forced to deal with it to some degree. On the outermost, graying edge of his memory, associated with a colorful pile of dry leaves into which he had jumped, leading his mother to chastise him (dirty pants, dusty shoes), he recalled the shadow of a tall man in a dark coat rising from a bench and doffing his hat.

A few months before his death, from fall 1923 to spring

1924, Kafka had lived in Berlin. Could she have encountered him there? Had Joachim been there when it happened?

She must have known that he had moved. Their mutual friends had his address, and presumably his telephone number as well. Surely they had told her he was struggling. The prices went up so fast that winter, it would have been laughable if people hadn't been starving to death. A piece of bread or a half liter of milk cost a thousand inflationary marks, and the pension for a retired clerk from an accident insurance company would have been barely enough to cover rent. His parents were sending him food from Prague.

Meanwhile, Felice and her family were doing better than ever before. When the German mark collapsed, it took the big banking houses down with it, and private bankers like Robert had no more competition. Thanks to personal contacts abroad, they were able to get investors for the failing German state and its industry, and they made a lot of money on it. For the first time since she was fifteen, Felice didn't have to go to work, and it shows in the photographs from that time. After the birth of her second child, Felice was full of life, her hair and complexion glowing with health. Who would have taken her for the aging, careworn, teary-eyed girl boarding the train in Prague in late 1917?

Of course she would have wanted to show up for Kafka. And probably help him, too. Compassion for her was a temptation stronger than vanity, and one she could never resist.

But there is no evidence of their meeting at that time, apart from a memory that may be just a figment of Joachim's imagination.

1938

Paris

AS THE DAKOTA DETACHED ITSELF from the runway with a sudden lurch, Felice barely suppressed a whoop of joy.

“Your champagne, madam. Madam?”

She accepted the glass offered her by the flight attendant and took a sip.

The captain announced their planned trajectory, including speed, altitude, and wind strength. With the sun setting directly behind them, the metal wing through the window blazed like heated copper. The hills beneath them, covered in dry grass, were pink, the sky tinted green.

She should not have been feeling happy at all. Even if it was her first time on an airplane. A woman in her situation should not have been smiling blissfully, nose glued to the window.

The ticket had cost her three hundred dollars. An enormous sum in light of the expenses now awaiting her and Robert. But by plane she could cross America in a mere sixteen hours, so tomorrow she could still catch the fast ship that sailed from New York once a week and covered the overseas journey in five days instead of seven.

By train, it would have been much cheaper, but the trip cross-continent would have taken three days, and meanwhile the ship would have sailed without her. She would have made it to Paris in two weeks at the earliest, which was far too long for someone waiting in a hospital.

They had also drunk champagne before Robert's departure.

Would she have let him go if she had suspected what danger he was in? How was she supposed to know? Robert hadn't told her a thing. Yet the whole time he had been carrying around in his pocket the vial of nitroglycerin pills that had now saved his life.

He must have known about his illness ever since Switzerland, where he underwent his last exam. It was after that appointment that he suddenly stopped smoking overnight.

When they arrived in America three years earlier, Robert was over sixty; now he was sixty-four. They were down to their last three thousand dollars of the savings they had brought with them from Europe, and that was off-limits. Felice covered their day-to-day expenses by giving massages and baking cookies, and Joachim chipped in as well, tutoring his classmates in French and German.

In late spring, Robert had been contacted by a former business associate from Berlin who fled to Paris when Hitler came to power. Several of his clients were looking for the most profitable way to invest their money in the United States, and they were offering a big commission. They were interested in the film industry in particular, but he said it could be something else, as long as it had a future.

Following Nazi Germany's annexation of Austria, there was no longer doubt in anyone's mind that war would break out in Europe. Those who were wealthy but for whatever reason were unable to make the trip themselves sought to place their savings in reliable hands overseas.

Robert predicted that it would take a while still before Hitler could sufficiently arm himself. Long enough to capitalize on the situation financially. He had managed to turn misery to their advantage once before, during the inflation of the twenties. Why shouldn't he be able to again?

"It has to work," he told Felice.

