

Sabine Friedrich

Who We Are

2032 Pages

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Excerpts

(The following text passages have been rearranged by the author. They do not appear in the same order or context as they do in the novel.)

The search of the fishing vessel was merely a formality. They did not search in earnest, otherwise they surely would have discovered him. Anyhow, Herbert Frahm was not afraid.

He is not afraid now. He has to get out: He has aided publicist Paul Frölich's attempt to flee to Denmark. But Frölich has been arrested in Fehmarn. That means, Herbert Frahm himself is not safe any longer in Lübeck. So now, under cover of darkness, a fishing vessel is taking him across the Baltic Sea, from Travemünde to Denmark.

They are on the high seas by now. Herbert is standing at the railing. He is nineteen years old. In his pocket are one hundred Reichsmark that his grandfather took out of his savings account. Herbert clings to the railing, struggling with nausea. He is not afraid, but he is seasick. He is agitated. They have lost. They have not saved democracy. They have failed. He has failed. The question is, will he continue to fail. The question is, will he be able to accomplish anything, will he ever contribute anything worthwhile? How long will he have to stay away from Germany? Impossible to say. What exactly is it he will have to do abroad? He does not know. What country is he leaving?

The images he takes into exile with him are the revolting ones of the Nazi boycott of Jewish businesses on April 1. The sense of failure is overwhelming. They were not able to make the Germans see what kind of brutes they were about to elect. They have failed. They have failed. He must not fail again, he senses this strongly. But at what? What is his task? He struggles with nausea. He feels as if the vessel was traversing a storm, the waves towering, metres high. Shouldn't the river Styx be utterly still? Once the vessel lands, he will not be who he was anymore. He will never again be who he was, he has left everything behind, even his name. He is travelling under a name not his own. But that is not right. From now on, precisely this name is to be his true name. In the first light of morning, the coast of Denmark appears before them.

Rödbyhavn.

It is as the fisherman has told him: There are no passport controls, no customs office. The vessel docks. In the chilling earliness of the spring morning, their breath is visible. They climb off the boat. He steps onto firm ground, and the feeling of nausea disappears immediately. On the pier, there is a group of local fishermen, with steaming mugs in their fists. They wave over the new arrivals, and offer the hot drink. He drinks. Strong coffee, with sugar and aquavit. They exchange nods, shake hands, mention names.

“Hvad hedder du?”

Herbert Frahm draws himself up.

“Willy Brandt.”

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Luckily, it has all ended well. Harro is safe. Marie Louise Schulze did the right thing when she left Duisburg immediately after the call, without packing a suitcase, without even informing her husband. It was right that she did this by herself. A man would have spoiled things more than he could have helped. Harro's mother went alone to von Levetzow, Berlin's Chief of Police. First he hesitated to oppose the SA. But then he did give her two policemen to accompany her. He promised to set Harro free, if only she could find him. Marie Louise Schulze went from torture chamber to torture chamber, from one wild concentration camp to the next. The wild camps are everywhere, all over town, in bars, bowling alleys, dance halls, basements, in sheds and attics. She finally found him at Fürstenbrunner Weg, in the basement of the Hilfskommando Henze. She does not dare to think about that now. She does not dare to think of the hour she spent on that street, in front of that house, enmeshed in a battle of words with this horrible person. Inside the house, they had her son. Did she hear a scream? From there? The young brute in front of her had grinned, scratched his genitals.

But she has Harro back. She has found him. It is April 25, 1933. Harro is sitting here, next to her, in a taxi that is moving through April puddles, weak April sunshine, back into the normal world. They are in the normal world. They are safe. Harro's arrest was a mistake. The mistake has been corrected. So now, everything is alright again. Harro's face is greyish white, the rings under his eyes the color of lead. His hair is chopped short, as if he was just out of a penal camp. His lip is split. His eyebrow is caked with blood. Right now, there is no evidence of anything worse. He had some trouble entering the cab, though. Now he is holding on to the front seat, to avoid leaning back.

