



Translated by

Heike Schwarzbauer

and Rick Takvorian



WHAT

REMAINS

AND OTHER

STORIES

■

CHRISTA

WOLF

The University of Chicago Press

sion out of you. How could I have wanted the first and only confidentiality between us to be the confidential admission of a defect . . .

Each one of us has reached his goal. You had succeeded in getting rid of me; I in discovering your secret. Your preparation had done what it could, Professor. Now it left us in the lurch.

There is nothing worse than two people who are through with one another.

I am coming to the end.

You waited for me at the institute the next morning. There was hardly any talk. You didn't show me your face as you filled the syringe. "Shame" has to do with "disgrace." Disgrace as in destroy. We can't do anything but start afresh with the most painful of all feelings.

I did not dream anything. Upon awakening I saw a growing light spot. Your Bepeter minus Masculinum 199 is a reliable drug as well, Professor. After all, it says so in the report. You have been proven right in all your predictions.

Now we are facing my experiment: the attempt to love. Which, by the way, also leads to fantastic discoveries: the invention of the one who can be loved.



WHAT REMAINS

DON'T PANIC. One day I will even talk about it in that other language which, as of yet, is in my ear but not on my tongue. Today I knew would still be too soon. But would I know when the time was right? Would I ever find my language? One day I would be old. And how would I remember these days then? Something inside me, which expands in moments of happiness, contracted in fright. When was I last happy? That didn't interest me at the moment. What did—it was a morning in March, chilly, gray, and not even all that early—was how I would think back on this day, still new and not yet lived out, in ten or twenty years' time. Alarmed, as at the frantic warning peal of a bell within me, I jumped up and found myself barefoot on the beautifully patterned rug of my Berlin apartment, saw myself tearing back the curtains, opening the window which looks out onto the rear courtyard, full of overflowing garbage cans and rubble but devoid of human life, as if forever deserted by the children with their bicycles and transistor radios, the plumbers and construction workers, even by Frau G., who would later come down in her housecoat and green knitted cap and take from the large wire containers the boxes from the seed store, the perfumery, and the Intershop, flatten them out, tie them up in handy bundles, and wheel them around the corner on her four-wheel handcart to the waste-paper salvagers. She would rant and rave about the tenants who threw their empty bottles into the garbage cans out of laziness, instead of piling them up neatly in the cases reserved for that purpose, about

the late-night homecomers who broke in through the front door almost every night because they kept forgetting their keys, about the municipal housing office, which didn't seem to be capable of installing doorbells, but most of all about the drunks from the hotel restaurant next door, who passed water brazenly behind the damaged front door.

The small tricks which I permitted myself every morning: gathering a few newspapers off the table and sticking them into the newspaper rack, smoothing out a tablecloth in passing, arranging glasses, humming a song ("No way, clever people say, two times two is never three"), knowing all the while that everything I did was a pretense and that in reality I was, as if drawn by a string, on my way toward the front room and the large bay window which looked out onto the Friedrichstrasse and through which shone no morning sun, for it was a spring graced by little sun, yet at least there was morning light, which I love and which I wanted to store up in large doses as a precaution against gloomier times.

Of course I know that heaven's treasures, which multiply unnoticeably, cannot be had by an act of will alone; know for certain that all nourishment above and beyond our bodily needs falls into our laps without our being obliged or allowed to gather it bit by bit, it collects on its own; and yet I fear that these desolate times will contribute nothing to those imperishable provisions and thus drift off irrevocably with the tide of memory's fading. With pure fear, real panic, I now tried to cling to one of these doomed days and not let go, no matter what I ended up holding in my hands, be it banal or weighty, whether it surrendered at once or struggled to the last. And so I stood, as I did every morning, behind the curtain, which had been hung so that I could

hide behind it, and looked out, hopefully unnoticed, at the large parking lot beyond the Friedrichstrasse.

Actually, they weren't even there. If my eyes weren't deceiving me—of course I had put on my glasses—all the cars in the first row were empty, and those in the second row as well. In the beginning, two years ago—this is my way of measuring time—I had been fooled by the high headrests of some vehicles, taking them for heads and marveling uneasily at their immobility; not that I no longer made mistakes, but I was certainly beyond that stage. Heads are unevenly shaped, movable; headrests evenly shaped, rounded, high—a considerable difference, which I might describe someday with precision in my new language, which would be tougher than the one in which I was still forced to think. How obstinately the voice retains a pitch once it has been reached, how much effort is needed to alter even the slightest nuances. Not to mention the words, I thought, as I began to take my shower—the words which pour out zealously, rushing forth as soon as I open my mouth, swelled with conviction, prejudices, vanity, rage, disappointment, and self-pity.

I just want to know why they were standing down there yesterday till midnight and why they had completely disappeared this morning.

I brushed my teeth, combed my hair, employed various sprays unthinkingly, albeit conscientiously, got dressed, same things as yesterday, slacks, sweater—I was expecting no one and would be granted some solitude, that was the best prospect of the day. I couldn't avoid making one more quick trip to the window, again without result. In a way, of course, this was a relief, I told myself, or was I really trying to suggest that I was waiting for them? It was

possible that I had made a fool of myself yesterday evening; someday I would find it embarrassing to think that I had felt my way to the window in the dark room every half hour and peered through a slit in the curtains—embarrassing, I admit. But to what end would three young gentlemen be sitting for hours on end in a white Wartburg directly opposite our window.

Question mark. Kindly take your punctuation more seriously in future, I told myself. As a matter of fact, stick more to harmless agreements in general. It worked before, didn't it? When was that? When there were more exclamation marks than question marks at the ends of sentences? But I wasn't going to get away with easy self-incriminations this time. I put on the kettle. Let's leave the mea culpas to the Catholics. And the pater noster, too. There is no absolution in sight. White, why white of all colors these last days? Why not, as in the weeks before, tomato-red, steel-blue? As if the colors had any meaning at all, or the various makes of car. As if this mysterious plan, which called for cars taking turns, occupying different parking spaces in the first or second row, contained some secret meaning which I could figure out by urgent endeavor; or as if it were worth pondering over what business the occupants of these cars—two or three stout, able-bodied young men in plain clothes, who plied no other trade than to look over at our window while sitting in their car—had with us.

