

me into" his institution's planned program of cultural activities. He wrote "work me into" in quotation marks to show that he was aware of the irony of his offer. Did he think I needed money? No, he did not. My advice, he pointed out tactfully, my occasional cooperation could do his joint—he wrote "this joint here"—a world of good. It would be no problem at all to talk me into it sometime soon. Then he would also take the opportunity to tell me how he had been doing "since then"—the sole expression which had slipped out uncontrolledly. But, as I well knew, ill weeds grew apace.

Silence. Silence. Intermission. In case you think he can still hurt me . . . Well, you're right; he can hurt me. He can do it again.

The letter gave off a faint aroma of self-sacrifice. I guess that was part of his personality. And now he writes me this letter to prove that the opposite was true. And he files it away carefully, as evidence of his brave solidarity. But invite me he will not. Nor will he work me into his planned program of cultural activities. He will presumably attach the list which forbids him to do so, and which also includes my name, to his letter in the same file.

So what? Chalk it up to experience.

The telephone rang for the second time that day. A female voice. Why is she so upset, I wondered before I even knew to whom I was speaking. She was upset because she was expecting complications that evening. It was Colleague K. from the cultural center, who, much to my surprise, had invited me for a reading that evening, and now she wanted to know if I couldn't come half an hour earlier.

Sure, I said, but why?

To stave off any chance that unpleasant incidents might occur.

She had said "stave off." It was her language, her tone of voice that made me break out into a cold sweat. What kind of unpleasant incidents? I asked cheerfully.

Frau K. already regretted her choice of words. She said, trying to placate me, Oh, nothing special. Just general precautions.

There seemed no reply except: All right. I'll come earlier. Then I had to hang up. I smelled a rat.

Now it was after twelve. Were they still there?

They were.

So let's have something to eat. One shouldn't have to be alone on days like this.

Alone? There was hardly anything left to think or say without getting my censor upset at me. If you don't stop whining and feeling sorry for yourself . . .

All right, all right. By the way, you're right. I'll let you-know-who into my kitchen without reservation. I won't have forgotten what I thought about him today, but I'll believe him when he says that he is fond of me. And who's going to get him out of there, if not someone he is fond of? If he really wants to get out. If he really is involved with them. It had to be someone. Have you forgotten how many weaknesses they can exploit to get at him? Oh, to hell with you and your moral bigotry.

Maybe it wasn't quite one of those days, after all.

I heated up yesterday's beef broth and ate absent-mindedly while listening to the same news as that morning. Children's shouts from the courtyard could now be heard, they were answered by pop music from the fifth floor of the building next door, opposite my kitchen; soon Frau G. would appear in her green cap and complain bitterly about the noise. And so she did.

I was back at the desk but had avoided looking out

the window. (They were still there.) I sat down and began catching up on the entries I had neglected to make the last few days in my thick green pocket diary. Someday I would be sitting in a room—I pictured it as bare, a typical office—and they would be asking me questions. Questions of different degrees, innocuous ones among others; but I had decided not to answer a single question and would stand by my decision (you and your illusions, sister!). Then, after one, two, or twenty hours—weren't there interrogations which went on for days, with short breaks?—my interrogator would take out this thick green notebook in which I was now conscientiously writing down what I had done, read, heard, whom I had seen, and even what I had noticed about the weather today, yesterday, and the day before that. Now, my interrogator would say—he would remain very polite up to the third- and fourth-degree questions and only become very rough all of a sudden at the fifth-degree questions, but I would be prepared and would also stand up to his roughness, perhaps even more easily than to his politeness (Sister! Sister . . .). Now, he would say, let's get down to the nitty-gritty. And he would read me the answers to every question, which I had just so proudly refused to furnish, out of my own notebook in my very own words. Now, Mr. Know-It-All, can you explain to me why I still keep writing everything down, other than out of pride, foolhardiness, and arrogance?

Because you think they won't dare.

Silence.

Now I had to go to the telephone, dial, listen. Did I wake you up? I said a little too guiltily. No, said my younger daughter. But she was in the middle of her breakfast. What was she having? The list was long and given my

approval. So that was what she called "breakfast." Other people would live off that for two days. She made up for it by not eating anything for two days. But that was just the tragedy. She asked for and received news about her father. And what about yourself, ma'am? Oh, marvelous, said I, and she said, Splendiferous, at which point I requested that she make use of a generally understandable form of speech, which she indignantly refused to do. Whatever you say, missy, I said. But how are you spending your tired days? Oh dear! said my younger daughter. No indiscretions, please! But seriously, are you getting enough sleep? Aye, aye, sir. Do you ever go out for a walk? Aye, aye, sir. Listen, I said, I'll tell you one thing. If I ever sever our relations because of mental cruelty, you'll be sitting in the gutter and your hot tears will be flowing. Lady, said my younger daughter, you really cut me to the quick.