"Harro. My child."

"Hush."

She does not know if he has really said that. It was a sound, maybe just a sob. It has started to rain outside. At least he lives in the Residential Estate Eichkamp now, not in this horrible hole in Wedding any more, and also not with those Russians. The car stops. Lärchenstraße 6. They have arrived. She pays. He gets out, again with some trouble. He refuses her support. He opens the door, then walks up the stairs ahead of her. The apartment door is undamaged. So they did not come here. They got hold of him at the editorial office of the gegner, but they did not search his flat. Inside, it smells a bit stuffy, unaired. But everything is very orderly. Of course. Even as a child he insisted on order.

"Take off your shirt, child." He does not answer. "Harro, please. Take off your shirt."

She is almost surprised when he obeys. His back and shoulders are covered with welts. Some are bluish red, puffy. Some are split and oozing. She manages to neither scream nor groan. She speaks quite calmly.

"We have to get a doctor. You stay here. I will fetch a doctor immediately."

"Stop it, mom. Please."

He sits on the edge of a chair. He looks past her, at the wall. He says: "Henry is dead."

She cannot answer. Outside, the rains seems to have become more intense. She hears the drops beating

against the window pane.

He says: "They beat him to death."

She remembers Henry Erlanger. Harro's colleague and friend: a slight young man with dark hair, dark eyes, a nose recognizably Jewish.

"We will report them, Harro. You stay here. I will go to von Levetzow and report them."

He turns his face towards her. He is twenty-four years old. He begins to laugh, soundlessly.

"My child!"

After a while, he says: "I knew two of them. I knew two. Only, they came a bit late. They came too late."

There it is again, the little sound. It is not like crying. Rather, it is a nervous sound, like a small gasp for air. She knows it. He had it already as a child. Already as a small boy, when something had upset him, some slight maybe, not necessarily his own. He says: "How did you find me, anyway?"

"I went to von Levetzow", she says. "He has been appointed as Berlin's Chief of Police. Admiral von Levetzow, of course he knows dad. Of course he knew Uncle Alfred. I told him who we are. I told him who you are."

"Yes", Harro says. "The grandnephew of Grand Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz. In a torture chamber of the SA. That certainly does not look good."

"Von Levetzow did not know where you were", she says. "We searched for you. Two whole days."

She presses her hand against her mouth. Two days. When you say it like that, it is absolutely inconceivable. How many hours, how many minutes, how many single moments. And not one of them can be skipped.

Harro says: "We. Who is we? With whom did you look for me?"

She hesitates. Then she says it.

"With Miss Schütt."

"Ah. Regine."

She doesn't know herself why she becomes eager now.

"Miss Schütt has called us in Duisburg. She told me that you had disappeared. That they had come for you, at the editorial office. Without her I would not have known. Without her", She does not continue.

He does not say anything, either. He lets her fall silent. She would like to dress his wounds now. She would like to make him lie down and rest. She would like to get him some soup, a cup of hot coffee. But she knows him, this son of hers. Harro hates everything that smells of interference, patronization, motherly care. He hates it when she tries to interrogate him. But surely she is entitled to some sort of information? Surely she

has the right to one little question, now that he owes her his life, for a second time? The thought yanks her back into the tumult, into the terror of possibilities, down the unforeseeable roads the future might have decided to take, had it not been for her intervention. For Miss Schütt's intervention.

“A very nice girl, this Miss Schütt“, she says. Now she has said it. Now it does not matter any more. “Very well-bred“, she says. “So amiable and affectionate. And courageous. That she called me at once. That she went from one SA-premise to the next.“

“Yes“, Harro says.

“Is there something special between you and her?“

“No“, he says.

She takes a final risk.