The coffee had to be hot and strong, filter coffee, the boiled egg not too soft; homemade jam was preferred, dark bread. Luxury! Luxury! I thought, as I did every morning upon seeing everything assembled on the table—an everlasting feeling of guilt which penetrates and heightens our every pleasure—those of us who have known want. I

barely heard the news on the Western station (energy crisis, executions in Iran, the strategic arms limitation treaty: themes from the past!), my gaze had settled upon the burglarproof iron bar which barricades the second entrance to our apartment—the door leading from the kitchen to the courtyard via the back stairs. I suddenly remembered that, in my dream, this filthy, narrow, unused stairway full of discarded furniture had been clean and busily populated by all manner of rude people whom I referred to as “riffraff” in my dream thoughts—a word I would never say out loud in front of those wiry, nimble, lemurine men, devoid of all sense of shame, who—as I had always feared so much!—had gained entrance into our kitchen through the break-in-proof back door, were now pushing and shoving at the threshold and trying to force the iron bar, which remained unshakable in its brackets and, oddly enough, was respected by those miserable creatures, although they could easily have slipped through underneath, but instead pressed their bodies against it, while more and more figures, incredibly agile and loquacious, spewed out by an unseen, devilish throat—yes, they seemed flat like cardboard figures—kept pushing from behind. What was it they had said? That we should by no account let them bother us. That we should act as if they weren't even there. That it would be best of all if we forgot them completely. They weren't goading us, they were serious, that's what angered me most in my dream. Since one cannot forbid oneself a dream, nor can one blame oneself, I laughed out loud to prove to myself that I was actually already above all this. My laughter sounded contrived.

Don't panic. My other language, I thought, still trying to kid myself, while I put the dishes in the sink, made

my bed, went back to the front room, and finally sat at my desk—my other language, which had begun to grow but had not yet fully developed, would casually sacrifice the visible to the invisible; would stop describing objects by their appearance—tomato-red, white cars, good heavens!—and would increasingly allow their invisible essence to emerge. This language would be gripping, loving, and protective, that much I thought I could foresee. I would hurt no one but myself. I slowly realized why I could not get beyond these scraps of paper, these individual sentences. I was pretending to dwell on them. In fact, I was not thinking anything.

There they were again.

It was five past nine. They had been there for three minutes, I noticed them right away. I had felt a jolt, a tremble on my inner seismograph, which continued to reverberate. A glance, hardly necessary, confirmed it. Today the color of the car was an unobtrusive green, and inside, three young gentlemen were on duty. Did they swap these gentlemen as they did the cars? And what would I have preferred—that they were always the same or always different? I didn't know them, or rather, yes, I did know one. The one who had recently gotten out of his car and crossed the street in my direction, but only to stand in line at the hot-dog stand below our window, and had returned to the car with three hot dogs on a big paper plate and three rolls in the pockets of his green-gray jacket. To a *blue* car, by the way, with the license plate number . . . I started to look for the paper where I wrote down the license numbers, when I could make them out. This young gentleman or comrade had had dark hair, which was beginning to thin along the part, this I could see from upstairs. For a brief moment I

reveled in the notion of being the first one to notice the young gentleman's encroaching baldness, even before his own wife, who presumably never studied him so attentively from above. I couldn't help imagining how they then sat cozily together in their car (it can be very cozy in a car, especially if it is windy outside, with the odd raindrop to boot), how they ate their hot dogs and weren't even cold, since the motor was keeping them warm. But what did they wash it down with? Did they each bring along a thermos of coffee, like other working men?

Our feelings in situations such as these are complicated. And the right words continued to elude me; I was still using words from the outer circle, they made sense but they didn't make the point, they made use of true facts in order to obscure the truth; I wouldn't be able to gush forth much longer in such a carefree manner, but what are you if you are not carefree? Careworn? I looked up "care" in Hermann Paul's German Dictionary, getting drawn deeper and deeper into the maelstrom of my obsession: "Care" in Middle High German could mean "rubble, seizure, want," even "arrest" in the older legal terminology. Seizure, yes, that hit the nail on the head, seized and held and left to waste away. "And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was heavy with care." Dr. Martin Luther trying to fool me into believing that we could only refuse or accept, could only be friends or foes. Thy word shall be yea, yea and nay, nay.

Anything beyond that is evil. Dr. Luther's tirades against the Pope, that gluttonous pig, then against the peasants, those mad dogs. It is a happy man who can place his enemy outside himself. In my language animal names will be used only for animals; I could never, as others have

done, use the names of pigs and dogs, not even those of ferrets and reptiles, for the young gentlemen out there. I was probably lacking in good, healthy, leveling hatred.

I didn't know them, after all. What did I know about them, anyway? Even the characteristic "leather coats" were an outdated cliché, synthetic parkas having taken over long since—but I couldn't have said whether this uniform had been provided for their field service or whether they got an allowance for wear and tear at the end of the year, and how much this might be. And wasn't it true that one already knew half the person when one knew his working conditions? For example, I would also have been interested in knowing how their daily work schedule was arranged, and the receipt of orders, which is probably what it's called, and whether certain jobs were more popular than others, car duty for example more popular than door duty. And while I was on the subject, whether those who patrol the streets with their shoulder bags really do have walkie-talkies in them, as rumor insists. I sometimes suspected that they had nothing in their bags but sandwiches, which they hid out of the humanly understandable need to impress. A twisted kind of assumption of authority. Of course it was out of the question to go up to one of them and ask politely, Excuse me, what exactly is it that you've got in your bag? Just as one could not ask the men in the cars whether they were equipped with listening devices and, if so, what their range was. Other intimacies, however, were not out of the question; interaction with them was also regulated by a code which one could not learn, though; either you had it or you didn't. For example, I still regretted the fact that I hadn't followed my first impulse right away, back then when it started, on those cold November nights, and brought them

down some hot tea. That could have developed into a habit; we had nothing against each other personally, after all, we were all doing what we had to, we could have struck up a conversation—not about business, God forbid!—but about the weather, about illnesses or family matters.