We both hung up at the same instant. I felt better. I looked out the window. Yes, they were still there. See if I care. As for me, now I was going to take a break. I drew the curtains in the bedroom and lay down. This was one of the most deeply relieving moments of the day. No unfamiliar person, no unfamiliar look, perhaps not even an unfamiliar ear had followed me into this room. I reveled in the indescribable pleasure of being alone and unobserved and placing no demands on myself. No thinking, no working. Not finding anything out, not wishing to know anything. Lying peacefully on my back, closing my eyes, breathing. I am breathing. I am not thinking. I am relaxed.

My inner eye focused on a high, pale, curved horizon above a dark disk. Was this a stage? All my inner thoughts floated off to this horizon. Shadowlike, they flew away, sluggish, lazy bats. They're succeeding. Nonsense.

They're not going to get very far. They're going to bash their heads in. The horizon is made of marble. Can't you see that? They all came crawling back to me obediently. I'll never get rid of them this way.

How does one get rid of thoughts? By thinking them. Thinking and thinking them again and again. Thinking them through. Thinking them out. If only there were a machine that could gather up all the hope left in the world and shoot it like a laser beam at this horizon of stone, melting it, breaking it open.

Now you're thinking like them. Machines, radiation, violence. Now you're extending their little bit of current power into the future. Then they'd have you where they want you.

Don't you think I know that? Do you think I think that I am completely the other? Purity, truth, kindness, and love? Don't you think I know what they need? I know. They want me to be like them, for that is the only joy left in their poor lives: to make others just like them. Don't you think I can feel their hands running over me, looking for that weak point through which they might enter me. I know that point. But I'm not going to tell anyone where it is, not even you and not even in my thoughts.

So, how do you see your future?

Suddenly all those huge, shadowy bats rose up again in a frightening flock.

Do you really not know that one has to forbid oneself certain words sometimes? In order not to weaken? In order not to get too soft?

So you think I should be harder from now on?

The opposite of soft isn't hard. The opposite of soft is unyielding, firm.

Sounds fantastic. And how do you manage to conjure away your fear?

My little bit of fear? We'll just have to live with it. Whoever can't deal with it can leave. And whoever is trying to scare me by shooting these images through my mind—a minute ago the curved horizon had disappeared and in its stead I saw barred rooms—whoever is trying to break me down can leave as well. And I mean right now.

I see. In case that means you're giving me my notice, that's fine with me.

Then I did fall asleep, after all. The last images I saw were sharply defined details of a familiar male body, irreconcilable love scenes which would have astounded me had I been awake. A dream demonstrated to me in ruthless fashion the violation of the amniotic shell of an embryo; accompanying this I heard the scornful words: Born in a caul! I understood the meaning upon awakening, but why the scorn? Why these wounds that one had to inflict upon oneself no less?

No reply. The notice remained valid. So I got dressed, made a pot of strong coffee, and sat down at my writing table, my torture table. Were they still there? They were not there anymore. The bottle-green car was gone. They had given up. They were finally convinced that . . .

Four cars over to the left stood a white car, occupied by two men. Everything as it should be.

It was 3 p.m.

Through the right alcove window I had a clear view of the Friedrichstrasse all the way to the streetcar terminal, through the left alcove window all the way to the Oranienburgerstrasse. Throngs of people were pushing and shoving in both directions. Thousands of unsuspecting citizens by

the hour passing between me and the white car over there, heading home or to work or to their lovers or to their shops. Carrying on their normal lives, which were stuck to them.

As long as I wasn't prepared to change places with any of them, my pride remained unbroken and my principal lessons remained to be learned. Or theirs? The foreignness separating me from the crowd also separated the crowd from itself, or so I thought.

I had not yet had such thoughts, but the time seemed ripe for them, and quite different ones as well. Different ones and in different ways. The crowd not always infallible, a judge, a higher authority: the many who know better, whom I couldn't disregard, hurt, ignore; the masses, who were always right when it came right down to it. They were passing by my window, knew nothing, and were neither right nor wrong, for they had been made up. And wasn't it possible that it wasn't up to them, but rather the individuals who could say yes and no, could raise their arms automatically or refuse to agree, throw the first stone upon instruction or refuse to accept the judgment. Wasn't it up to each and every one of the many people down there—that girl, for example, who had just woven her way between the white car and the black-and-yellow one next to it and was now walking across the strip of lawn which separated the parking lot from the sidewalk, who had to wait at the traffic light and was now purposefully crossing the street. A girl like thousands of others, medium height, neither thin nor fat, with very short brown hair and a dark complexion. A green cloak, her pocketbook hanging from her shoulder.

All you had to do was look one of them in the eye and you were rid of your fear.

I had to get ready, pack H.'s bag, put on my shoes;

visiting hours at the hospital began in less than half an hour. The doorbell rang. It couldn't come at a more inopportune time, I told myself, in order to cover up my fear. Who was it? Today? At my house? It would be best not to open the door at all. I snuck through the corridor and listened at the door. Put on the chain? Nonsense. That's how it starts.

