

Sample Translation

The Archives

(De ordening)

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Translated by Ina Rilke

Headword: Train (October 1944)

A roar rips through the sky. Her throat tightens. The train comes to a juddering halt and in the ensuing melée she grips Joris by the hand as they surge ahead in a mass of elbows and shoulders. The older officer wearing the regulation cap takes her arm and steers her forward. Schnell! Low-flying aircraft! Dazzling lights dip from the sky like fireworks, wafting slowly, gracefully in the wind. While she hurries along among passengers scattering in all directions, the engine bursts into flame. The officer is still close by. He grabs hold of Joris with one hand and waves the other in front of him as if to clear a path through a swarm of insects. Together with the boy he drops into a deep furrow in the dark earth. She follows suit and finds herself knee-deep in cold water. The officer pins her against the sloping side and shields the boy with one flap of his greatcoat. She stares up at the illuminated sky. The roar comes back. Four, five planes skim over the train, the land, spewing fire on the petrified bodies below. For minutes on end they huddle in the ditch without moving. Behind them, in the fields, they can hear people groaning. And someone screaming, ‘Herr Gott, hilf uns!’

Then the officer says: ‘I’m an engineer.’ He points to his shoulder, but the insignia on his uniform are impossible to make out in the dark. ‘I have built bridges, and also roads. That is all. Verstehen Sie? Where are you heading?’

‘To Berlin, we know someone who has relatives near there, where we can stay for a while. Until things get better.’

‘Do you believe they’ll get better?’

‘Yes, don’t you?’

‘Bridges. You must understand. Bridges, roads, transformer stations. That is all. Things are not going to get better. Not in Holland and not in Berlin either.’

‘Don’t say that. My husband holds an important position. He has information, he...’

‘For three years I drifted further and further away from home, building bridges, new headquarters, on and on. But for the past four months I have done

nothing but blow things up. And here I am, almost back home again.’ He falls silent, draws himself up a little and stares at the burning locomotive, his big, blond head seized by some recollection.

‘I have nothing to do with this whole accursed mess. I’m an engineer. Verstehen Sie?’

All around her dark figures begin to scramble to their feet and make their way back to the train. She is suddenly aware of the cold water in her shoes and the smell of the sticky mud. She straightens up but the officer restrains her.

‘Better wait a while, sometimes they come back.’

‘My shoes,’ she says.

‘What?’

‘They’re wet, and my stockings...’

He averts his face. She hears him chuckle strangely.

Then he opens his greatcoat wide to let Joris out. The boy nestles into her, smothering his low, dry panting in her chest.

‘It makes no difference, ma’am, eastward, westward, northward... it makes no difference any more.’

She gropes for words to counter his defeatist talk, to dismiss it. But the bulky figure of the man, black as a shadow, drains her, leaving a frightened, wordless emptiness. He reminds her of long ago, when she was fifteen and the only one of all her friends not to be invited to the party at Soestdijk Palace. That afternoon she had asked herself if she had done something wrong, if she had been mistaken about her position, about who she was. It was the first time she had felt that frightening emptiness inside her. And now, lowering her eyelids against the fiery afterglow, she wonders again if there had been some mistake, if she had got it all wrong. No, she tells herself, I had only beaten Juliana at tennis. That was the reason.

Now the officer draws himself up to his full height and helps her and Joris out of the ditch. On the way back to the train she steps on something soft and slippery. She stumbles, doesn’t dare look back.

Returning to her compartment, she notices that her fur coat has been stolen. The shopping bag containing fresh milk, bread and roast chicken has vanished, too. She brushes the bits of glass from the shattered window off her seat and sits down.

'Bridges, roads, transformer stations,' repeats the officer, who has reoccupied his seat facing her.

He points to his insignia again. 'Verstehen Sie?' His face is the colour of red brick.

'My coat has gone. And our food's been stolen too. All of it.'

'Valuables should be kept on the person,' he says, opening his heavy Eastern Front greatcoat and extracting a piece of bread and a dirty carrot from the inside pocket. Without speaking he hands her his provisions. 'Berlin is a long way yet, the boy must eat.'

He wraps himself tightly in his coat and slumps back on his seat. Shards of glass crunch under his weight. He starts humming a tune and stares out at the night through the star-shaped holes in the window. The humming changes imperceptibly into a listless, monotonous singing. 'Ich hatt' ei-nen K-me-ra-den.' The eyelids in the massive square face droop. Still singing he falls asleep.