Enough is enough. Just another example of my shameful need to get along well with all kinds of people. We had drunk the tea ourselves back then, late at night, standing in the dark room by the window where we hung up these very curtains on the following day. I suddenly felt compelled to switch on the light, stand up close to the window, and wave to them. At which point they blinked their headlights three times in quick succession. They had a sense of humor. We had gone to bed a little calmer, a little less tense than usual. Tense? I had never wanted to admit that to myself. But now that I had, perhaps this was the first necessary step toward something inglorious. Wasn't this the way children felt when their angered father had intimated to them by way of a curt "Good night!" that he was not averse to making up? And what else but childlike and childish should one call those incessant interior monologues at which I caught myself, and which all too often ended with the absurd question: What do you want, anyway? I still had so much to learn! Addressing an institution as if it were a person! I was well beyond that early phase, I assured myself, I no longer fell prey to protestations, but since when? One day I had understood that there was no addressee for protestations and attempts at explanation; I had to assume that which I had balked at for such a long time, that the young gentlemen out there were not accessible to me. They were not my kind. They were the messengers of the other. It had been a long time since I had thought of sidling up

to those cars and staring in with a grim expression to meet the opaque gazes of their occupants, whose sole task it must have been to be recognized for what they were and thus provoke anger, better still, fear, which, as we know, makes some people give in and drives others to rash undertakings, these in turn serving as evidence for the necessity of said surveillance. I felt very strongly that someone had to make the attempt to break this vicious circle.

At some point I would be able to talk about this as well in my new free language, although it would be difficult, since it was so banal. The unease. The sleeplessness. The weight loss. The pills. The dreams. It could certainly be described. But to what end? What the world knew as fear was quite different from this. My hair falling out by the bushel. So what? It had grown back thicker than before and the pills lay unused in the drawer. Things always sorted themselves out. The dreams. Well, yes. I did not deny that to myself, but where in the world can people live without nightmares these days? No. Every day I told myself that a privileged life like mine could be justified only by attempting to go beyond the borders of the sayable, knowing full well that border violations of any kind are punished. However, I told myself—becoming aware of the fact that I had been staring for minutes on end at the television tower, which rose above the massive ophthalmological and gynecological hospital block slightly to the right of my field of vision—however, I would draw closer to the border of language only if I felt capable of explaining why the fear did not go away on those days when the cars were present only as phantoms on my retina and not in reality, was not even slighter than on days of apparent surveillance. I would have to come up with something about that, I thought, no matter in what language.

How much more time did I want to give myself, anyway?

Time was one of my cues. One day I had realized that it was perhaps a fundamentally different relationship to time more than anything else that separated me from those young gentlemen outside—they were still standing there, oh yes!—for time to them was worthless; they were wasting it on a pointless, yet no doubt expensive idleness, which was bound to demoralize them in time, but it didn't seem to bother them. On the contrary, I suddenly suspected, it seemed to suit them fine. They were throwing their time out the window heartily with both hands, or did they call what they were doing work? Even that was imaginable. It was imaginable, no, probable that they showed their wives a face from which could be gathered how irreplaceable they had been able to make themselves once again on that day. Rumor had it, however, that sometimes one of them bragged at the supper table, in the presence of his teenage children, about his insights for the day: the human weaknesses of the observed objects, abstruse love affairs, for example, which, if he was allowed to talk about them, could get a lot of people in hot water. Yet he remained as silent as a tomb. They really did remain silent, of that I was convinced. With the exception of bragging fathers. In reality, all of them surely knew that each of them could become superfluous from one second to the next.

Every time I had this thought, I felt chilled like the first time.

The telephone. A friend. Hello, I said. No, he wasn't interrupting any important work. Why not? he said chastisingly. Well, I said, the question couldn't be answered in one sentence. I could feel free to use several sentences, he said. So that they can be written down, I said. But I was

no doubt underestimating their technical capabilities, he said. They could certainly spare a tape recorder for the two of us! What expense, I said.

There followed the kind of laughter which had become our routine upon just such occasions, a little bit provocative, a little bit vain. But what if no one was listening in? What if all our hubris and preening were directed at emptiness? It wouldn't make the slightest difference. I would have to give that some thought.

Did I know how I sounded this morning?

So how did I sound this morning?

Well, said my friend, not exactly thrilled, I would say. Or doth my ear deceive me?

Oh, I said, what else could I be but thrilled when you deign to call me—and so on.

That was how we always talked, circumventing the real text. I couldn't help thinking of the two or three times when the real text actually had slipped out because I didn't have the strength to keep it in, and how his eyes and his voice had changed. How was H. doing? he now asked. Good, I said, he's allowed visitors in the afternoon. And how about us? he asked. When are we going to get together? As soon as possible, I said—the real text. In that case, he said, he would be in the city in the next few days and tell me beforehand when to make the coffee. Certain people whom we both highly esteemed could gladly rack their brains trying to figure out what “coffee” was the code word for.

I do not particularly like these kinds of jokes. Coffee? I said. I thought you preferred tea. Not at all, he said, and I shouldn't get the code all mixed up. *Bon*, I said. And he, after a short pause, with no change of voice: You've got company, eh?

I also didn't like these kinds of questions, but said yes, incapable of lying.

Well, that's just fine, said my friend. See you soon.

Suddenly I heard myself shout into the telephone, Hey, listen! Someday we'll be old, do you realize that?

He had hung up. But I sat back down at my desk and buried my face in my hands. Yes. This is how we spend our few days. I didn't cry. I hadn't cried for quite a long time, come to think of it.

Although I hadn't got any work done yet on that day, I would go shopping now, right in the middle of my work schedule. It was a victory for the others, I wasn't kidding myself, for if there was one ethic I held to, it was the work ethic, not least because it seemed to be capable of balancing out inconsistencies in other ethical systems. I didn't want to give up like those young gentlemen had given up when they let themselves be hired for such thinly disguised non-activity, perhaps due to an ineffaceable penchant for order and subordination, instead of doing an honest day's work.