At first I thought my senses were deceiving me. It was the girl I had just seen crossing the street. Very short brown hair. Dark complexion. Cloak. Shoulder bag.

Who had sent her? Our eyes met and I started to feel ashamed. I asked her in as casually as possible. Something which at its core was both related and, at the same time, absolutely foreign to me crossed over my threshold in the form of this girl. I couldn't bring myself to tell her—how young she was! twenty? twenty-two?—to take off her cloak. The girl told me her name, which seemed vaguely familiar, and I was overcome by the feeling that this girl would never again leave my apartment. I did not pull out the telephone plug as I walked by, which would have been the reasonable thing to do; I risked letting this girl talk about herself into the possibly activated microphones in my room, at my round table, for that was why she had come, that much had been clear to me from the start. A few quick questions and answers revealed that the name of this girl had popped up regarding a certain incident at a certain university in connection with denunciations, proceedings, and cases of blackmail; that it really had been she who was expelled from the university because she was not among those who let themselves be blackmailed.

Right, yes; I remembered the story, which I knew about from hearsay, but that had been . . . how long ago was it? One year? Two years? Yes. But the girl now said,

almost casually and certainly not by way of bragging, a second incident had landed her in prison for a year after that, which was why she had not been able to come sooner. As if we had had an appointment for two years now. The atmosphere I had been prepared for since the girl's arrival had finally been established. "Prison" was the word that jeopardized our relationship. There was nothing I could say to this, nothing I could ask. The girl dug around in her shoulder bag and finally pulled out a few pages, the manuscript that was the reason for her visit, and I read them at once, although I had said right from the start that I had to leave.

After reading the short text, I asked the girl to whom she had shown it apart from myself. She had shown it to her sister, a friend, her husband.

Now I stood up and pulled out the telephone plug. I didn't want to turn on the radio; the girl should think me neither timid nor conceited. So she was married. Yes. Her husband had stood by her, but he wasn't really interested in what she did.

I had the fleeting thought that, in times such as these, all our weaknesses come to the fore or our strengths become weaknesses. It wasn't for me to call a good text bad or not to encourage the author of a good text. I said that what she had written was good. It was no lie. Every sentence rang true. She shouldn't show it to anybody. These few pages could land her in prison again.

The girl's pleasure at hearing this softened her; she loosened up and started to talk. I thought, The time has come. The young people are writing it all down. The girl told of her hard life; she wished to reveal her innermost feelings, but where would this lead? I had to restrain her,

I couldn't allow her to go back on the street in such a trusting state of mind; I couldn't help asking how it was in prison and couldn't help hearing that the worst thing had been the cold. And the high quota set for stocking production. And the kidney pains. They simply didn't heat sufficiently there.

And this in my warm room, and me in my stockings. Now I had to scare this girl, if it was at all possible. Had to tell her that the greatest talents had already rotted in German prisons by the dozens, and it wasn't true that talented people could withstand the cold and the humiliation and the wearing down better than those with no talent. And that people would still want to read sentences like the ones she was writing in ten years' time. And please not to rush headlong into disaster.

So she should save herself? But what for?

Didn't she love her husband?

He had married her to give her security. He stood by her. She was a danger to him; he held a high office. Love? No.

And didn't she want to have children?

Earlier she had wanted to, oh yes. But not anymore. By the way, they hadn't recognized her kidney pains for what they were and had performed an operation on her uterus.

Silence.

The girl had had a change of heart. She didn't want to throw her life away, after all. It was just that she enjoyed writing down the truth as she knew it. And then talking about it with other people. Now. Here.

The girl cannot be held back, I thought. We can't save her, can't spoil her. She should do what she must do and relinquish us to our own consciences. She left. I

watched her departure from the window. She crossed the street, threading her way between the cars and walking directly past the white car, unmoved by the glassy stares of the young gentlemen, made her way across the parking lot and vanished from their sight and mine.

And I had forgotten to get her address.

Now I plug the telephone back in, finish getting ready, lock the door, and go. I am sure that visiting hours at the hospital have already begun.

My car stood seven spots away from the white car, which I did not grace with as much as a glance. I got in and started up the engine. The girl had not asked small-mindedly, What remains? Nor had she asked how much she would remember when she was old someday.

I went the same way the girl could have gone, concentrating on the sidewalks and almost causing an accident when I thought I recognized the short brown hair in the crowd and tried to stop at the curb without observing the traffic, was forced to drive on, harassed by furious honking, and lost sight of the brown hair. No address. We did a good job on that one.