“But she seems to feel differently about that. She seemed to me very – very fond of you.“

“Maybe. We had, well. What people sometimes have.“ Again the quick intake of breath, almost a sob. “She loved to come to the gegner office, in the evenings. She found the atmosphere stimulating.“

“Harro? But you will give that up now, won't you? You will, well, I don't know. Adapt a bit. Arrange yourself with the facts.“

He looks at her, raises his eyebrows.

“What do you mean, mom?“

Now she does not know how to continue.

“You know quite well“, she says. “You know exactly what I mean. I have said it again and again. I have seen it coming the whole time. I have begged you to give up your magazine. But now you will not bother with politics any more.“

“I won't?“

He draws himself up with a kind of twist, the way he did already as a little boy.

“I won't bother with anything anymore?“

The wind hurls a handfull of drops against the window pane, like tiny stones. Harro gets up and walks over to the window.

“The gegner is finished indeed“, he says. “You are totally right. The gegner is banned, and everything is smashed. Rest assured of that.“

She averts her glance from the sight of his back.

“I think I will become a pilot now“, Harro says. “This thing in Warnemünde that dad mentioned.“

The training at the German commercial pilot school. She holds herself back. She tries to stay composed, not to show her relief, to keep her joy out of her voice.

“Yes, child. You do that. You do what your father says, that’s best. You’ll be a pilot.“

The rain has ceased. Harro continues to stand by the window.

She thinks about where they might dine later on: at Lutter & Wegener maybe, or even at the Traube, doesn’t the boy deserve something special? And he must be starving, after all that has happened.

“Mom“, Harro says without turning around. „In that basement. During my days there. I met people“, he raises his hands, lets them drop again. “People, who“, he shakes his head. He turns around, looks at his mother. “I will not forget this, mom.“

*

Mildred has not been able to gain a foothold in America. To do that, you first have to lose the ground beneath your feet. You must have felt what it is like to slide towards the abyss, on an icy path or a muddy embankment, helplessly, powerlessly, and then all of a sudden, you feel firm ground under your soles. You regain control, you stand, your toes dig into the earth. Your heart is still racing, but the panic recedes: You have gained a foothold, now you stand safely, securely on your own spot of land. This is precisely what Mildred did not achieve.

Already the passage to New York was utterly unreal, a grey nightmare in which Mildred stood day after day at the railing, staring out at the surging grey water. She saw nothing, she felt nothing. Where was Emerson? Where was Margaret Fuller?

Be not the slave of your own past. Plunge into the sublime seas, dive deep and swim far, so you shall come back with self-respect, with new power, with an advanced experience that shall explain and overlook the old.

Obviously, the level of the sublime seas had sunk. The sublimeness had evaporated. Mildred’s ships ran aground. And where her heart was supposed to be, there were empty passages, echoing hallways that she roamed with growing agitation, with a breathless impatience as if she was in danger of leaving a task of vital importance undone, of irretrievably missing a crucial appointment. But which task? Which appointment?

The ship reached New York on schedule. Mildred disembarked. She went to her mother’s house. The house smelled of apple pie, as she had imagined. The first week, Mildred tried to savor everything. She tried to really return home, to arrive at this little house under the wide American sky: But the feeling of urgency grew, pushed her, drove her on as if from now on every minute counted.

She contacted the University of Wisconsin. Arvid’s professor, John R. Commons, had of course long since retired to Florida. But some of the old people were still there. They remembered her. Of course they remembered her: young Mildred Fish, radiantly adorned with her light blond hair, and also her boyfriend,

Rockefeller scholar Dr. Arvid Harnack. They genuinely regretted that they could do so little for Mildred. At least one of the employees in administration helped her contact some organisations that might be interested in her speech on the reception of American contemporary literature in today's Germany.