His former business partner was leaning on him as well. His clients had confidence in Robert. This kind of operation was right up his alley. They were willing to entrust him with a large sum of money in cash, provided he would come to Paris. But he needed to get there ASAP. If the Czechs' dispute with the Sudeten Germans were to escalate, there was a risk that France would declare war on Germany, significantly complicating everything.

Robert got to work. Billy Wilder, their former neighbor from Berlin, not yet famous but on his way to success, introduced him to Ernst Lubitsch, who took him around the offices of the movie studio heads and executive producers. Cash money was in demand everywhere.

In between the ashtrays and glasses of whiskey, their desks were overflowing with scripts, budgets, profit forecasts, movie star headshots. In one office Robert even shook hands with Marlene Dietrich, but he didn't let it dazzle him. His hunting instincts were on high alert. He couldn't sleep at night, with all the profitable combinations bouncing around in his head. And he still managed, the week before his departure, to have the piano tuned, which he hadn't touched since the movers unpacked it.

He didn't say a word about anything wrong with his heart.

"This trip," he told Felice, "is my last chance to get back into finance."

She wasn't worried. She baked a batch of pastries, bought a bottle of champagne, cooked a festive dinner, and, finally, drove her husband to the station, where he climbed on board a new silver pointy-nosed Pullman car headed for San Francisco.

She was a little envious that he got to ride the express.

She had been sitting at Robert's bedside since morning, and also kept him company during lunch, but then the staff sent her away.

“Why don’t you go for a walk, madame?” said the attending nurse. “It’s such a beautiful day. Go enjoy Paris. Don’t worry, your husband won’t run away. He’ll be back home in a week, and then you’ll have your hands full taking care of him. Do a little shopping. Let the monsieur get some rest. Even just talking tires him out. Don’t move and get plenty of sleep, that’s the best heart medicine there is.”

Robert told her it had felt like there was a claw stuck in his chest. Unable to breathe, he had tried to sit up, grasping for the vial of nitroglycerin on the nightstand. He put a pill beneath his tongue. Five minutes. Another pill. The claw was still there. He groped for the phone. The receiver slipped out of his hand onto the bed. The night receptionist picked up . . .

“Talk about luck,” said Felice. “If he had been asleep . . .”

The nurse, a pretty young blonde about half Felice’s age, always stopped to talk with her when she came by. She wanted to know about Hollywood. Was it true even an ordinary girl like her could become a movie star? Had Felice met any movie stars yet?

In the pretty young nurse’s imagination, Los Angeles was a place glittering with gold. It was no use telling her about neighborhoods like Boyle Heights, where you didn’t see any movie stars, but every day you encountered a multitude of poor immigrants from Europe, most of them Jews. Even the main shopping street, with its one-story homes, cheap eateries, tiny stores, barbershops, and auto garages, looked more like one of Berlin’s forever unfinished working-class suburbs than a city center.

It wasn’t until Felice unexpectedly found herself in Paris that she realized how much she missed a real European city.

She walks out the hospital gate. To her left is the entrance to Notre-Dame Cathedral, in front of her the embankment of the Seine. It’s so bright out that she has to squint even under the brim of her hat.

Felice stands on the bridge, watching the river with its colorful tour boats. Then she crosses to the other side and, feeling

a sudden urge for a coffee with cream, finds a café and takes a seat at a round marble table. Directly across from her, on the other side of the street, busy with cars and trams, a stone Archangel Michael perches atop a fountain, finger pointing skyward. In his other hand he grips a sword, keeping in check the devil writhing at his feet.

It's Saturday afternoon and men stand around the fountain dressed in their holiday best, some holding flowers. The women and girls they are waiting for are almost always late. The men shake their heads, pacing impatiently back and forth, checking the time on their watches against the time on the corner clock. When their sweethearts finally arrive, they give them a kiss on the cheek or the lips and walk away, arms around each other or hand in hand. . . .

How uninhibitedly the youth of today behave, thinks Felice. Compared to how we lived. Dragging around a chaperone with us everywhere we went, and then when we did find ourselves alone, we were too nervous to talk. The war certainly put an end to that. With all the killing going on, who cared who was married or not? When we took rooms next to each other in Marienbad, no one asked us a thing.