As I continued driving faultlessly and precisely, observing all the traffic regulations, something curious occurred inside me. Something was happening to me, to my vision or, more precisely, to my entire faculty of perception. I still remained in control of my vehicle, that was not the problem; the problem was, I could no longer see properly. I no longer saw what I was seeing, although the houses, streets, and people had by no means become invisible to me, that wasn't it. What's the matter with us, I heard myself think several times in a row; no other words came to mind and none have to this very day. Let's say, by way of trial,

that a tie had broken between me and the city—provided that “city” can still stand for everything that people do to one another, both good and bad. It wasn't that I was afraid of going crazy. I was neither afraid nor anything else, I wasn't even in contact with myself anymore; what did a husband, children, brothers and sisters, or entities of the same order matter to me in a system that was self-sufficient. Pure horror, I hadn't known that its first stage was lack of feeling. I wove my way out of the traffic effortlessly, observing myself from a certain height all the while, not without a sense of appreciation, turned left into the driveway of the hospital, found a parking spot immediately, as if this were only natural, and wasn't even surprised that it was suddenly possible to enter a building which had stood there, flat and sharply silhouetted, looking as if it were cut out of cardboard, that there was a staircase, albeit a dirty one, signs with arrows indicating the various floors and wards through which I quickly and easily found my way to the third floor, Ward C1, and a room with the number 17. I arranged my features to accommodate the expression of a woman visiting her husband in the hospital; I knocked on the door, went in, nodded to the young man lying in the first bed, went up to the second, observing myself from a certain height, saw myself smile, bent down over the face lying on the pillows, and kissed it.

All the while, I was observing myself from a certain height.

I asked the questions one asks, got the same old answers, put the buckthorn juice on the night table, and packed up empty bottles and dirty laundry, performing everything quite convincingly and naturally and not even leaving out words like “worry” and “longing,” since, after

all, those who feel nothing have all words freely at their disposal. I sympathized, digging for details and wanting to be informed of even the slightest progress, of fractions of degrees in his temperature and all levels of pain. No, there hadn't been any real danger, that I knew, although I had been uneasy all yesterday morning. That's what I said, and it was true, I had been uneasy and I knew at that very moment that I was bound to cause suspicion with this truthful sentence, although he wouldn't immediately articulate it. He would only ask, What else? That's what he did.

What else?

What else? Nothing special. Pretty quiet. Not many people. Done me some good. Nah, nothing out of the ordinary. Now stop it. Sleep? Of course. Like a baby. Now stop it. You don't have to worry about me at all.

Why do you keep saying "Now stop it" today? asked H.

Me? I said. Do I?

Within the space of one minute you said "Now stop it" twice, said H.

Leave me alone, I said. His sentence demanded silence. Go ahead and cry, said H. after a while. I pushed the chair aside and sat down on his bed; the nurses didn't like that, he said.

How are you doing? I asked, starting all over again. The same answers to different questions. He looked pale and one of his facial expressions was unfamiliar to me. I traced along the lines I knew with my finger. He had been in danger. Yesterday I had had to fight violently against the horrible vision of a life without him for one whole morning. Everything is going well, I said. Everything is fine.

Really?

Now stop it.

I'll tell you everything later. Don't be afraid. I'm not afraid anymore either. Everything depends on us, you know. Don't laugh if laughing hurts. You can laugh at me all you want later. Thank God, you can laugh at me for a long time still, husband. You know what, I'm so happy all of a sudden that I don't know what to do. And not even being able to touch you.

All right. I guess, I'll be going.

I sang in the car, "Have you seen the mockingbird, the mockingbird, the mockingbird . . ." They won't win, husband. I turned on the radio and sang along with the tunes, I drove down the Leninallee too fast, suddenly deciding to have a bite to eat at the bar-and-grill and whipping around the steering wheel to get to the parking lot on the other side of the street. The signal NO U-TURN flashed too late in my cerebral cortex. I hope no one . . .

Uh-oh. The sound of a whistle. So, there was a traffic policeman stationed at this intersection, whom I was obliged to obey and show my papers in a friendly and rueful manner when he waved me over to the side of the street. The best thing was to admit to the offense immediately, not try to gloss it over but rather provide reasons which the already mollified guardian of law and order can rationalize into mitigating circumstances. He wasn't going to write me up after all, the right moment for that had come and gone, ten marks' fine at most, and possibly only five if he was willing to listen to reason. What could Patrolman B. do with an offender who candidly admitted to driving down this street frequently, who offered nothing in her defense but a state of absentmindedness and, to top it all off, happened to be a woman? All he could do was hand me back

my papers with the almost jestful-sounding admonition: Now don't you turn here anymore!, raise his hand to his cap, and wish me a good day.

My luck couldn't hold, though.