Now what? Doing other people's thinking for them again? Slipping on shoes, putting on a coat, locking the door twice, preferably three times, if that was possible, no matter how little that would help if things came to a head, as I well knew, for those young gentlemen or their colleagues, specially trained in opening doors, had visited our apartment during our absence at least once, but more likely twice, last summer, of course without taking into account the cleaning tick of Frau C., who wipes away her own footprints when she leaves the apartment after a day's work and naturally became suspicious when clear prints of the profiled soles of a man's shoes, size 41/42, could be seen in some doorways and on the dark parquet floor in the

middle room the next day. Which prompted Frau C., who isn't easily discouraged, to sift a little flour onto the doormat behind the front door "in the old time-tested manner," as she put it, before leaving the apartment, after carefully removing the traces which, as was to be expected, made the footsteps stand out much more prominently the next day. Apart from that, the shards of the bathroom mirror had been in the sink without any natural explanation for these findings having presented itself. Therefore we had to assume that the young gentlemen did not wish to keep their visit to our apartment a secret.

That was called intimidation, said an acquaintance, who purported to be in the know about such things; but were we intimidated? Granted. Of course we spoke very quietly with others in the apartment when certain topics came up (and they always did come up); I turned up the radio during certain conversations and sometimes we unplugged the telephone when we had guests, yet we remained aware of the fact that the measures taken by the others and our reactions to them meshed together like the teeth of a smoothly functioning zipper. Hope could not be gathered from this. Hope could possibly be gathered from the fact that I had not felt at home in my own apartment since last summer.

I went outside. Were they still there? They were there. Would they follow me? They did not follow me. According to our well-informed acquaintance, we had been accorded the lowest level of surveillance, the warning kind, the instructions for those carrying out the task being: Conspicuous presence. Following one's every move and step with one, two, or up to six cars (what expense!) was a totally different level, yet another, secret surveillance which was

employed when the observed object was rated as under serious suspicion. So this did not apply to us? The know-it-all shrugged his shoulders. It was, after all, possible that two different kinds of surveillance be used on one object.

By the way, I could also be followed on foot. I couldn't see any suspicious characters in the display window of the drugstore. I noticed with slight consternation that I was beginning to breathe more easily. I had been assured by a specialist in Russian literature that Akhmatova had had her own personal shadow for twenty years. I pictured this while walking along the Friedrichstrasse unaccompanied and unpursued like a normal human being and couldn't help asking myself what I had done to deserve this privilege. It began to dawn on me how severe and absolute the freedom at the innermost core of total encirclement must be. They hadn't even shown me their instruments, I thought. But what made me think of that? Oh, yes! They were performing *Galileo* at the Berlin Ensemble that evening, it said so in large black letters against a white background, and no one stood in their way, for this was a play from the time when purified dialectics still counted for something, along with the words "positive" and "negative," when there was a reason for speaking the "truth" and it was evil to suppress it; it was evil not to speak of the nasty lie which was harmful and gave the liar a bad conscience, the remains of which have survived even up to this day. A history of bad conscience would have to be included in reflections on the boundaries of the sayable, I thought; with what words does one describe the speechlessness of those who have no conscience, how does language deal with absence, which will tolerate no adjectives or nouns clinging to it, for it is without qualities and certainly lacks a subject in the same way that

a subject without a conscience lacks itself, I asked myself further, but was that at all true? Wasn't I just looking for excuses to banish these young men, who were perhaps not without a conscience after all, from my sympathy, because they had banished me from theirs? Tit for tat. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. My new language would also have to be able to speak of them just as it would have to deal with every failure of language, I said to myself.

I always enjoyed crossing Weidendammer Bridge. Poor old B.B., with his belief in the unbelief he calls "science," with his determined attempts at division with which he cuts a path through the jungle of the cities and countries as if with a hatchet, convinced that the world will break apart into two halves along this wound. But the jungle closes behind him, and the abyss yawns before us. Galileo, fearful and cunning, escapes the Inquisition and saves his work. The Church, which threatens to destroy him, has nonetheless given him the weapon with which he can stand up to it: a belief in the sense of truth. He only had to come to terms with his fear. And so it was purely a question of character as to whether he fought the lie or not. We, who are also full of fear, and non-believers to boot, always fought against ourselves, for we lied and kowtowed and railed and slandered, and we lusted for slavery and pleasure. Only, some knew it and some didn't.

Leaning over the railing, I saw the ducks and seagulls and a barge with a black, red, and gold flag. There was a wind as usual. In the middle of the bridge hangs the cast-iron Prussian eagle, which stared at me mockingly and which I lightly touched in passing. As always when I crossed this bridge, I remembered the endless walks I had taken through these streets back then, more than two years ago,

and I remembered my shameless longing for peace at almost any price and that I hadn't even been able to bear the memory of joy and happiness, and that I used to burst into tears spontaneously whenever they showed a film on television which portrayed a hope I had also once nourished, and I would never forget the moment—I was standing in front of the display window of a run-of-the-mill drugstore, lost in thought—when the realization that pain was the driving force within me struck like a bolt of lightning. I hadn't recognized it. Pure, raging pain had taken hold, had taken possession of me and made of me another person.

This was the same time that the young gentlemen appeared at our door, although they couldn't have known that we would never meet. While they rose out of their underground, I sank down into another and found myself on unknown terrain. One hand had gripped my heart, another had touched my eyes. I was in foreign territory. For weeks on end I wandered through the nameless streets of a nameless city. Winter came, slush, sleet, a damp cold that chilled me to the bone, passing through my flesh as if it wasn't there. Yet it still retained the dull memory of previous joys, bread, wine, love, the smell of the children, the images of landscapes, cities, faces. And now there seeped from it such desolation that I was sure a cool waft emanated from me which anyone could feel.

Without a thought in my mind, I walked the short distance along the low stone balustrade, which is interrupted by the beginning of the path to the door of a certain glass pavilion—referred to as "the tear bunker" in common parlance—where the transformation of citizens of different countries, including mine, into passers-through, tourists, exiting and entering visitors, was accomplished in a light

which fell from very high narrow windows and reflected off greenish tiled walls, a light in which the assistants of the master who controlled this city, dressed as policemen or customs officers, exercised the right to bind or release. If its outer appearance corresponded to its function, this building would loom up like a monster instead of being a normal building of stone, glass, and iron struts surrounded by a well-kept lawn upon which one was naturally forbidden to tread. I had also had to learn my mistrust of such well-kept objects, had understood that they all belonged to the lord who ruled my city without opposition: the ruthless advantage of the moment.