She hadn't gone on dates with Robert, either, or left him waiting with a bouquet in his hands. The reason for their marriage had been clear from the start. To start a family, not to wander around holding hands, staring up at the clouds.

Felice finishes her coffee, leaves the change on the table, and sets off uphill, along the boulevard Saint-Michel.

The hotel where she is staying, by the Luxembourg Gardens, isn't too expensive, and is quiet, considering how centrally it's located. Her third-floor room is spacious and looks out into the treetops. Robert will be able to recover well there, and as soon as the doctor allows him to get out of bed, they can go for walks in the park. She paid for the room through the end of

October, though it's clear now they won't be leaving any sooner than mid-November.

She saunters along the sidewalk lined with restaurants and shops, observing the Parisian women. Their skirts are longer than last year's, and their hats are bigger, too, with a broader brim than Felice's fall bonnet, which she bought in Geneva before they left for the United States. Straw hats and berets are also back in fashion, in every color imaginable, with decorations that strike Felice as eccentric. She prefers a short feather or simple ribbon. Then again, some of the chapeaus passing by are entirely bare, with no decorations at all, like a men's hat. On this warm day, there are even women going hatless. Strolling along with uncovered heads, a coat draped over their arms, even those clearly not students, laundrywomen, or maids.

The café terraces are filled with merry, noisy people, and they are right to be that way. You can't stop living just because Hitler is on a rampage in Germany and Europe is on the verge of war.

Felice decides to stop in at the Galeries Lafayette before Robert is released from the hospital and buy herself a new hat and maybe a light autumn coat. She normally never buys clothes off the rack—in Berlin she'd had them sewn, and in Geneva and Los Angeles she had simply refashioned them—but why not pick up something nice as long as she is in Paris?

She stops in front of a display window. Looking at herself reflected in the shiny glass, her graying hairs and wrinkles are not actually obvious, and as she stands there, handbag pressed to her hip, she is quite content with what she sees.

Suddenly she snaps to attention. Is that just a trick of light? Or is there someone on the roof of the building across the street?

She turns around and squints her eyes, sharpening her focus.

A man stands in front of a garret window, balancing on the steeply sloping tiled roof. He is naked, with a bare head and a black patch of hair around his genitals. Pale skin shining

white in the afternoon sun. He grips the window frame with both hands, shouting something, but his cries are drowned in the racket from the cars and trams below. Felice sees his mouth open and close, the muscles on his neck tensing; then either his foot slips or he jumps. A white flash, the impact of body on pavement.

She wants to run to his aid, but the road is too busy to cross. People gather around him on the other side of the street.

“The Austrian Jews got here in the spring, and soon the Czechs will be here, too. It isn’t just Paris, the whole country is bursting at the seams. You can’t imagine the situation.”

She is sitting in a restaurant with Robert’s business partner from Berlin. Given that it was he who lured Robert to Paris, he feels somewhat responsible for the unfortunate situation that Robert now finds himself in. Although it wasn’t as if it had been deliberate on his part, he reasons with himself.

Nevertheless he still feels guilty, even after paying Robert’s hotel bill, packing his things with his own hands, taking them back to his place, and telegraphing Felice to come. Now on top of everything else, he is treating her to dinner, again another expense.

Yet he had incurred losses, too. Due to Robert’s sick heart, he had missed out on an advantageous deal. All that had been left to do was sign the contracts and scoop up the money.

The negotiations with the clients were going swimmingly. He had wanted to celebrate—prematurely, he could see now—by inviting Robert to the Café de La Rotonde, in Montparnasse. They ordered an aperitif, a bottle of wine to go with the food, and champagne at the cabaret to top the evening off. But they hadn’t gone overboard with their carousing; by eleven thirty Robert was home. That is, in his chilly hotel room on avenue des Gobelins, where the bathroom stank of sewage and the curtains of stale tobacco smoke.

"It's a farshtinkener pit!" he told Felice after she arrived. "And the money it costs!"

In any case, his heart attack had probably not been caused by either the heavy food or the alcohol he drank, but by Robert's habit of reading the newspaper before bed. Already during dinner he had gotten upset over Hitler's brash ultimatum and Chamberlain's willingness to negotiate on the Sudetens.