It didn't. The waiters at the bistro were unfriendly, the service was slow, and I finally had to leave without having eaten. I knew from experience that hunger disappears after an hour at most. It got dark. I took a chance and parked the car in one of the gloomy, dilapidated streets behind the Alexanderplatz, wasted a long time walking in the wrong direction looking for the cultural center, and when I finally found it, the half hour I had promised the program director had already begun. I was no longer beaming, but a smidgin of gusto remained. Gusto propelled me through the throng of people blocking the entranceway to the cultural center, where I laughingly persuaded the young people that they would have to let me through, which they laughingly did. The large sign at the locked entrance announced: SOLD OUT. A young gentleman stood on either side of the door. Well, what do you know. Not exactly what you'd call inconspicuous. The young gentlemen didn't cause any trouble, they politely signaled to those inside that they should open the door. This they did. Four or five young girls and women and two young men were standing in the foyer and greeted me courteously. A trap! I thought in my typically exaggerated way, while shaking hands all around—more, in my confusion, than would have been necessary. I read PEOPLE'S SOLIDARITY CLUB on a door sign to my right, and then I got led up the stairs by a zealous, young girl toward a large inscription reading: GROWTH—PROSPERITY—STABILITY. Once again I read automatically: growth, prosperity, stability. Where were we, anyway? I really felt like sinking my teeth into this question, but I

had to admit that this was neither the time nor the place.

The unreal atmosphere of the office of the departmental head of cultural activities, a storage room for outdated office furniture, surpassed that of almost every other office I knew. Three ancient posters on the walls did nothing to enhance the cultural aura which Colleague K. was aiming at. Colleague K. pretended to be thrilled to see me, but she seemed all upset to me. She was wearing a pea-green sweater, which served as the background for a hammered bronze shield the size of a clenched fist which hung right between her breasts. I wondered whether this woman happened to be called Brunhilde, but I really wouldn't have profited from the information. Then she started talking in a rapid, precipitous manner that made the shield on her chest start to jangle. What was the matter with her? At first with growing astonishment and then with growing comprehension, I saw her fingers groping about on the desk top, saw how her gaze rested stubbornly in the farthest corner of the room, and realized: This woman was afraid. The unit for measuring the degree of her fear was the jangling on her chest. It tinkled softly when she mentioned her boss; apparently he had not deemed it necessary to back her up against those "higher authorities," the mention of whom caused her shield to jangle more loudly. Still, since the event could no longer be canceled anyway, she had succeeded in wringing tacit permission from those authorities as well, although they must have put a lot of pressure on her. However, Frau K.'s bronze shield rang out a loud alarm when the conversation turned to the visitors outside the door who hadn't gained admission. Such a riotous assembly was all Colleague K. needed.

That was all I needed as well, although I didn't say

so. On the contrary. I mobilized my pertinent experience, which was considerable, and began asking Frau K. questions which were designed to back her up and simultaneously inform me as comprehensively as possible. There is a way of doing this which can't be explained to an outsider; I assume that there are conversations in every country, the hidden meaning of which becomes apparent only when they are compared with dozens of similar conversations on the same topic.

So what was the problem with the higher authorities? The higher authorities feared that something could happen. What, for example? Provocative questions from the audience, for example. I see. The level of barely tolerable questions seemed to have sunk a few notches lower. But don't panic, Frau K., just leave it to me. After all, I'm no beginner.

I was no beginner? To tell the truth, today of all days I felt just like a beginner.

What else, Frau K? I see, foreign correspondents. What foreign correspondents? Those who could have snuck in, although . . . Although what? Is this a public reading or isn't it? Well, yes. Although . . .

The long and the short of it was that precautions had been taken. Precautions?

Now a familiar little alarm went off inside my head. Now I entered negotiations with Colleague K. which, tenacious, tactical, clever, and friendly as they were on my part, stymied the defenses of the departmental head from Thüringen, who only a short time before had been stranded in Berlin, the snake pit. After a certain amount of haggling and considerable shield rattling, she surrendered to me the list of invited participants with a gesture worthy of the ca-

pitulation of an army. Truly, it honored me. No one had been omitted.

I told Frau K. that the list honored me. But what was the meaning of the six successive numbers which were followed by neither a name nor a departmental designation? Frau K. remained silent and stared down at her desk. I also remained silent and stared down at her desk. Only six, I thought, almost confidently. When I thought of those other events where almost a quarter of the audience . . . But one really shouldn't talk about "progress" in certain contexts. The important thing is not to lose my sense of humor now.

And so I asked Frau K. whether a normal audience was to be expected at all, considering this impressive list. Now I had all but insulted her. Of course she had let in "normal people" as well. Those were her very words, which almost completely restored my good mood. At least we'll have something to fall back on in our old age.

But now Frau K. had to hurry down and get the audience outside the door to disperse. And what about letting a few more of them in, what about opening the door leading to the staircase? Frau K. could only dismiss this as an unseemly proposition in light of standard fire regulations. Left on my own, I leafed through my manuscript, wiped the sweat from my face, and sprayed myself with eau de cologne. Didn't all these old Berlin apartment buildings with their countless corridors have a hidden rear exit? And might it not be next to the door of the restroom, which I could still visit inconspicuously? Where I could just as inconspicuously mistake the restroom door for the exit? After all, the insinuation that it had never happened before would be beside the point. There was always a first time for everything.