Only then did I realize that a secret fire had glowed in the interior of this city before, I didn't know its name yet, but ever since the day when it was to be extinguished, when all its accompanying fires were to be suffocated and each of its hidden sparks stamped out, I had been hopelessly under its spell. As of yet I had to live with all the others in a lost city, in a merciless city which had not been saved, sunk to the bottom of insignificance. At night I heard the stomp stomp of the robot who laid his iron hand on my breast. The city had turned from a place into a non-place, without history, without vision, without magic, spoiled by greed, power, and violence. It divided its time between nightmares and senseless activities—like those kids in the cars who were more and more coming to symbolize my city.

Now I needed to talk to a real flesh-and-blood person. I went into the small liquor store beneath the streetcar bridge in the Friedrichstrasse where the saleswoman, an elderly woman with thin, graying hair, seemed to have been waiting just for me. She struck up a conversation about the

red champagne which she actually had in stock, the quality of which was not at all appreciated by all her customers. Satisfied, she took down a second bottle from the shelf for me.

Had she been working here for a long time? Oh, her entire life. Either here or around here. She was an original Berliner.

Then she could surely tell a story or two.

Oh, as far as that was concerned—she wouldn't know where to begin! The most curious things had happened right in front of her eyes. The woman loved the word "curious," she kept repeating it. I wondered whether I could listen to still more curious stories, but I feigned interest in the saleswoman's memories, which could only be gruesome—as, in fact, they were—however, what really surprised me was, the woman knew it. She was an exception. I first heard it in her tone of voice and then I understood: she was really still attached to her Jewish girl friend, with whom she had spent her youth, with whom she had ridden the streetcar from the Alexanderplatz to the Kudamm every morning—she to the department store where she was an apprentice, her girl friend (her name was Elfriede, Elfi, imagine, a Jewess named Elfi!) to the bank to add up columns of figures. She found it boring. When was this? 1935, '36 . . . Don't look at me like that. Elfi's boyfriend, the SS commander, had offered to get her out, but she said, No, only if my family can go too, otherwise no. The guy was crazy about her. Of course it never could have worked out, but you always know better once it's too late. I guess he must have organized something for her anyway, the talk was Holland and they must have caught on. In any case, one fine day, as we are coming around the corner of the

Joachimsthaler street, where he always parked his car and waited for Elfi so that he could catch at least one of her glances for the day, there's his car again, and as we go by, we see that it is full of gentlemen with those trenchcoats and those sporty hats, and Elfi's friend is sitting next to the driver and looking straight ahead, and I whisper to Elfi through my teeth, Don't turn around! Just keep going straight ahead and, whatever you do, don't start running! And we pulled it off. Well, she never heard anything more about the guy. You can't have everything, maybe he finally caught on— The champagne costs thirty marks.

The woman didn't seem inclined to go on talking on her own—she had to be drawn out. Elfi? Of course they came and got her. It was '42 when they took away the last load of Jews from Berlin. With her whole family. I personally never found another girl friend like her; you get choosy with time, don't you agree? And the things that can keep going through your head for decades. We could have hidden one in a pinch, but an entire family . . .

It was all madness, she shouted after me. When I think back on it, pure madness.

I didn't want to get into all of that again. I stared blindly at the window display in the train station bookstore, circled the newspaper stand without success, and decided to go to the new department store in the Japan Center, after all. Shopping, that time-honored painkiller, didn't work, but I got some buckthorn juice for H., who had told me he was always thirsty. The women standing in the checkout line were almost all too fat and had bad posture. By force of habit, I looked for that one face which would turn toward me when spoken to but did not find it until a young, singularly plain-looking woman let another older woman

ahead of her in line because she couldn't stand on her feet any longer. So it is possible, after all, I thought. It had to be. Still, that strong, isolating feeling of otherness would not go away, but I knew that I should not get hung up on it. Even if the people ahead of me in line didn't know anything, hardly suspected anything, worse still, didn't want to know anything—you couldn't let your aim fall short, it was better to aim higher to reach them, further, toward the future.

All right, all right. I was getting on my nerves. My last stop was the post office, to withdraw money. Anyone who knew me could have seen how irritable I was. Everything was too much for me now and everything took too long now, although I was wondering at the same time where I was rushing to and what it was that I so hurriedly sought. Always this deep, dark double life. The thrill of the uncertain, which can be as addictive as a drug. That I always felt the compulsion to express everything. Meanwhile, I had long since spotted my old friend and he me, of that I was sure. Our gazes had collided for a fraction of a second, but Jürgen M. pretended not to know me: his gaze had retreated a fraction of a fraction of a second earlier than mine. I was used to that. Was I ever: the curtain lowering before the eyes of the other; the whites of a friend's eyes glazing over like those of a fish; the clouding of the lens. We have never seen one another, never met. All right. It's better that way. Just go over to the other counter. Busy yourself with the papers you have to show the post-office clerk, shuffle about unnecessary forms, anything, as long as you don't run into me at the exit. But the other, this time it's Jürgen M., can relax: I'll play along. I'm already outside. There is no way I am going to turn around.

How long has it actually been since I went up to an old friend, certain in the knowledge that he wanted to see me? Since I was the first to hold out my hand? Since I started up a conversation? Since I withdrew? And now the big question: How many people have to cross over to the other side of the street, to get caught up in the handiest window display, to change tables in a restaurant and turn their backs on you at a meeting before you understand and behave accordingly? How often do you have to think "coincidence" before you're prepared to think "on purpose"? I couldn't help grinning, because I'm always happy to discover that statistics can't answer the real questions.

No great loss, I thought. Jürgen M. was no great loss, so why did it bother me that he was avoiding me? Why did it bother me every time it happened? Why didn't one toughen up? What was wrong with me? Which mechanism was out of order?