The car was parked in front of the villa, flush with the steps leading up to the terrace where Hector had spent so many hours gnawing thick branches this summer. But there was no sign of Hector now. Hanna had taken him with her when she went home on the moped the evening before.

Early in the morning Andreas and I stowed our bags and the widow's leather suitcase in the boot. She wanted to keep the wicker basket with refreshments next to her on the back seat, along with a small cushion she normally kept on her chair in the drawing room. Andreas slid behind the wheel and I sat next to him. A Michelin map of Switzerland lay on the wooden dashboard.

For the last time we followed the tree-lined avenue with the half-hidden villas, and in my memory the widow held her face up close to the window and gazed out at the silvery morning dew glistening on the leaves and the grass.

Less than an hour and a half later we reached Zevenaar, where we crossed the border. I kept my eyes fixed on the landscape which did not change until we reached the Ruhr district, where it was transformed into black pyramid-shaped slag heaps, chimney stacks, snarls of concrete viaducts sliding under and over each other, dark waterways, and then the first chalets, the first intimation of tranquillity and solid bourgeois values. Cologne, the banks of the Rhine, then Bonn and the foothills of the Siebengebirge.

The names of the towns and villages we passed put the widow in mind of holidays and trips in the old days, of people she had known in the past. ‘What was the name of that town again? Koningswinter, ah yes, Koningswinter. A lovely little place on the Rhine. Ever been there, Andreas?’

‘No, never.’

‘We rode donkeys all the way up to the Drachenfels. Leni was there too. Dear old Leni. She’s still going strong, you know.’

Leni. Hearing her name spoken switched a slide projector on in my head, and I saw a black-and-white photograph of the widow in a classical pose, taken from a low angle. There were some ruins on a hillside in the right background and the taut outline of her youthful chin and cheek was starkly defined against the high clear sky. ‘For my dear friend Lotte.’ Signed by Leni Riefenstahl.

March 1943. Bonn. Corresponding diary entry: ‘Leni is convinced every single man is in love with her.’

Our journey into that vast, ever more lovely countryside was actually an excursion into her past, I reflected. Into her past and into my archives.

We stopped for petrol and then pulled into the adjoining parking area, where the widow and I strolled about for a bit while Andreas checked the oil level. She linked her right arm through mine and clasped her thin fingers around my wrist, not so much for support as for physical closeness, it seemed.

‘Rather pleasant, isn’t it, with just the three of us?’

Fine wrinkles appeared on her upper lip as she turned to face me.

I nodded.

I believe that all three of us were enjoying ourselves that day. We delighted in the charming German landscape and in the car with its excellent springs and soft leather upholstery. Once again the widow praised Andreas' smooth, controlled manner of driving. She much preferred his driving to that of her husband's personal chauffeur, she declared. 'He never caused an accident, but still it wasn't very pleasant to be driven by Leo. It simply wasn't a velvet ride. Good driving is like velvet.' I envisaged the said Leo on the day she boarded the train to Germany: sweating under his peaked cap as he hauled far too many suitcases and travelling bags out of the courthouse limousine and loaded them onto a porter's trolley. Amersfoort. 17 October 1944. Corresponding diary entry: 'Tomorrow afternoon Joris and I will take the train to Kremmen. He's looking forward to the journey. "We're going on holiday," I told him.'

She took a certain pleasure in opening her wicker basket at regular intervals to serve us roast beef sandwiches, almond cake baked by Hanna and coffee from her thermos. Late in the afternoon, a little way past Karlsruhe, she propped her cushion between her head and the window and dozed off. The low rays of the sinking sun through the windscreen cast flecks of gold on her cheeks and on her eyelids. Her breathing was soft. Her hand rested on the picnic basket. Later, each time I thought back to our journey, I saw her as a child, safely dreaming on the back seat.

We turned into a layby, but she did not wake up. Andreas and I got out of the car and strolled idly past parties of holidaymakers at the wooden picnic tables. We paused at a deserted seesaw. He put his arm around my waist. Behind us the traffic whooshed by. Ahead there was a tall fence with an endless stretch of dark forest beyond. We were shut in by the fence and the motorway, but I did not feel trapped. That afternoon anything seemed possible.

'We'll be at the border in under two hours,' Andreas said, gazing at the deep green haze of the forest advancing like a cloud up the hill toward the clear summer sky.

'Basel,' I said to myself. Then I turned round and stared at the car, which was parked a little way away; with its streamlined curves and chrome finish it cut a

stylish figure amid the uniformity of more recent models. A shadowy, motionless figure occupied the back seat. ‘Her life is one great lie.’ I said.