But Frau K. was already back. Had she been able to disperse the waiting crowd? Unfortunately not. Frau K., who had quivered in many different places since we met, now quivered in the general vicinity of the chin. She told me that, whatever might happen, she was determined to let the reading begin. Something had to have happened to her down there by the entrance. Only someone who was resolved to the utmost could have walked the way she walked on ahead of me. If green really is the color of hope, then her green sweater gave off all kinds of signals, but hope was not among them. At the door to the auditorium it turned out that she had no intention of introducing me. I should just go up and start right in. People will notice on their own when the reading starts, said Frau K. My oh my, I thought. This certainly is a first.

It was quiet in the auditorium. I squeezed between the rows of seats and made my way to the podium, upon which stood a bare wooden table, a simple chair, and a lamp. I stepped up onto the podium and sat down. Two or three pairs of hands clapped. So they were not among the six on the list. Or were they? I announced what I was going to read and began.

I knew the text by heart. The sentences establish their own rhythm, the voice rises, falls, softens, hardens. The way it should be. Everything automatic, no one will notice. Whatever the reasons for your coming, ladies and gentlemen, you will be served properly. The fee for which you have hired me is modest, but I am giving you your money's worth. What I would like to know is, did you have to fork out the money yourselves or did your respective departments pay the one mark fifty per ticket for you? I can only hope so. Do you at least have to feign a keen interest

in cultural events for this job or isn't that necessary either? And what are your instructions? Applause at the end, and if so, how much? Or manifestations of displeasure? But at what point? Raised workers' fists are apparently no longer in fashion.

GROWTHPROSPERITYSTABILITY.

Oh yes. You will be served. One day you will be fed up, my dear colleagues. By the way, why you of all people? Why of all people that young guy down there on the left, with the sweat running down his forehead, who isn't wiping it away? Doesn't he dare to for fear of attracting attention? Is he as interested as he makes out to be? And the girl behind him, the one with the long hair—where might she work. Or have the two of them not been ordered here after all and belong to the "normal" people? To those for whom I would have to read in a completely different fashion. Why would I have to: have to. Even if there were only the two of them. But there could be two or three dozen, and I forgot all about them. And why didn't it occur to me that it would also be a worthwhile experience for the others, for those who have been sent here? For where does it say that they are made of stone, that they can't be seduced as well.

All right, then. Now I make an effort.

Now I no longer cared about classifying the audience in whatever way. No matter how the world might be reflected in these more than one hundred various minds—for this one hour I wanted to implant my world therein. I no longer had any objections, or the slightest reservation against any single member of this audience and—although I couldn't swear, I was more than willing to believe it—maybe those six, or however many there might be, forgot

their prejudice, if not their assignment, for a short time. For where would we be if it became fashionable to spit into the hand being held out to you?

I could see how gladly Colleague K. would have used the pause before the first question was posed in order to close the evening she had so valiantly refused to open. Nothing had happened yet, but any second—now, for example, where that young man in the first row was getting up, the one who was sweating so—it could. But all the young man wanted to know was when the book was coming out, and none of those aforementioned six could have opened the discussion more cleverly, for now time was spent providing information on how books were published. The reports, which would hopefully come together tomorrow at the proper place, could read “composed atmosphere.” The general atmosphere of the discussion was composed.

But you shouldn't count your chickens before they're hatched. You should always keep an eye on your own feelings. In the last row, a young woman of the type I am helpless against got up and introduced the word “future”—a word we're all helpless against and which is capable of changing the atmosphere of any room and moving any crowd. The young woman—a teacher? a student of music? a technical draftsman?—would never have had the heart to speak in public if she hadn't come for the express purpose of asking that question which she could no longer postpone: how a livable future for ourselves and our children was going to grow out of this present situation.

She spoke in a level tone of voice, she didn't make a fuss, made no accusations, did not put her feelings on display. She only wanted to know. Everyone in the auditorium had caught the signal, each in his own way. Col-

league K.'s bronze shield started clanking desperately, but it didn't do her any good. Even if the words GROWTH PROSPERITY STABILITY had appeared on the wall in large neon letters, nothing would have done any good, for now the real questions had surfaced—the ones which give us life and can mean death if taken away from us.

I said something along those lines and took great pains, as was my habit in such situations, to shoulder the responsibility for her question and thus cover up for the young teacher, who may have been sitting there innocently among the wolves. I immediately felt ashamed at this maneuver, for hands and voices were raised in many parts of the auditorium which not only repeated the young woman's question as their own but elaborated and dwelt on it in a carefree and ruthless manner. What were these people doing? They were putting themselves in danger. But what right did I have to think them more stupid than myself? What right did I have to protect them from themselves?

And so I remained silent and listened as I have seldom listened in my life. I forgot about myself, they forgot about me, and finally, we all forgot the time and the place. The auditorium was couched in semidarkness. As the forms in the auditorium became harder to distinguish, the formality of the occasion faded. The terrible habit of speaking for others faded away and everyone spoke for themselves, thus leaving themselves vulnerable. Sometimes I had to shudder: How vulnerable. But wonders never cease, no one attacked. Most of them were seized by a fever; it was as if they could never ever make amends if they didn't grasp this perhaps last opportunity and immediately contributed their small part to that curiously close future, which kept slipping out of reach. Someone said the word “brotherhood” softly.