As if it weren't obvious to everyone that there would be a war—it was what Hitler had wanted all along. What was there to negotiate? Phooey! There was no negotiating with a dreykop like that.

"You've got to hand it to him," Robert's associate tells Felice, "your husband was prescient in a way. Everything he predicted has come to pass. He got you out of Germany in time, while it was still relatively easy. I used to see him as a pessimist, but clearly his pessimism has paid off. The optimists, who are fleeing now, are having a much harder time of it. In France there are some departments that aren't taking Jews anymore. England doesn't want them, either, and America has cut back on its quotas. Nobody wants us, my dear, and that conference in Évian that got so much press is a total bluff. It's just for show, so the world can't say they don't give a damn. Hundreds of thousands of people, Felice, surviving from day to day here in Paris only thanks to charities. Even famous people, successful people, you wouldn't believe it. Do you remember Dr. Weiss?"

"Is he in Paris?"

"Oh, yes. Physician, successful writer. Now, of course, he doesn't exist in Germany. His books have disappeared from shops. They aren't allowed to be published or sold. Every so often he writes something for the exile newspapers, but from what I've heard, the pay is hardly worth mentioning. I always enjoyed reading his work. I liked the way he complicated things. You know, I ran into him just a few weeks ago, on the street, right here, by chance. I invited him to lunch. He didn't

let it show, but it was obvious he hadn't had a proper meal in a long time."

"Do you know where he's staying?"

"The last time we spoke, he had a room in a hotel not far from yours. He lives modestly, but even so, he sometimes has to stay with friends, to economize. Do you know him personally?"

"A bit."

"I'll write down the name of his hotel for you, but I can't guarantee he's still there. It's been three weeks or so since the last time we met."

He writes a name down on a napkin and slides it to Felice.

So Dr. Weiss is also in Paris, waiting for a miracle.

Felice can pick them out now when she sees them on the street.

The quick-stepping men with the briefcases under their arms and a busy look on their faces who suddenly stop mid-stride, unsure which way to go. The painstakingly dressed and groomed women who avoid the eyes of passersby as if they are ashamed.

The man on the roof was surely one of them. Perhaps a former neighbor from Viktoria-Luise-Platz. An actor, journalist, insurance agent. Maybe she used to see him in the park. Or she bought gloves from him.

Cheap boardinghouses, attic rooms—for the poorest, alcoves and under bridges. Lines in front of charity agencies. Lines in front of public lunchrooms. Donated clothes and shoes that never quite fit.

If not for Robert, she might have fallen into that trap herself.

Up to now, her only regret had been losing her homeland. In Los Angeles, living among the other refugees, who carefully preserved their bubble of the old world, she had dreamed Hitler would fall and they would return to Germany.

Now in Paris, in October 1938, for the first time she sees her situation differently.

Her Berlin exists no more and never will again.

Here in her handbag, though, she has a round-trip ticket to America. All she has to do is walk into the shipping company office and announce her date of departure. And waiting for her at the other end of her journey, tucked in between an orange tree and a stunted palm in Boyle Heights, is her home, with Else and her children inside.

Suddenly she feels impatient. She just hopes there won't be any hitch and Robert will be back on his feet as soon as possible, so the two of them can return home.

The lobby has a certain elegance to it, and the hotel's first two floors do their best to give the impression of an establishment that provides its guests with more than the bare necessities. If the yellow carpets aren't sparkling with newness, they aren't entirely trampled bare, either. The armchairs and tables with flowers mask the stains and cigarette holes, and the curtains on the windows are trimmed with gold fringe.

On the third and fourth floors, the fringe, armchairs, and flowers are gone, while the burn holes and stains are decidedly higher in number. On the fifth floor, which is the shabbiest, the cage elevator comes to a stop. From there on, you have to walk.

The boy who rode up with her points to a door, behind which there is apparently a hidden staircase.

"Room six oh eight is up the stairs. Shall I escort you the rest of the way?"

They ascend to the attic. A narrow corridor with a row of numbered doors and a shred of gray daylight falling through a single unwashed window. From one room she hears a child crying as two grown-ups quarrel, the thin walls only slightly muffling the noise. From somewhere else the peals of a woman's high-pitched laugh.