She gave the first speech for the Madison Book Club. As venue, they had chosen the meeting hall of the Green Lake Hotel, of all places: the place where eleven years ago, Mildred had celebrated her wedding. It had been August then. The woods and lakes of Wisconsin had lain under the summer sun. They had not been able to afford a big party, but at least they had invited their closest family and friends. Everything had been simple and very tasteful: the dishes, the table decorations in light blue and white, the menus that Mildred had written by hand. She still kept one. It was inside the drawer of her nightstand, in her flat in Berlin, on her side of the bed in which Arvid now slept alone. Mildred sat alone at the fireplace in the lobby of the Green Lake Hotel.

It was winter. She studied the list of guests that were expected for her speech. Horror struck her. Not only the members of the hosting organisation, as well as some students and professors, had announced their coming, but also members of Fritz Kuhn's German-American Bund, the notorious association of Americans of German descent, Nazi sympathizers who had connections to the Regime. So, even here in America, she could not talk freely.

Especially not in America. Not here, where she didn't know anyone any more, where she could not be sure of even her few old acquaintances, how could she know what anyone really thought? How could she be sure that she was not being observed, that no spies of the Nazis listened in?

Nowhere could you talk freely, nowhere suppose yourself among your own. Freedom did not exist, neither did refuge from the Gestapo. Of course, as long as she was here in America, nobody would harm her. But Arvid was in Germany. He was their hostage. And if that was so, what could she permit herself to say in her speech?

She went through her script, in a trembling hurry. She went through it again. And again. She crossed things out. And crossed things out. She presented the wreckage in the hall of the Green Lake Hotel. The speech had lost all congruence. The frame was missing, the overall context, the walls of the building. The details hung in the room like cables after a disaster, like blackened roof battens after a fire. Afterwards, one of her former professors walked up to her. He squeezed her hands, remained guarded. She would not let him get away with this. She demanded a reaction, urged him, got passionate, explained. He said: "Oh. I understand now. Excuse me, but why didn't you say any of this before? You should have. Then it would have been a good lecture -"

Thankfully, he had left it open what the lecture had been. And of course, that kind of thing did not earn her any money, anyway. She depended on her family, on friends. Dutifully, they took her in. They treated her to dinner, they bought her a new pair of stockings. Couldn't she translate something, maybe? Or maybe she could write for a magazine, like she did for in Germany's *Dame*? She inquired at a few newspapers and publishers.

She was asked what she was doing here, anyway. Why wasn't she where she belonged, with her husband in Germany? Why was she travelling without him, all by herself? Why was she in America? What did she want here? Was she herself possibly a spy of the Nazis?



The editor in chief of the Wisconsin Sentinel asked her that.

No, please, he certainly did not intend to hurt her sensitivities. But he must be permitted to ask, at least: Was she prepared to practise free journalism, in his paper? Did she believe in the American model, or had she been turned inside out, over there? Would she possibly even use his paper to propagate the German system?

She could not respond to any of this, of course. She could not say anything about these matters, not even that she could not say anything, she ran from the Sentinel's office. People stared after her uncomprehendingly. What was the matter with her? Why did she get so agitated? Did she suffer from paranoia? Didn't she trust anybody any more?

Please, Mildred, really, just go ahead! Speak freely, you are among friends here! Here you are not among your German Nazis. You are in America, not in Berlin.

She gasped: your German Nazis. She started to say something, stopped, what was she to say? People here were stupid. They did not understand. That was because of freedom. Freedom and safety had made them stupid. Democracy, the way they took their luck for granted had made them arrogant and dumb. Of course, Mildred knew exactly what they wanted to hear from her.

I hate the Nazis. Arvid and I, we hate the Nazis. We wish Hitler dead! We long for liberation, for the American model.

Those were the things they expected from her, while Arvid was over there, trapped.

But wasn't he working for the Reichswirtschaftsministerium? He worked for the German State. That was not necessary, after all. With his work, he supported the Hitler regime, voluntarily, without external force. Couldn't he do something decent instead?

Like what, starve to death?