‘What brought this on, all of a sudden?’ asked Andreas.

‘Last night I read Ewald’s farewell letter to her. She betrayed him.’

‘She betrayed him? That’s impossible, surely.’

‘Him as well as herself.’

I explained briefly what I had discovered.

Our eyes were fixed on the blurry figure dozing inside the car.

‘Suddenly I see her differently,’ I said.

‘Because she betrayed him?’

‘Because I know her secret. Odd, isn’t it? No matter how much time you spend with people, you don’t get to know them until you discover their secret.’

‘Come now, my sweet, don’t look so glum. Shall I confess my secret to you?’

‘You’re a serial killer.’

‘Only in leap years. No, my real secret is that I can’t pee in a urinal if there’s someone in the next stall. No matter how great the need, as soon as another chap comes in and stands next to me, I dry up.’

‘Are you scared of being groped?’

‘Not at all. It’s got nothing to do with me. It’s my kidneys, I have extremely shy kidneys.’

‘Tell me, Andreas,’ I said, looking round, ‘what are you, me and those shy kidneys of yours doing in this layby? I mean: what are we doing here?’

‘Let me jog your memory: we’re on our way to Switzerland.’

‘It’s all so weird. Here we are, and there she is fast asleep in the car.’

‘Do you want to give up?’

‘That’s not the point. It’s just that sometimes I lose track of what’s going on.’

‘It’s simple: these people are on their way to Switzerland.’

‘What’s your real reason for going, honestly?’

‘Glamour, remember. Some glamour for a change.’

‘Rubbish. Tell me why.’

‘Perhaps the guy wants to find out how far he can go.’

‘And me, what about me?’

He reflected for a moment, brought his face up close to mine and whispered his reply in my ear.

Until then I had reckoned it was the utter pointlessness of the undertaking that I found attractive. We would drive to Switzerland with the widow, we would stay at the Baur au Lac Hotel and, with any luck, we would get to visit number 36 Bahnhofstrasse, and our three-day excursion would end either with a mystery cleared up or with an anticlimax. And after that? I had no idea. At any rate I had not taken Andreas’ hint about never going back too seriously. If I had had the slightest feeling that the whole thing, the drive, the refurbished car, us escorting the old lady, might be part of some scheme, I doubt if I would have gone along with it, but an innocent trip that would lead nowhere was the kind of thing that appealed to me in those days. I had come along because I had been asked, because there was no effort involved, I had agreed because it made no difference to me, because I couldn’t see why not going might be any better or worse than going.

There I stood, on a layby in the environs of Baden-Württemberg, my back turned to the motorway, the through road to my future. On my warm hip I felt the comforting pressure of a man’s hand and his whispered words echoed in my head: ‘Perhaps she wants to know what it feels like to go with the flow.’

We started walking back. A man in a tracksuit holding a child on his arm was circling the car, inspecting it all over as if he were about to make an offer for it. The widow woke up and blinked her watery eyes. She said she was cold.

As we drove off, my fingers ran to the soft hollow at the base of my throat out of sheer habit, unconsciously searching for something that was no longer there, and the discovery sent a shudder like an electric shock through my body from my crown to my toe nails.

I once spent a whole afternoon in the public library studying road maps and the Automobile Association’s Motorists Germany, trying to figure out where exactly we had stopped on that fifth of September 1994. What was the name of the Ratstätte or Erfrischungsstelle where we had taken a break? I seem to remember

that the name ended with ‘tal’. About fifty kilometres south of Karlsruhe, I would guess. Some day I will go back to that place. And if I get down on my knees and feel around in the grass perhaps I will find my gold chain with the little amber pendant.

That evening we checked into the Baur au Lac Hotel in Zurich: Andreas, the widow and me. A doorman in gold-braided uniform opened the car doors for us, while orange clouds floated in the evening sky above his cap. The widow was stiff and tired from the long ride. She looked pale and trembled slightly as we went up in the lift, the widow flanked by Andreas and myself, facing the uniformed back of the bellhop with the keys to our rooms.

‘All these exertions are too much for an old body like mine,’ she said softly. In the meantime we had reached the rooms she had booked for us: numbers 408 and 409. I might have known - they were the same rooms she and Werner Bambach had occupied each year on or around the sixth of September. There was a connecting door between the two rooms, but when we went in it was bolted on both sides.

I had never stayed in such a fancy hotel before and I ran around like an excited child admiring the marble bathroom and the huge twin beds with their shiny covers in a brightly coloured art-deco pattern.