Felice pulls out her wallet, finds a few coins, and hands them to the boy.

“Would you be so kind as to tell the gentleman I’ll be waiting downstairs. Felice Bauer, from Berlin.”

It hadn’t occurred to her before how awkward it would be. Standing at his door, knocking, waiting for him to open.

The first time it had been him knocking on her door, in Berlin, more than twenty years ago. He had shown up at her office unannounced, as she was today, bringing an urgent message from Prague. She had seen him several more times after that. In Berlin, it was impossible to avoid running into each other. He had been living with a well-known actress at the time.

By the time Felice makes her way down the stairs to the ground floor, the boy, who rode the elevator, is already waiting, and hands her a piece of paper:

“Dear Felice, what a lovely surprise! I had no idea you were in Paris. I’ll be right there. Give me a half hour or so. Wait for me by the Grand Bassin in the Luxembourg Gardens.”

“The gentleman wasn’t alone,” says the boy with a grin, holding out his palm. She decides to pretend not to notice and exits the hotel.

She is already frozen through by the time Weiss appears, having waited over an hour.

In the meantime, she walked the loop around the pond, watching the children in their berets and fall coats, chasing one another in circles around the green metal chairs where their mothers and nannies sat. An old woman in the kind of hat still worn before the war shuffled from one seat to the next, collecting the rental fee in an old-fashioned fabric drawstring purse, the type once known as a pompadour. The change made a jingling sound as it dropped on top of the other coins.

Despite keeping an eye out, she failed to see him coming.

All of a sudden, he is standing right in front of her, smaller than she remembered, with a thin, long face, dark eyes, and a vertical wrinkle between his eyebrows.

"So, what do you say to all this, Felice?" He runs his eyes over her, from her hat down to her shoes. "You haven't changed a bit."

A compliment? From him, hardly.

"Forgive me for making you wait. The lady dawdled getting dressed."

Still one to provoke, even now. He always had taken her as the petit bourgeois type, easily disconcerted by comments about sex. But Felice doesn't fall for it. She never had. Nor does she wait for him to offer his arm, taking hold uninvited. "It's chilly. Shall we go for a walk?"

They slowly make their way in a large semicircle, climbing the white staircase, then submerging themselves in an allée of trees already turning yellow.

"If only he could see us now," says Weiss. "Two archenemies on a stroll in the Jardin du Luxembourg. While we were fighting over his soul, his body vanished into thin air."

"If I felt a need to reminisce, I wouldn't do it with you. I have no desire to speak about the past. I sought you out because I happened to be in Paris. But we live in Los Angeles now."

"Lucky you."

"Maybe we can help you get out of here. I'm not sure how, but there must be a way."

"How do you know I want to leave?"

"Everyone wants to leave."

"I'm not everyone, though of course I do, too. And I know you're in America. The gossip gets around here as reliably as in Berlin. Miss Bloch is in Italy now, for a change."

"I believe that she's in Florence. She hasn't written in ages."

"I hear she's headed to Palestine, or maybe England. But she hasn't left yet. There is a love interest involved. She's living with a musician, much younger than she is. You see, I know everything. Though I haven't a clue what you're doing in Paris when everyone else is fleeing in the opposite direction."

"My husband is in the hospital here. He traveled here on business and had a heart attack. That's why I came."

"I don't know your husband, but he has my sympathy. It is actually a miracle that we haven't all died of a broken heart."

As he leads her down the long allée, the darkness thickens, the light from the electric lamps shiny on the damp yellow leaves. It rained a bit that afternoon and the air smells of decay.

"I am honestly glad you sought me out, Felice. A messenger from that old, happy world, which seemed so unbearably unhappy to us at the time. Little did we know what lay in store. I often wonder what he would say to all this. Though I'm sure it wouldn't surprise him. He suffered no illusions when it came to the human race. I sometimes argue with him in my mind. But everything he faulted me for, I fault myself for now. 'The measured leaps of a grasshopper,' he said about my writing. Writing is increasingly difficult, but the most difficult thing of all for me is getting up in the morning and keeping my wits together. Though apparently I do possess a certain tenacity—I wouldn't call it courage—that won't allow me to give up completely. Do you remember Hanni?"