Sheer madness, I thought; someone else jumped up and shook his fist, pulling at his hair in frustration at such naïveté and incapable of understanding what was happening when those all around him offered gentle remonstrations on the practical value of this utopian word. He sat down, shaking his head; someone else, who obviously enjoyed the sound of his own voice, was cajoled into getting to the point, which presumably had been his intention in the first place. The atmosphere got more and more relaxed, as on the eve of a celebration. The titles of books were shouted across the room, some people wrote them down, others started talking to their neighbors, a circle formed around the young woman who had spoken first.

Had Colleague K. taken leave of her senses? Was she responsible or wasn't she? But there she was, clinking softly, one might almost have taken it for the clinking of spurs. Her sweater was even greener than before, the glow of her cheeks redder still. Was she trembling? Of course she was. The trembling of her body carried over to her voice, which nonetheless sounded determined. This seemed to be the right moment. All get-togethers had to . . . And so she hereby closed the reading and was certain to be speaking on behalf of everyone present. The thank yous. The flowers: the five obligatory gerbera, surrounded by asparagus leaves. A good evening to all.

Yet the people remained seated. Was Frau K. mistaken? Had it not been the right moment, after all? On the other hand, what were they waiting for? No one really knew, but when the old man in the second row—the one who looked like a war veteran—stood up, it seemed as if they had all been waiting for him. As the oldest by far at this gathering, he merely wished to take the opportunity to make

a friendly gesture. He then took a flat box wrapped in tissue paper out of an ancient, coarse linen bag and presented it to me. Now they could laugh and applaud, now they could get up and gradually disperse. Some people came up to the front with photographs to be signed, among them the young woman who had asked about our future. What was her profession? Oh, just a nurse. Why the "Oh, just . . ." Oh, that wasn't anything special.

This should have been the finale of the evening. But instead there was an epilogue. It was begun by the two young people who approached from the door and had not been among the audience up till then. A harmless-looking young man, a nice young girl with frizzy blond hair. As I was signing their books, the young man told me his name. So he was the one who had been putting his poems in my mailbox for the past few months. Well, this was a nice way of finally getting to meet one another.

Then the young man asked, By the way, do you realize that the police broke up the crowd downstairs outside the entrance?

I recognized that familiar sensation of an elevator descending rapidly into the pit of my stomach. The police? But why? And I'm supposed to have known . . . Colleague K.!

Colleague K. was prepared. Yes, unfortunately. Unfortunately, it had been necessary to call in police protection. The crowd had become unruly and aggressive.

Both the young man and the girl said quietly, That's not true.

Not true. Well, Colleague K. knew better than that. She herself had been insulted when she attempted to disperse the crowd in a friendly way.

"Friendly!" said the two young people in one breath.

So she had been aware of the intervention of the police? I asked Colleague K. Perhaps even ordered it?

Everything had transpired in accordance with proper and lawful procedure. Police headquarters had called finally to assure her that a squad car was on hand.

When! When had the police called?

Around half past six. Of course before the reading. But it had been predictable that something like this would happen.

But what? Something like what? asked the boy, the girl, and I.

Suddenly, as if he had shot up out of the floor, a man was standing next to Colleague K., who was jangling and trembling from head to toe. He was barely taller than she, but obviously one or two notches higher on the salary scale: the director of the cultural center himself, her boss. Who now felt obliged to reveal his identity. Just for the sake of showing these young people here . . . So, to get right down to brass tacks, what had happened? Well. Years ago he started studying law. But even without that background, anyone with any common sense would call what happened today "trespassing." However, to prevent such occurrences we fortunately had a powerful police force, even if some people didn't happen to agree. Just to set the record straight. Moreover, the police hadn't even cracked down, which would have been perfectly justified.

One of them told me they could easily have loaded us all onto three or four trucks and carried us off, and one, two, three, the problem would have been solved, said the young girl.

Told you! said the director of the cultural center in a superior tone of voice. But what did the police actually do!

They pushed and shoved out the people standing downstairs in the foyer.

So you admit it yourself. The police reestablished order without bloodshed. Was Colleague Writer even aware of the fact that her fans had forced their way into the building?

Forced! said the young man. We were bored outside and just passing the time with all kinds of nonsense. Somebody at the door called out, What we need is a skeleton key! and then someone passed one up, they opened the door—it was easy—and a few people went inside. That was all. It was completely peaceful, funny even, like a happening or something. So please don't think anybody wanted to disturb your reading.