I took a shower and changed. Then, while Andreas was in the bathroom, I knocked on the connecting door. It was some time before I heard the bolt being slid away on the other side. The door was now ajar. I pushed it further open and saw the widow in a long white nightdress which trailed over the soft carpet. She held her hands out as if she was afraid of falling as she shuffled across the room to her bed, whose covers had been turned down. She stretched gingerly, as if her body ached.

I asked if she needed anything.

‘No thank you. I am very tired. Sleep is all I need at the moment.’

The light from the bedside lamp gave her a ghostly look.

‘Why don’t you two go downstairs and have some dinner. You can charge it to my bill,’ she said, and continued in an earnest voice, as if this were a matter of consequence: ‘I can recommend the Rostbraten, it is excellent.’

‘Won’t you have anything to eat yourself?’

She shook her head. ‘No thank you. I’ve had enough for today. I will stay in bed. I hope to feel a bit stronger in the morning.’

The sixth of September. Number 36, Bahnhofstrasse, I thought, almost saying it out loud.

Andreas and I dined in the spacious hotel restaurant, where we were among the latecomers. He had put on his new shoes and the pink shirt, and I was wearing the dress he had bought me. Around us, in the soft glow of the light brackets, there was a sprinkling of diners, mostly elderly couples. Tourists, I assumed. A company of dark-suited men were seated at a long table. The waiter addressed us in English.

By the time we went outside again night had fallen, and it was cool. A breeze was blowing from the lake. On the Lindenhof a busker wearing white makeup and a clown’s nose was sitting by the fountain, softly blowing his saxophone. His dog lay asleep at his feet on a blanket. We wandered around aimlessly in this town neither of us knew, with its open-air cafés along the river and its smooth clean streets and squares. I don’t know if it was the unfamiliar setting or just the way I felt that evening, but the murmur of voices, the drone of traffic, even the rustling of the leaves in the trees sounded strange to me, new, as if this town had no history, as if everything were happening here for the first time. Holding hands we crossed a wide bridge with little shops and stalls selling fruit and ice cream.

‘This is how it should always be,’ said Andreas.

‘How?’

‘Arriving in a new town. With you. Each time anew.’

I gave him a sidelong glance: his short, shaggy haircut, the relaxed expression on his face.

‘How about it?’ he asked.

I nodded and held his hand tightly.

In the dimly lit hotel bar there was a man with a shiny bald pate playing the grand piano. He wore black and played Strauss, Chopin and Sinatra with gusto, shaking his shoulders and elbows and raising his eyebrows to such an alarming height that his performance took on an unintentionally comic air. We stopped to listen for a while. Behind us men and women in evening dress chattered as they crossed the lobby and disappeared down the corridor. We decided to find out where they were going and soon came upon a large hall separated from the corridor by a glass partition. There were hundreds of guests milling around, as well as a tv camera crew. A superannuated rock band was playing on a platform at the far end. The bass rhythm reverberated against the windows. Men and women danced in the stark, bleak light, or stood together in little groups talking and laughing. At first they seemed friendly and cheerful, but the longer we studied their faces the more there seemed to be an undercurrent of resentment and menace stirring in the jovial multitude.

We stood there for a long time, watching the waves of smiling animosity surging through the terrarium. Then Andreas broke the silence between us: ‘Rats.’

‘What?’

‘We’re the researchers and they’re the rats. What do you see?’

‘Just a bunch of human beings. People like you and me.’

‘You’re not looking properly. You and I, Stella, we are the only ones.’

‘There we go again.’

‘Honestly.’

‘So tell me why the two of us are different.’

‘There is something in the offing for us. Can’t you feel it? For you and for me. For us.’ And in the same breath he went on, ‘O.K. then, ready steady go, on with the bulletproof vests and into the trenches.’ He grabbed hold of my hand and before I knew it he was pulling me, much to my surprise, towards the entrance to the terrarium.

‘What are you doing?’ I asked, but he did not reply and two seconds later I was inside, keeping my eyes fixed on the floor: scores of shiny black shoes and

twinkling heels, the music swelling and thumping much more loudly now, a carousel of countless perfumes and aftershave lotions, the tightly packed mass of people dancing or hovering around the buffet, chattering and breathing the heavy fumes of an evening full of drink and food onto each other.

On legs that feigned indifference I followed Andreas to the bar, where he ordered drinks for us. The bartender inquired in Swiss German dialect whether we had been invited and Andreas pointed to the band dismissively.

‘I’m their manager.’