Now one thing at a time, just relax. Jürgen M. When was the last time I saw this Jürgen M.? Quite some time ago, that much is certain. No doubt under pleasanter circumstances. Hadn't I teased him about the loud pattern of his necktie? But all he did was make an ironic bow and hand me the glass of champagne he had just taken from a tray, take a new one for himself, and make a toast. Long time no see but still recognized. Did I like the paintings, he wanted to know; So-so, I said. It was that exhibition opening in the Marstall, things weren't going badly, people were running into other people they hadn't seen for a long time and asking the standard questions about their situations, as if they had spent the previous years in different countries. We *had* spent the years in different countries. I played according to the rules as usual, whenever it was

possible, and asked Jürgen M. what he was up to at the moment. Me? he said, oh, you know, the usual daily grind.

That was all he had actually said, when I thought about it. Jürgen M., a fellow student's boyfriend, for whom a brilliant future had been predicted by his friends. Jürgen M., the philosopher. Hadn't he drawn attention to himself with a few controversial publications? I remembered that he was thinner and wore his hair parted on the side back then and hadn't been going out with my girl friend for a long time—first I lost track of him, then of her. Was he still writing for the appropriate periodicals? Had that book he had incessantly talked about ever come out? Was he a failure, disappointed in himself and the world; was this perhaps the reason why he avoided meeting former acquaintances? Should I have been the one to approach him? But hadn't there been something else about Jürgen M.?

Someone walking behind me whistled so loudly and shrilly that it echoed throughout the streetcar underpass and drowned out the sound of the traffic. What was he whistling anyway, I definitely knew that song: "We swore to Karl Liebknecht, we give Rosa Luxemburg our hand," the man whistled. I started to cry. This had to stop. And it would stop, unfortunately, probably very soon. The man whistling the song, a broad, heavysset man around forty, was wearing a black corduroy suit like the ones carpenters wear, but without the shiny buttons; he strode whistling up to the door of the little bakery, not caring whether people were staring at him, and disappeared inside.

Could I imagine a woman at this man's side? I could not. There are always certain women with whom I can't imagine any man, but this time it was the other way around. I had no trouble imagining a woman at Jürgen M.'s side,

one of those stylish women who come twelve to the dozen, for he could only have left my girl friend, who was difficult but still something special, for that kind of woman. Or had my girl friend left him back then? Hadn't we all been a little puzzled about why the two of them had separated after all those years?

What did I care about Jürgen M., dammit. Was he even worth thinking about? Hadn't he written that disgusting article about his professor back then, during similarly difficult times! It was just like me to forget, not to do what I had set out to: never to speak to him again. To think that I talked to him because of that stupid tie and then was surprised at how eagerly he had given me his champagne! He had quite simply been relieved that I spoke to him at all. But now the shoe was on the other foot, things weren't going well, no, they really weren't, and Jürgen M. could certainly afford not to know me. What is more, he wasn't allowed to speak to me. Perhaps he even knew that . . .

Now one thing at a time. Just relax. What could he know? What could a man like Jürgen M. know, above and beyond the scanty, official statements and the elaborate rumors which were possibly more than enough for him? After all, somebody else apart from my friends had to know about the existence of the young gentlemen outside my door. The person who had stationed them there, for example.

There it was again, my obsession; I recognized it immediately, but I couldn't help wallowing in it joyfully: that there must be someone who knew everything about me except for the really important things. All the information about me—gathered by the young gentlemen, the telephone tappers, the mail spies—had to come together on some desk

or in some head somewhere. What if it was in the head of Jürgen M.?

There seemed to be some likelihood of this, for my second spontaneous thought was: Then he'd finally get what he needed. I was astonished at this second thought. Since when had I had something against Jürgen M.? Since when did I think I knew what he needed? What else had I filed away on Jürgen M. without even noticing it? Jürgen M., the speechmaker—indeed, he had been that as well. Was that before or after that business with his professor? I didn't remember anymore. A reputation for straightforwardness preceded him, and it was true, he was straightforward, but everything he said impressed me as a justification for past or future activities. I remembered how fascinated many of our colleagues were by Jürgen M. Finally, someone who tells it like it is. He received lots of applause, as I recall, and I wanted to go home quickly, deeply dejected as I was, but he was lying in wait for me at the door and dragged me off to the beer parlor. The crowd at our table grew, the evening was long. I hadn't known that Jürgen M. drank. When he started babbling on uncontrollably, I made the mistake of asking him, Why do you drink? His head whipped around to face me as if I had given him a slap. On top of things as usual, madam! he said. The man hated me. Did I do something wrong? I said helplessly, and that one sentence broke through the dam Jürgen M. had built up around himself, and there streamed out an unstoppable confession which I was forced to listen to but did not want to hear, for I knew: after this he would not only hate me, he would be a danger to me. But I was caught up in the spell of his fury and my own curiosity, and so I discovered that he, Jürgen M., had been spying on me and my life for years.

That he knew every single word I had said or written—above all, every word I had refused to say or write; that he knew all my relationships as intimately as an outsider can possibly know the relationships of another person; that he had thought and felt his way into my very being with an intensity that staggered me and—this drove him mad with rage—that he thought I was successful and happy. And above all proud. Proud, I asked dumbfoundedly, how so? Insofar as I seemed to think that one could have everything I had without selling one's soul. Come come, now, I said, if only to alleviate the tension, we're no longer living in the Middle Ages, are we? Luck wasn't with me that evening; I kept giving him the cues he seemed to have been waiting for, since now he really got going. No longer in the Middle Ages! There you have it. That was precisely what I had chosen to believe and probably actually did believe, rather than, as he had thought for a long time, shrewdly parading around with it as a motto behind which to hide and take all kinds of liberties, for who could contradict such a motto nowadays? Prancing around on that tightrope of yours with your head in the clouds and never falling off, said Jürgen M. But now, just between the two of us, he wanted to pull my head out of the clouds. Not in the Middle Ages? You're wrong, madam. We are in the Middle Ages. Nothing has changed except for appearances. And nothing is going to change. And should you wish to rise above the ignorant masses like someone in the know, then you'll have to sell your soul—that's the way it's always been. And if I wanted to know the truth, blood would flow in the process as well, even if it wasn't one's own. Not always one's own.