What I thought was of little importance. I was relieved to see that although Colleague K. had known about the police intervention, she hadn't known about the trespassing. I wondered what the two young men standing at the door had actually done when the skeleton key was passed up. Had it perhaps passed through their hands as well? There was something fundamentally illogical about this story which I couldn't get out of my mind. That phone call at half past six when not a soul was thinking of a skeleton key . . . or were they? I had relaxed too soon. Jürgen M., or whoever else it was, would get his report, probably even three or four fat, juicy reports, which would satisfy him and enrich my file. And wasn't it conceivable that my old friend Jürgen M., whose young men had stood around so long in front of our door without any results, would spare no ex-

pense for such an enrichment of my file. Conceivable yes, utterable no. Unutterable. Unmentionable.

Well then, good night.

Just a minute please. The director of the cultural center had decided to take the opportunity to conclude that, in his opinion, the evening had been quite successful all in all and that the unpleasant, peripheral incidents had nothing to do with Colleague Writer in the least. The best thing was for her to forget them as soon as possible. Colleague K., all jangling shields and quivering chins, concurred. Her eyes glued to her boss, she formulated the sentence which would later appear in her report: It was a normal reading in a liberal atmosphere with a satisfied audience.

Exactly, said her boss.

I left, flanked by the young people. Someone brought me the flowers I had left behind. The two of them accompanied me to my car. It's better this way, said the boy. We didn't say much. The people outside had really been peaceful, peaceful and unprovocative. They had talked with one another. The two of them, for example, had only just met out there.

That's nice, I said.

I was probably tired now.

Yes.

Was it a good discussion?

Oh yes. We discussed the future, you see. What remains.

What remains.

I couldn't help laughing. I knew it would be dangerous if I started to laugh now. I managed to stop. The young people discovered that they both lived in the same

direction. See you some other time, I said, got in the car, and drove off. The only thing on my mind was that I was tired.

What if they really had loaded some of the young people onto their trucks and taken them away? What if they . . . That was it. There was nothing I could do. Put out of action, as they say. My back to the wall.

Around this time there is no more traffic in the Oranienburgerstrasse, especially not in the Tucholskystrasse. I drove mechanically and parked the car in the first row of the big parking lot, right opposite our windows and right next to the car in which two young gentlemen sat smoking. This car was probably blue in the daylight. Dark blue. Let it be. Let them be. In the daylight and at night, in summer and in winter.

It was 11:05 p.m.

The apartment was dark and quiet. I went through all the rooms barefoot and turned on all the lights. In the kitchen, I put the gerbera in a vase with some water. I stared at the announcer on the tube, who wished me good night and vanished. I looked through the records. *Exsultate, Jubilate*. What good is that to me? What good the painfully loved "Arrived did I a stranger"? And a stranger I will leave.

Nothing fits.

Walk along the bookshelves, even climb up the stepladder, peruse the upper shelves, tap the back of a book here, check out a title there. Nothing works anymore. I had lost all my spirit, even the holy spirits. There may have been a few lines left here and there. With my assassin time . . . That worked. With my assassin time I am alone.

Go to the bathroom, stare into the mirror I couldn't smash because they had smashed it before me. The course

had been set. The concrete poured on the pathway over which they would drive us. Go back into the room, turn on the radio. Unwrap the candy box the white-haired man had given me. Read the enclosed card. It turned out the man was a priest and wished me God's blessings. With the radio blaring hit after hit, I sat there and ate one piece of candy after another until the box was half empty.

Now what?

The telephone rang. It was midnight. My older daughter had heard from a friend what had happened. One of the people who had been standing outside. She was supposed to tell me that they had not provoked anybody. Really not. They had been in a happy, relaxed mood. They hadn't wanted to make any trouble for me. I know that. But listen to your voice. It sounds normal to me. Sometimes one should just grab oneself by the scruff of the neck and place oneself a few years into the future. Oh. So that was her recipe. Why wasn't she in bed instead of telephoning all over the place at this ungodly hour? I didn't really want to know, did I? Was Father doing better? Yes. Well then! You can't have everything. Were they out in front of the house again? They were. Did it still bother me? No, it didn't bother me anymore. But it bothered me that my own daughters were spying on me. Well then, so long, said my daughter. Oh, by the way, they're right not to trust you. I'm just beginning to understand that myself, I said.

The moment I put the receiver down, the phone started ringing again. A man I vaguely knew wanted to tell me that he had been among the young people at the cultural center that evening. They really hadn't provoked anybody. I said I knew that. How was I doing? Good, I said. Really? Better, I said. Let me give you my number, said the man,

whom I all of a sudden remembered. You can call me any time, even at night. My goodness, I said, telephone therapy. Go ahead and laugh, said the man. I'd rather that than something else.

I wrote down his number. I went through all the rooms and turned off all the lights until only the desk lamp was still burning. This time they had almost got me. This time, whether they had been trying to or not, they had found the weak point. Which I would describe one day in my new language. One day I will be able to speak easily and freely, I thought. It is still too soon, but it won't always be too soon. Why not simply sit down at this desk, by the light of this lamp, shuffle the paper into place, take my pen, and begin? What remains? What is at the root of my city and what is rotting it from within? That there is no misfortune other than that of not being alive. And, in the end, no desperation other than that of not having lived.

June-July 1979 / November 1989