It sounded utterly convincing. After a few sips he led me to the dance floor and we danced to the Beatles’ ‘Michelle’. We had never danced together before. But from the very first moment we blended effortlessly into the languid rhythm of the music, into the shuffling crowd around us, casting shadows on the ceiling. We were rocked by their bodies and voices. We danced slowly toward the centre of the throng of dinner jackets and evening dresses. Suspended overhead was a large reflecting globe which sprayed multi-coloured lights across the white walls. Andreas pressed his chin gently against my forehead. I felt very light in his arms. I laid my cheek against his shoulder and shut my eyes.

‘Rats,’ he whispered in my ear.

Stretched out on our beds with a supply of beer conveniently within reach in the minibar, we talked until the early hours, speculating about the following day and our visit to 36 Bahnhofstrasse, exhausted but too agitated to sleep, confused, too, by the knowledge that this was where the widow and Andreas’ grandfather had held their annual trysts. We asked ourselves what would happen if it turned out tomorrow that there was no Zurich mystery, that I had in fact already found the solution in the archives.

‘I promise you one thing, Stella. If that weird Monte Christo theory of yours proves to be true, I won’t run away from the adventure.’

‘You?’ I said mockingly. ‘Oh Andreas, what you like is theory, playing games, not... You’re daring all right on the verbal level, but when it comes down do it you don’t even dare to make love to me.’ This statement had been going round

my brain for weeks, but each time I had wanted to make it my cautious lips had refused to cooperate at the last moment. But now their resistance had been broken, no doubt as a result of the long journey, the late hour and the beer. I felt ashamed, already regretting my words.

He said nothing, just lay on his bed in his boxer shorts, the outline of his chest a silvery arc in the light of the bedside lamp behind him. The languid sensation in my arms and legs, the tranquil rising and sinking of his chest and the luxuriously appointed hotel room suddenly suffused me with desire. But he still seemed distant, so that I felt obliged to keep the conversation going. At times like this anything was better than silence.

‘Adventure,’ I went on, ‘weren’t you always saying that adventure is nothing but a surrogate for the story, that you didn’t need adventures because the stories were enough for you?’

‘And I still believe that. But let me put it this way: once a flow of lava catches up with you there’s not much point in crawling back to the crater. Then there’s nothing for it but to press ahead, you understand?’

‘Not a word,’ I replied.

Now, with hindsight, I realise he was right. At that moment we were like two characters in a film. And people in films always have to choose, that is their lot, that is what the whole story hinges on: they are manipulated into situations that leave them no choice but to choose anyway. They can’t turn their backs and say: ‘No thanks, I’m off,’ because then the film wouldn’t get made.

The only way for me to stop now was to reject the whole story, to make an about turn, but for that I had been floating for too long in a sensual, heady mist which at this hour was intensified by the long shadows on our bodies, the deep blue night against the window panes, the cold bottles of beer, the soft gurgle of the pipes in the bathroom and the smooth grey rectangle of the connecting door behind which the widow was presumably asleep with two pillows under head, dreaming of the Septembers of her life.

‘You know,’ I said, conscious of the defiant sharpness of my tone, ‘you are a complete mystery to me.’

‘What you’re describing is perfection.’

‘How so?’ I asked.

‘People are always trying to understand one, to see through one. I have no wish to be understood.’

‘Not by anyone?’

He hesitated. I could feel the warmth of his body from where I was lying. ‘Do you want an honest answer? All right then, by no one. For the time being at any rate.’

‘I wish you’d stop talking nonsense,’ I said and turned my back to him. It was quiet for a moment, but then I heard him get up from his bed and walk round to my side.

He lay down next to me and drew me towards him, pressing his lower body against my buttocks. I felt his lips brush against the tensed muscles in my neck. ‘Stella, sweet Stella...’ He turned me gently on my back and bent over me. He smiled. He really smiled. He found all this amusing. A second ago I had felt I had gained some insight into him, but seeing the twinkle in his eye I realised that I had only given myself away. He kissed me on the lips, while his hand crept under my skirt with a soft scratchy sound. He touched me. There. For the first time. And for an instant my entire body stiffened. My cheeks were burning. I knew I was blushing. Then I flung my arms around him and pulled him to me, bracing myself for the moment that he would leave me. But that did not happen. He undressed me calmly, confidently. Then he slipped his hands under my buttocks. I felt powerless and unsure of myself. I was no match for him, I felt, I whose schooling in love at this point in my life was barely past elementary stage. In a flash I recalled the few trivial affairs I had had. I hugged him even tighter, happy and frightened at the same time. He was not to leave me. I needed him. And I wanted him to need me in the same way. I whispered his name in his ear, by way of supplication. He kissed me on my mouth and pushed my legs apart. I no longer felt ashamed, I was more than ready to go where he wanted me to be.