Mildred was sick with anger and humiliation. She felt tainted. She did not measure up to them, to those lucky ones in their innocence, their white purity. How could they understand where Mildred lived? In fact, Mildred herself had only now begun to understand it. How could they understand that anyone who lived in a state like that inevitably became tainted? That a state like that penetrated and sullied all areas of life, that it left nothing unstained, that you could not protect anything from it, because no part of your life was free from its influence? She could not talk about this. She did not dare: And so she had to keep silent.

She was considered standoffish. She was considered arrogant, what was she so smug about, anyway? She had forgotten how to make small talk. They sat around the table and talked. They sat around the fireplace and talked easily about this and that. She could not think about anything to say. The things she could not say got in front of everything else. The unsaid grew, got cumbersome, blocked up all mental space like huge props obstructing a stage, there was nothing free and open about her any more.

People began to suspect that she herself was a National Socialist.

How else could you explain her behaviour? She was inhibited. Ossified. If she did say something, her own voice sounded shrill in her ears, what had happened to the old Mildred? Young, weightlessly floating Mildred, with her luminous hair, her slim neck that grew out of a white lace collar like on some ancient portrait: That Mildred had been a willow wand. Now she was a stick. A wooden stick, rigid. Ruthless. Solely concerned with her own interests. Her sister reproached her for that.

“You have really turned into a German.“

That was what her mother said.

She did not mean it seriously. It hurt Mildred deeply. It was true. America was not her country any longer. She did not recognize anything, because everything had stayed exactly as it had been. America seemed unreal to her, the realm of a vague goodwill that did not impose any obligations. It was far less real than the faraway country she had left: Germany, in its cruel turmoil. In Germany, she had been homesick for America. Now, here in America, she was homesick for a summer morning in 1926. For Mildred Fish and Arvid Harnack, together at Picnic Point, at the shore of Lake Mendota, the air had been balmy.

It had been quiet, except for a few birds. He looked at her. They looked at each other: Now, now, now he kissed her. Happiness was a hot whirl,

Marry me!

Yes, yes, yes I will marry you. Was any other answer possible? Never on earth. She stood at Picnic Point. It was winter: February 1937. The water was frozen. On the far side, she saw the blue line of trees. What was she doing here? Arvid did not wait for her at Picnic Point, in some sort of past. He waited at home, in their shared flat in Berlin. He sat at the table and ate from his lonely plate. In the evening, he threw back the covers of his empty bed,

I have somewhere surely lived a life of joy with you, I ate with you, and slept with you –

Maybe at dusk, he placed a candle on the cabinet under the large oil painting that his mother had painted of the shifting dunes on the Courland Spit. Maybe he wandered around the apartment then, by himself. Mildred thought she could hear his lonely steps, his cough, his voice that spoke to a visitor who then walked away and left him alone again. Mildred had not known this. She had thought you could go away and come back. But it was not like that. The path only lead in one direction, ahead. Nothing could be taken back. Behind no point, once crossed, could you ever return. She had left, and now she was a stranger in her own land.

It was worse. Because as a stranger, she might have settled in, and over time, she might have eventually become at home here. But Mildred already did not possess anymore what a stranger only hoped to obtain. America did not open up to her anymore. It did not let her in. The rip that her departure had torn had closed behind her. For Mildred, no loophole had remained.

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Bialystok has surrendered without a fight. In the early hours of June 27, the Sicherungs-Regiment 2 occupies the town. Regimental Commander Colonel Ronicke is welcomed at the Hotel Ritz with bread and salt. The

town is absolutely still, not a soul visible. Around nine o'clock, the police bataillon 309 rumbles into town. The policemen are drunk. They have been assigned to clean the town of elements hostile to the Germans. They are determined to do just that. If there are no hostile elements, they will know how to create some. Half of the inhabitants are Jewish, by the way. Towards afternoon, the overcrowded synagogue burns, its doors blocked. The flames are spreading to the center of the city. Colonel Ronicke yells at a group of raucous policemen that he is going to have them shot. He confronts a laughing policeman, whose uniform is spattered with blood. But these men are not subordinates of Ronicke. Where is their commander? Knocked out. Lying around somewhere, drunk as a skunk.