Now I remembered what I had suddenly understood back then: they had him in the palm of their hand. And I

remembered how my pride—he was probably right about that, talented psychologist that he was—drove me to ask him quietly, Why don't you quit? And how he turned as white as a sheet, rolled his eyes, brought his face up so close to mine that I could smell his beer breath, and, in a clear and stone-sober voice, said three words: I—am—afraid. Right after that he played the drunk again; I got up, knocked on the table, and left. I didn't see Jürgen M. for years after that, forgot the episode which he will never forget, and now he no longer feels the need to know me, sits in that house with all those telephones and collects all the news about me to his heart's content, news unavailable to anyone else, and offers his thanks each morning to a fate which has placed him in a situation whereby he can satisfy his passionate desire and be useful to society at the same time.

Just like me, in my own place.

I walked blindly across the Weidendammer Bridge in the opposite direction and couldn't help thinking of the files in which all the information about me was no doubt hoarded. But first it had to be sorted, formulated, and possibly dictated to a secretary. Or how else was one to picture it? Could I imagine Jürgen M. arriving at his office punctually at eight in the morning and reaching for a thin folder with my name on it—my imagination allowed me this one small vanity—first thing? Therein was the report on the previous day; Jürgen M. concentrated with visible pleasure. Aha! Yesterday—this was today—she had a telephone call at 9:45 a.m. Caller: Here the name of my friend appeared. There followed the transcript of our discussion, at which Jürgen M., who was now no doubt in a position to be amused, would grin. He was also in a position to be condescending. "Codeword," "coffee," "tea"—oh, you poor

amateurs! Jürgen M. was a pro, if my picture of him was correct, and being as intelligent as he was, he was bound to be struck with horror at the futility of his occupation one fine morning while reading the two-hundred-and-thirty-seventh report by his informants. For whenever he leafed through all the files, reading a line here, a shorthand note there, and then the transcript of a conversation, and asked himself what he now knew about the object in question that he hadn't known before, he would honestly have to say, Nothing. And if he furthermore asked himself what he had accomplished, he would likewise have to say, Nothing.

But I knew better. He had accomplished a lot, the dear, quite a lot, but there was no way he could know what, for that was something his spies hadn't heard and his tape recorders hadn't recorded. For it is made of too fine a fabric; it slips through their fingers, not even the tightest net can entrap it, and when I now asked myself what this mysterious "it" actually was, I found that I had no name for it; dissatisfied with myself and unable to justify what I was about to do, I crossed the parking lot, headed toward the bottle-green car (they were still there, what else had I expected?)—it was 11:15—I brushed by the car and surprised the three young gentlemen in the middle of their breakfast. The one at the steering wheel had his lunch box on his lap, the one next to him was taking a bite out of an apple, and the one in back was gulping down a bottle of bitter lemon soda with abandon. He did not choke when he saw my face, he just kept on drinking unconcernedly, but all three of them put on a glassy-eyed stare, as if by silent command. Maybe, I thought, as I ceremoniously crossed the parking lot to the mailbox as if I had some letters to mail, maybe they learn that glassy stare at their training school. They must learn

some practical skills apart from social sciences. Maybe it's written on the weekly course agenda: Glassy Stare Training 101.

And what if it isn't Jürgen M. but someone else?

I knew the voice. Good morning, dear self-censor, haven't heard from you in a long time. Well then, who could it be if not Jürgen M., in your opinion? An unprejudiced civil servant who doesn't even know you. I think I would even prefer that. Prefer is good. All the same. Someone who has no personal interest in me. Who has nothing to prove to me. Who does not want to beat me at my own original game.

Like Jürgen M.? Wake up!

I knew from experience that interior dialogue is preferable to a long-drawn-out interior monologue. And so I let my inner censor think about what was spurring Jürgen M. on: namely, that he was dying to prove to me that not only a writer could find out everything there was to know about a person—he could do it as well, in his own way. He as well could make himself the lord and master of his objects like any run-of-the-mill author. Yet since his objects are made of flesh and blood and do not exist only on paper, like my own, *he* is the actual master, the real lord.

And you, said the unwelcome voice, which can be very tactless, you want to compete with him? Want to pick up the tossed gauntlet? Show him who the master is? Face it, your spotless Jürgen has already won.

But what else am I supposed to do? I asked myself, while I opened up the mailbox in the hallway and took out the mail and magazines. Up the stairs, toward the hallway mirror, the one that isn't smashed yet. The fact that I was

pale didn't mean much, a bit short of breath, that's all. Good luck in your middle age, the voice wished me. Impudent, was my reply. By the way, wasn't there something touching about the young man drinking soda in the car down there? I should not play down such undignified activity. So we were still talking about dignity? Still? But we were just starting.

But who told us what dignity is?

I started reading my mail after the usual preliminaries, that is, after making sure that there were no unpleasant return addresses, no one I was afraid of. After holding the envelopes up to the light in such a way that the shiny glued edge, which evidently was caused by sealing the envelopes a second time, became visible. The glued edges of the envelopes were very rarely less smooth than usual and hardly ever did I find a page stuck to the inside of an envelope. Such slip-ups should be avoidable. Somewhere—probably right out in the open—there had to be a huge house (or maybe there were smaller houses in all the districts?) where wagonloads of mail were delivered daily, to be sorted by busy female hands on a long assembly line and directed to other floors according to criteria unfathomable to the likes of us, where even more women steamed open the letters—or had they come up with more effective methods in the meantime?—carefully, oh so carefully, and conveyed them to the sanctum sanctorum in which skillful colleagues no doubt made use of the photocopy machines we so sorely missed in our libraries and publishing houses. An army of employees granted neither recognition by the press nor a holiday in their honor like the miners, the teachers, or the employees of the public health service; a steadily growing swarm of people who had

to resign themselves to working in the shadows. The word “shadow” got lodged in my mind; I wrote it down on a scrap of paper. The occupation of large sections of the population is relegated to the shadows. I saw crowds of people sinking into a deep shadow. Their lot did not seem enviable to me.