"The last I heard of her, she got married. It was in the papers."

"The wedding changed nothing between us. Her husband knew about me. He didn't much understand Hanni, but he appreciated that she was an exceptional woman, an artist, with particular needs. As long as he wanted her, he had to accept my existence. He works in finance, like your husband. The two of us are friends now. We've even seen each other here in Paris a few times."

"They're here?"

"He is. Hanni died. I was with her. Just me, by myself. I returned to Berlin on a Czech passport. Then I buried her. That was two years ago."

"I'm so sorry."

"Of course. I also felt sorry for you at one point. Though it

might not have seemed that way to you. So, how are you doing? Over there in America?"

She tells him, truthfully, how she took the massage and cosmetic courses, how she's been learning English, how she and Else bake custom cakes and cookies, and that as soon as she saves up enough, she wants to open a shop selling notions and knitting supplies. Both of her children are fine and in school. But Robert hasn't caught on there yet. His trip here to Paris was sort of a test run.

"Else is your sister from Budapest?"

"She lived with her husband in Budapest, but it's been years now since she divorced him. Then she lived with us in Berlin and Geneva. She and Hana, her daughter."

They walk slowly out of the park and come to a stop at the wrought-iron gate on boulevard Saint-Michel.

"I remember he was very fond of one of your sisters."

"Erna. She got married and stayed in Berlin. He was fond of Toni, too, but she died."

"Did you know he's been translated into French? Schocken published his collected works. You probably know about that. It appears he's going to be as famous as Brod predicted. You know what Klaus Mann wrote about his books? He said they were the most noble and significant publications to appear in Germany recently, a spiritual event spawned from the splendid isolation of the ghetto. He meant well by it, Klaus Mann. He was doing his best to help. He's been helping all of us, actually. But in this case, all it accomplished was to draw the censors' attention. They probably wouldn't even have noticed his books otherwise—they were below their resolution threshold. But an intellectual event from the ghetto? *That* they had to prohibit and burn immediately. On the other hand, it was great publicity for him abroad."

"I don't dwell much on the past," says Felice. "I don't have time. I don't read much, either."

"I would love to take you out for dinner, but honestly, I can't afford it. Maybe next time. I just finished a novel and entered

it in an international contest. If I win, I'll get a visa to America and my troubles will be over."

"I'll keep my fingers crossed."

"Of course, why not? There's a young lady here as well—married. The woes of love. I never have known how to be alone."

Felice opens her handbag and takes out an envelope.

"I hope you won't be offended, Doctor. It isn't much."

The vertical wrinkle between his eyebrows deepens. It looks like it was cut with a knife.

"I'm not offended at all, Felice. Why should I be? I thank you with all my heart. I used to tolerate hunger fairly well, but now I've developed a stomach ulcer, and it hurts if I don't give it something to eat. It doesn't like everything, either. It's a picky ulcer."

"I used to get stomach cramps when I worked in the office. I don't know if it was an ulcer, but it hurt an awful lot."

Weiss pauses, turning the envelope in his fingers. "I'm sure you think I hated you. But that isn't true."

"You needn't explain a thing to me!"

"On the contrary, I quite liked you. You weren't my type, but I understood what he saw in you, what he admired in you."

"Really? Then why did you meddle in our affairs? Why did you talk him out of the wedding?"

"I was frightened of you."

"Frightened?"

"He never should have stayed at that dreadful insurance company. It was killing him. And you acted like you didn't see it. He never should have stayed in Prague. And you, you wanted to move in there with him. How could she be so bright and yet so deaf and blind? I thought. Why does she insist on having her way?"

"I was so angry at you for being so obtuse."

"He was begging, Felice. He knew his life was at stake. He wanted nothing but to leave his job at the office and write, but he couldn't. No, not as long as he was strong and healthy, not

until he was dying. But you, you could have helped him. He wasn't wrong about that. If only you had wanted to. You were solid as a rock. You helped everyone else. Why not him?