And Division Commander Lieutenant General Johann Pflugbeil does not interfere. Pflugbeil is the highest ranking officer here. It would be his duty to interfere. As a matter of fact, he is highly indignant. But he does not interfere. Why not, what the hell is keeping the man?

Two men are lying in the dust at his feet, in mortal terror, imploring him to protect them. A policeman is standing behind them. He is standing directly opposite of Pflugbeil. He looks him squarely in the eyes. Then he opens his pants, takes out his penis and urinates on the whimpering men. Pflugbeil's face reddens. He opens his mouth, closes it. The men cling to his legs. Pflugbeil is under the certain impression that drops of urine have dirtied his pants. He tears himself away. He turns around. He walks off.

*

Once you have realized what is right, you have to stick to it. You have to be strong, you have to demand something of yourself. To be tough with oneself has never yet hurt anybody. And many things that at first seem unbearably hard can be accomplished, if you approach the task one step at a time, if you allow yourself to grow slowly into the enormosity of the challenge: You prove yourself in something easy, and thus gain power for something hard. It also helps if you consider how you will appear to others.

After all, you are not alone in this world. Your companions will judge you by what you have done, by your proficiency. Would you want to look like a wimp, a shithead, a vicious traitor? Would you want them to turn their backs on you: on the man who has abandoned them at the crucial moment, who left it to the others to do what had to be done?

Heaven knows, he has not actively striven for the position he now finds himself in. Fate has put him there. And of course, he could balk. He could refuse to act, he could choose the easier route. But then he would betray the future: the future of the children, the world they want to create. It is the future that matters.

Neither the past nor the present are of any importance. What matters is the children, his children as well as those of the others. It is their future he has to keep in mind. This is what is driving him on. The children shall have a future.

Once Jewish Bolshevism, the global Jewish-Bolshevist conspiracy has been vanquished, they shall run a manor under the cherry trees at the banks of the quiet river Don. They shall rule the World Empire of Germania, without having to do any dirty work ever again. They shall not be plundered any more, squeezed dry by the Jewish organisations of international finance. The sons shall not be forced to live under the heels of those traitors of the people, neither shall the daughters be sullied by their dirty lust.

It is enough to imagine what they would do to you, if they had the power.

The enemies of the people have to go: the Jews, the Bolsheviks, the whole rabble that is crawling and stumbling around in front of him with smashed hands, oozing eyes, holes in the skulls, squeaking like a litter of pigs. He fires into the dirty stinking heap. He fires and fires.

*

Axel von dem Bussche has been waiting in the guest barracks of the Wolf's Lair, the Führer's East Prussian headquarters near Rastenburg, for four days and three nights. Today, finally, the day has arrived. Today the Führer will die. Axel is prepared. In his mind, he has gone through the whole thing hundreds of times. He will explain the advantages of the new uniforms. He will activate the mine. He will loudly clear his throat to drown out the hiss of the fuse, and then, he will lunge at the Führer. He has rehearsed this moment. He has counted the seconds, between the activation of the mine and the leap forward,

one two three four FIVE

Axel feels solemn. He feels exalted. During the last hours, he has only consumed bread and water. He wants to be pure. His sleep has been deep, with dreams in blazing colors: Oceans stretched beneath him, vast lands, then voices called out to him, without him being able to fathom the words. He knows now what he should have done in Dubno.

They were naked. They stood in a long line. They were being killed, one after the other, from the early morning into the night, and nobody did anything to save them. What could have been done? Axel Bussche and his regimental comrades could have joined them. They could have undressed, all of them, starting with their commander, and they could have joined the line. Then the murdering would have stopped. Axel is sure of that. If they had joined the ranks of the victims, there would not have been any more victims. Axel has joined their ranks now.