I put aside the newspapers after skipping over the headlines. There were three letters I still hadn't opened. I knew who had sent them, although one of them had neither a return address nor a stamp; the sender, a very young poet, was in the habit of putting his letters in my mailbox in person. I had never seen him. Going by his poems—these new ones had been written in a premilitary training camp—I pictured a delicate, soft-spoken boy with gentle blue eyes who suffered without being able to defend himself and survived by writing poetry. I read the boy's poems reluctantly, for I could not help him; I wrote him evasive responses and sometimes I was furious at him, even more so at myself. He could have been my son. I believed I could foresee the fate awaiting him. They would stop at nothing. The young gentlemen standing in front of my door would not hesitate to pass through his door. That was the difference between the two of us—a major difference. A moat. Would I have to jump over it?

Now we were finally getting down to the right questions, that certain voice said to me. You could recognize them by the fact that they provided a certain satisfaction along with pain. Once again Mr. Know-It-All seemed to know it all.

Weren't there days when I craved these questions? So what? Today wasn't such a day, in any case.

My partner claimed to be informed about that as well. It just seemed to be one of those days for me. I told

him to butt out. Okay, okay. After all, he hadn't been appointed my judge. What, then? My companion, was his laconic reply, to which I could only add sarcastically, My personal companion. The insinuation didn't faze him in the least. In a rage, I demanded to know who had appointed him, and he answered indifferently, You did yourself, sister. If you would please keep that in mind.

I myself. I couldn't get past those two words for a long time. I myself. Who was that? Which of the multiple beings from which "myself" was composed? The one that wanted to know itself? The one that wanted to protect itself? Or that third one that was still tempted to dance to the same tune as the young gentlemen there outside my door? Hey, buddy, which of the three are you siding with? At this my companion grew silent, out of sorts but helpful. That was what I needed: to be able to believe that one day soon I would have completely detached and expelled that third one; that that was what I really wanted; and that, in the long run, it would be easier to bear those young gentlemen out there than the third one in myself.

Why was it that, for some time now, each and every choice I was presented with was only a choice between bad and worse? Was it simply that one learned to see more clearly with those gentlemen outside the door?

Procrastination? It was about time to open the second letter, from one of my closest friends. The one who had supposedly been employed and assigned to me by the others for a long time, according to the insinuations of another friend. If this was true, they could have spared themselves the mail and telephone surveillance, the hidden microphones and the young gentlemen outside our windows. This friend would be more effective than the lot of

them. Jürgen M. could toss all the other transcripts and tapes into the wastepaper basket and needed only to file away my friend's reports. It wasn't that they could be dangerous to me in the bureaucratic sense of the word. In a deeper sense, however, there could hardly have been anything more dangerous for me. Without a doubt, Jürgen M. could bask in my innermost thoughts; above all, however, there would be no relying on anybody, and the pull toward the dark side of life, of which I was strongly aware once again, would grow stronger still, perhaps all too seductive, perhaps irresistible, and the place toward which I was being drawn would no longer be called "life." But what was the name of that which no longer was life?

No. I didn't want to read the letter just now.

Slow and steady now. One step at a time. And relax.

Are they still out there?

They are, and they'll stay there today as well, you know that.

But what is the point? If he tells them everything, anyway?

Now sit still and listen. Stubbornness is one thing, but a cool head is better. All right, let's take our friend. Suppose he was forced to comply with their wishes.

Forced to?

Forced to! You and your damned pride again! What could he do? Pour out his heart to us? So that we'll never ever be able to have a relaxed conversation with him again?

What else?

Holy simplicity! Pretend to carry out his orders, for example. Tell them only what they already know. Don't give them a handle against you or against himself. Walk a tightrope.

Trapeze artists, I said sorrowfully to myself inside myself, we are all trapeze artists. But in that case I don't want him for a friend.

Once a princess-on-a-pea, always a princess-on-a-pea. And on top of that, how do you think he should get away from them, and with whose help?

You don't mean—

Exactly. Only with your help.

If he even wants it.

Why shouldn't he want it? You know his history.

My friend wrote from H., where he was attending a conference, that he longed to sit in my kitchen, drink tea, and talk with me to his heart's content. If that is meant to be a hint that there are no bugs hidden in our kitchen . . . All right, I'm ashamed of myself.

I sat down at my desk and wrote my friend that I was presently in the middle of a difficult phase. Thoughts were surfacing in me which I myself found frightening. We could talk about it sometime soon when we were drinking tea together in my kitchen.

Who knows, I thought, and my inner companion was angered at my reservation. I asked, Should I let him into my kitchen without reservation? and he said, Without reservation. But he wouldn't notice a thing; I would act perfectly natural, I am good at that. And even open, to a certain degree.

That splendid inner voice remained silent, silent, silent.

There was one letter left, the most conspicuous of them all, a long white rectangle. This one I hadn't examined for suspicious signs; if they were there, I didn't want to know about them. An official letter. I absentmindedly slit open

the envelope with a letter opener. The necessary seconds, the seconds I needed to take out and unfold the letter were sufficient to pass review on a chain of remote thoughts. Pushkin. The collected letters which had just been published. His rage upon discovering that the czarist mail censors had opened one of his letters to his wife. His pathos: not even the intimate exchange of thoughts between spouses was sacred to them! His overreaction: that he could not write to his wife for a long time thereafter. And my spontaneous laughter upon reading this, my feeling of superiority: Oh, those oversensitive poets of the nineteenth century!

When was it that I stopped writing confidential and intimate letters? That I had to force myself to write letters at all? I no longer knew. When had the period of the "as if" letters begun—when I had decided to write as if no one was intercepting my mail; as if I was writing freely, as if I was writing confidentially. I no longer knew. All I knew was, I was ruined as far as spontaneous letters were concerned, and the contact with distant correspondents was fading. Could I still feel disappointment at this? Horror? Hadn't I come to accept it? They're succeeding, I thought. And how.

The letter had an impressive letterhead and was brief. The man who had written it was employed by the Bureau of Letterheads and wished to present himself as a respectable person. I was meant to gather from the letter that he would remain a respectable person, even in difficult times; he would not abandon me, even in difficult times. Is that all? I thought, half relieved, half disappointed, and no doubt unfairly. After all, he had written to me—on official paper!—that it would be no problem at all to "work