Afterwards we lay close together, saying nothing. Andreas' sleepy gaze, eyes lowered as if reading a book, was fixed on the wall.

'Why don't you go to sleep,' I said.

'Not before you.'

I kissed his cheek. 'I really don't mind.'

'You may not mind, but I happen to know about a female spider with killer instinct.'

'Shut your eyes. This is an order.'

'See? You're sounding aggressive already.'

'All right if I watch tv for a bit?' I asked.

'Go ahead.'

'I'll turn off the sound.'

While I switched on the tv he crawled under the cover. The screen lit up with a shimmering test card. The pale light beaming into the room was reassuring. I knew I would not be able to sleep for a while. I exulted in the warm, snug feeling in my body and listened to Andreas' regular breathing. He was lying with his cheek on the pillow, still and composed like the head on a coin, his handsome lips slightly parted. I pressed my face against his shoulder, keeping my eyes fixed on the flickering screen. Although I did not know what would happen, I knew I would soon feel terrified, as terrified as a child. I knew that nothing would stop the first rays of sunlight from falling on the carpet, nor the morning from creeping out of the bluish haze so that the next day would come and we would continue our journey. I reached out and touched the warm curve of his hip under the cover. He caught his breath, but did not wake. In the street I heard a few spirited voices, probably the last guests from the terrarium getting into their cars.

I pictured them driving off into the dark night.

I woke up as Andreas came out of the bathroom. His hair was dripping wet and a towel with the hotel monogram was draped over his shoulders. My first reaction was: 'I can see him, I can smell him, I can hear him. He is with me.' But as I watched him walk barefoot to the writing table where he had left his clothes a

bundle, my relief made way for apprehension. He did not want to be understood by anyone. Not even by me. The morning light poured in through the tall windows, glittering in the large mirror above the writing table. We eyed each other in the mirror. I wondered if he could sense my fear.

‘Did you get some sleep?’ He dropped the towel nonchalantly on the floor.

‘What time is it?’

‘Nine o’clock.’

I got out of bed and listened at the connecting door, but there was not a sound in the other room.

‘I expect she’s still asleep,’ Andreas said, balancing on one foot while he pulled on his jeans. He zipped up his fly. ‘Don’t look so worried.’

‘Me?’

‘Yes.’

I shrugged and went towards the bathroom. On the way Andreas reached out his arms and held me.

‘Is everything all right?’

I nodded, stroked his cheek and went into the bathroom. Last night, when I had first marvelled at all the marble and the mirrors, I had resolved to take a bath with a lot of foam in the morning, but right now I did not have the patience to wait for the tub to fill up. I took a hot shower and slipped on my little dress. Then I put my ear against the connecting door again. Not hearing anything, I knocked softly.

After a while she opened the door, still wearing her long night dress. The hair piled up on her head sagged lopsidedly over her thin face, which had an unhealthy pallor.

‘Are you feeling a little better?’

‘A little,’ she said. ‘Have you been downstairs to have breakfast?’

‘No, not yet.’

‘Why don’t you go down now, and would you ask them to bring me my breakfast in my room. Some lemon with the tea please.’

‘Will do.’

‘I have an appointment at around eleven. I would appreciate it if you came with me. It won’t take more than an hour. We can take a taxi.’

‘I’ll drive you there,’ said Andreas, sitting behind me on the edge of his bed, tying his shoelaces. ‘I’m your chauffeur, remember, your velvet chauffeur.’

She nodded absent-mindedly. ‘Eleven o’clock then.’

A few minutes past eleven we got into the Bentley.

‘We have to be in Bahnhofstrasse. It’s right in the centre.’

Andreas and I exchanged meaningful looks. He started the engine and reversed out of the parking lot. The sun glared on the window as we drove across the city. I folded down the sun-shield.

‘Your glasses,’ said Andreas.

I opened the wooden glove compartment and put on the round blue-tinted glasses.

He nosed the car effortlessly through the morning traffic. At the end of a long avenue lined with linden trees we stopped for a traffic light.

‘Your grandfather and I used to come here a lot, Andreas,’ the widow said weakly. I twisted round to look at her. She was very still, staring watery-eyed out of her window. Around her thin neck she wore a string of pearls.