"I did hold that against you. And I confess, I was delighted when the two of you broke up. If the war hadn't broken out, it might all have turned out differently. He already had his letter of resignation written. I helped him with it myself. He was determined to leave the company and settle down in Berlin. He was still healthy and I could have helped him. Lots of other people, too. He had plenty of literary friends who believed in him. And at that very moment they closed the borders. That's what I call 'bad luck.'

"But don't just stand there. Defend yourself."

Felice has her head bowed, hat shading her face. The man grasps her by the elbow.

"Go ahead and tell me how awful I am. You've been kind. You sought me out. No one forced you to do that. You gave me money. And here I am, causing you pain. What kind of man does that? A beggar, and an ungrateful one at that. I've gotten used to begging, though. It doesn't bother me anymore. I have an ulcer and my books don't sell and I can't open a practice—where would the French end up if every Jew here opened a doctor's office? But the worst part about it is, I can't write. That novel I told you about fell apart, just like everything else in my life is falling apart now. Maybe the jurors won't notice, but what does it matter?

"Why am I even alive, Felice? Love since Hanni's death isn't love anymore. It's just fear and arousing the senses. My mother passed away. No, there's nothing now for me but to write, no matter if it's good or bad.

"The truth is, I've forgotten what it was like to be someone—doctor, writer, lover, son. I only know it was nice. I live because I'm afraid to die, Felice. That's it. And the main sign of life is pain—here." He hits himself in the stomach with his fist.

Felice raises her head. Through a veil of tears she sees a man

falling—Dr. Weiss hurtling down into the darkness—and she has no way to help.

She reaches out and touches his sleeve, then turns and slowly walks away, leaving him standing there with the blue envelope in his hands, next to the cart of the roasted chestnut seller.

Over the course of the fall, she spotted Dr. Weiss once more, but only from a distance, in the park. He was strolling with a woman. It was late October, when she and Robert began going on walks, as the doctor had prescribed. But since Robert didn't know Weiss personally, she decided to pretend not to see him.

The Czechoslovak crisis, as the newspapers referred to it, had by then been resolved. The French and the English settled for the illusion that Hitler got what he wanted, moving him off the front pages into the foreign section, where they hoped he would remain.

Still, Felice was careful to keep the papers lying around the tables in the hotel lobby out of Robert's sight. His heart required absolute calm. Time measured only in meals, medicines, regular exercise, and sleep.

Robert knew his life was at stake and didn't ask any questions.

Afternoons, while he rested in bed, Felice read out loud to him from *Sentimental Education*, by Flaubert, then followed it with Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma*. She purchased them in German translation from the bouquinistes on the embankment.

They both were familiar with the books from their youth, and it was interesting and refreshing to read them again, together, in this strange situation in which they found themselves. Instead of Hitler, Germany, the fates of relatives and friends, instead of Robert's illness and their own uncertain future in America, they discussed the love interests of Frédéric Moreau and Fabrizio del Dongo.

On November 2, after consulting with the physician, Felice went to the office of the shipping company and booked two passages on a ship to New York.

On November 7, a seventeen-year-old German Jew with Polish roots, Herschel Grynszpan, shot five bullets into the abdomen of Ernst vom Rath, a German Foreign Office diplomat in Paris. On November 9, at 5:30 p.m., vom Rath died of his wounds, and a few hours later a coordinated pogrom was launched throughout Germany and Austria. Thousands of Jews robbed, injured, and killed, synagogues burned, shops ransacked. Felice succeeded in keeping even that hidden from Robert.

Hitler returned from the newspapers' foreign section to the front pages, apparently now for good.

On the morning of November 14, they boarded a train at Saint-Lazare station, and that same evening their ship set sail from the port at Le Havre.

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They are traveling first-class, even though they can't afford it. Robert needs quiet and comfort.

Felice helps her husband change into his pajamas and puts him to bed. She unpacks and arranges everything they are going to need in the cabin over the course of their voyage. Then she puts on her coat, ties a scarf on her head, and goes out to the afterdeck.

The pilot boat has just turned around and is heading back to port, where she can still make out the windows of homes and the lanterns atop the ships' masts.

A cluster of people stands at the railing. No one says a thing, the only sound the splashing of waves and the howling of the wind.

The coast recedes into the distance. The individual lights blur, merging into a soft glow that gradually, little by little, disappears.