‘So I understand,’ said Andreas. The light switched to green and he accelerated again, taking a smooth left curve past a tall glass-walled office block. ‘Did you like this town?’

‘Zurich? Who could like Zurich!’ She paused. ‘He was my oldest friend, and I was his. And together we saw how Zurich changed over the years, like an acquaintance you see from time to time throughout your life. Ah well, perhaps we did like Zurich after all.’

In less than fifteen minutes, without asking directions, Andreas drove to Bahnhofstrasse, where many of the Jugendstil buildings had been converted into luxury shops and where banks with grand facades cast long shadows on the street at this hour. Trams rode to and fro. Pedestrians strode purposefully down the

pavement between the linden trees and the shop windows with joyless displays of prohibitively expensive jewellery, watches and fur coats. Number 36 turned out to be on the corner, a neoclassical building with arched windows and pilasters of beige-tinted stone. It was in this forbidding symmetry that the head office of the Julius Bär Bank was housed, as the angular, unfussy inscription over the entrance indicated. There were no parking facilities at this end of the street, so Andreas pulled up round the corner. He twisted round to face the widow.

‘Will this be all right?’

‘Yes, this is fine.’

‘How long do you think you will be?’ he inquired, playing his role of chauffeur to the hilt.

‘Twenty minutes, half an hour at the most.’

‘Shall I wait for you here with the car?’

‘Very good.’

He opened the door for the widow, helped her out of the car and returned to his seat at the wheel.

He’ll be dozing off over the sports pages of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* next, I thought, as the widow and I linked arms and went up the marble steps to the bank. We found ourselves in a vast hall of gleaming marble dotted with counters and windows along the sides.

She asked me to sit on a bench and wait while she presented her identification at one of the counters. It was not long before a young man in a grey suit came forward to fetch her. He escorted her politely towards a tall wrought-iron grille, behind which she disappeared. A reverent silence hung in the space, and I wondered whether it was inspired by awe at the mysterious transformation that took place each time someone went up to one of the counters and became a number. Perhaps it had nothing to do with the clients, perhaps it was just that their money resided here and demanded silence in which to multiply.

After ten minutes or so the old lady returned with the young man at her side.

The grey-suited young man was pushing a metal trolley bearing a fairly large flat object wrapped in brown paper. And as they came towards me casting their blurry reflections in the gleaming floor, it occurred to me that events from now on would be a replay of past experience.

‘Roughly one metre by eighty centimetres. I haven’t laid hands on too many ninth-century prayer books lately, but I very much doubt they’d be the size of the parcel she got out of the safe. Go on, Stella, admit you were mistaken.’

He got up from the slatted sun bed and walked to the edge of the pool. He dived into the blue-green water and surfaced a good three metres away, then swam with supple arm strokes to the other end. The water rippled transparently over his back, his shoulder blades glistened in the sun. He swam a couple of lengths, hoisted himself onto the side and sat there for a while, with his eyes closed. Drops trickled down his shoulders as he held his face up to the sun. As I watched him he turned into a little boy, probably because of his short wet hair and his swimming trunks. But of course I knew he was not a little boy but a dangerous, mysterious man, a threat in spite of his friendly eyes and soft voice.

I reached for the orange juice on the low table beside me and took a sip. I had felt a little guilty about Andreas and me lounging by the pool of this five-star hotel while the widow was cooped up in her curtained room with her parcel from the safe. But now that I looked at him and felt the warm sunlight caressing my skin, the guilty conscience evaporated and a sense of idle indifference, of freedom, came over me, as refreshing as the blue-green water.

Andreas lay down on his sun bed again. He had left a glistening trail from where he had been sitting at the side of the pool. He put his head close to mine and laid a cool wet hand on my arm.

‘Do you still think I’ll drop out when push comes to shove?’

‘One time doesn’t prove anything, kiddo.’

He seemed to want to pursue this, but then he drew back his arm and rested his head on the sun bed.

‘Andreas?’

‘What?’

‘Say something.’

‘What would you like to hear?’

‘What are you thinking about?’

‘Really?’

‘Really.’

‘Let’s do the wrong thing, the very worst thing we can imagine.’

‘Something bad?’

‘The worst.’

‘You are bad.’

‘Why not?’

‘Crazy, dangerous.’

‘O.K., O.K. And she’s the only one he wants to be like that with.’

‘But he doesn’t love her.’

‘He care more about her than about anyone else.’

‘But he doesn’t love her. And he doesn’t want her to understand him either.’

‘Not yet.’

‘But tell me, why did it take so long for him to sleep with her?’

‘He’d seen her bending over, sitting, asleep, with her mouth open, her eyes closed, perched on the edge of her bed with her legs apart, that time in the garden when she sprawled face down in the grass, all those images, all those possibilities, and he couldn’t make up his mind.’

‘Which was why you played for time.’

‘Do you think that’s strange?’

‘Andreas?’

‘Yes.’

‘What about her?’

‘What?’

‘Is she a bad person?’

‘I shouldn’t think so.’

‘But...’

‘She, she...her instinct tells her they should stick together.’

A pretty woman with long honey-brown legs and elaborately blow-dried hair appeared, followed by her children, a boy and a girl. The boy carried a bag, his little sister held a terrier on a leash. They walked past us and settled down on the far side of the pool. The children squabbled over the bag and fished out a variety of brightly coloured toys.

Andreas shut his eyes and continued: ‘Now that girl Stella, make no mistake, she’s the sort of girl that makes things work. And... she’s gorgeous, too.’

‘But you haven’t answered my question. Do you think I’m a bad person?’

He opened his eyes and beckoned the young white-jacketed waiter, who was on his way to the exit with his silver tray tucked under his arm after serving drinks to the mother and her children.

‘Have a good day,’ the waiter said amicably as he loaded our empty glasses on to his tray, ‘tomorrow will be the end of the good weather, it seems. This may well be the last day of summer.’

Andreas smiled brightly at him and ordered white wine and club sandwiches for both of us. As soon as the waiter was out of earshot he leaned over to me.

‘Bad? No. I’d prefer to say she is... reasonable. But that’s nothing to brag about. Everything, everyone’s reasonable. Being reasonable is pass☺. Come now Stella, let’s throw reason overboard.’

‘Can’t you give me just one good reason?’

‘I don’t know, I haven’t got any,’ he said, earnestly now. ‘But I just feel that’s what we should do. You and me, Stella, just for once. The worst.’

‘No,’ I said, ‘Dammit, no!’

He rolled off his sun-bed and crawled over to me on his knees. His green eyes hovered above my face. He put his hands on my shoulders. I felt utterly transparent again. I knew he could see right into my heart.

‘Bastard,’ I said. And suddenly I saw his face very clearly.

With a tender gesture he laid one of his hands on my stomach. ‘I am so glad I met you, you’re so calm, so distanced.’

‘Do stop it!’

‘If you say so.’

‘Andreas?’

‘Yes.’

‘You...’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Yes.’

Still kneeling on the tiles of the pool surround, he kissed me. I lay there and did not move. Immobility as resistance.

‘Listen here Stella, it’s a hunch, a hunch that tells me: it can work. It can work now.’

‘You scare me.’

‘Our being together, you and me, it’s like a sacrament. Something wonderful. That’s how you should see it, as a sacrament.’

‘Didn’t you hear me? You scare me.’

‘So it seems.’

At that moment a bright pink flying saucer skimmed overhead. The strange-looking frisbee was spinning and gradually losing altitude until it landed exactly on the calves of Andreas’ legs. It was a plastic disc with a fluttery rim made of thin and very flexible material, and for a brief moment it lay there on its unusual and fortuitous landing pad until Andreas turned over and the toy slid to the ground. He picked it up and studied it closely. He read the words printed on the lower side.

‘But this is incredible!’ he exclaimed, looking up. ‘This, Stella, is beyond belief! We’ve received a message from outer space! At last! Look, look here.’ He held the disc under my nose. ‘The secret of the universe revealed. The sense of our existence summed up in four simple words. Just look at this!’ He laughed, his teeth flashing in the sun.

‘Warning: play under supervision,’ I read.

At that point the terrier skittered towards us, its nails squeaking on the tiles. It came to a halt in front of Andreas, and fixed its dark beady eyes on the disc in his hand. The little boy came running towards us.

‘It belongs to Chico,’ he told Andreas with a shy, shifty look as he pointed to his dog, ‘It’s his frisbee.’

Andreas handed him the disc and the boy ran off with the dog bounding at his side along the edge of the pool.

‘Play under supervision,’ Andreas repeated softly. ‘Do you see, Stella? That’s all it is, you know.’

‘Who’s doing the supervising?’ I said. ‘That’s the question.’

‘Yes, he said, ‘that is the question.’

I thought of the tame rats in the pet shop. Trembling with fear in their cages at the horrible, shrill menace of their wild kin, the kind of fear that had no name.

‘Andreas?’

‘Yes.’

‘Please, tell me what you are thinking.’