In the early afternoon, Oberst Stieff knocks on his door.

“The demonstration of the uniforms will not take place.”

“What?”

“The uniforms have not arrived.”

Axel does not understand. His ears are ringing.

“Berlin was bombed heavily yesterday. The railway car has been hit, too. What's the matter? Why are you looking at me like that?”

Axel does not answer. He does not even see Stieff. In his ears, there is a whistle. All the old wounds have started to hurt again: his right thumb, the spot under his heart where the bullet hit during the campaign in the West, the wound on his leg where the grenade splinters penetrated during the crossing of the Beresina, the shot in the lungs from September 1941.

“What’s wrong with you? You have gone all pale. Do sit down. What’s the matter? You should be glad. Be glad that you are staying alive.”

“The uniforms. Is it not possible to obtain new uniforms.”

„No. Not before the winter, anyhow.“

Axel von dem Bussche nods. He is suddenly very tired. He will return to the troops at the Eastern front. It will all go on. It will go on forever. Axel Bussche is deadly tired. He has to keep on living. He wants to cry.

*

Some moments are rifts within the flow of time, chasms without bridges: You cannot return to the other side and choose a different route. You cannot walk in a circle and so return to where you were. Freya is back from the Grundlsee. Her life is running as if on rails now.

The journey has started, the course has been set. Everything is decided, with this single decision. Freya is standing in the hallway of her and her parents’ home in Cologne. The window curtains in the hallway are green. The lamp has many curved arms, with light bulbs like candles. Freya knows this. On the doorframe next to her is a scratch. Freya knows this without looking, she is holding Helmuth’s letter in her hand. The letter transforms the house.

Nothing is what it was any more. Everything has to be considered anew, everything has to be measured, contemplated, valued again in the light of this letter. Freya has just now returned from Austria, from the summer camp at Eugenie Schwarzwald’s mansion Seeblick. On the very first day, almost the first minute of her arrival, everything was decided. Helmuth James von Moltke was leaning against the cold fireplace in the conservatory, when Freya entered. Freya saw him immediately. He did not notice her. He leafed through a book, swaying lightly from heel to toe. His suit was a bit too elegant for life in the country. His pants were slightly stained at the bottom. Grass stuck to his sleeve. He looked skeptical, turned another page, then glanced up. He looked at Freya. It seemed to Freya as if a chamber had suddenly opened up between them.

The vast chamber of the future: which they now entered, each from his side. Freya is 18. Helmuth James von Moltke is 22. Freya is relieved. She is certain now. She knows what she wants. She wants to live close to Helmuth James von Moltke. She has felt that, even before they had exchanged one single word. She has known it, even before she knew who he was: the boy with the split ear-drum.

I have to tell you that I do not expect anything from life.

I feel a definite lack of enthusiasm, I will not deny that. And am I under any obligation to love this life? I have not requested to be born, after all.

This is the way Helmuth von Moltke talks. Presumably, Freya should be shocked. Presumably, she should feel discouraged. But the only thing that matters is that he has written this letter.

That he has written immediately. That when Freya arrived, this letter was already waiting for her. She can see

the way clearly now. Freya has always wondered when that would happen. Of course, she did not sit around waiting for some supernatural apparition. Freya is about to finish school. After that, she will attend shorthand and type writing classes, she might possibly study history. Would that be a way? It would be a course of study. It would not decide where Freya would go. But now she holds this letter in her hand. The letter is a map. Freya's way is indicated on it. Naturally, it won't be without vagaries. But the worst danger is hopefully averted. During the first days, everything was hanging in terrible balance: Daisy D'Ora was there, the slim blonde beauty queen.

Daisy does not love Helmuth, though. Freya noticed this at once. Or anyhow, she does not love Helmuth like Freya will love him, maybe Daisy has realized it herself.

Anyhow, she left. From that moment on, Freya had Helmuth to herself. They went rowing on the lake. They climbed mountains, just the two of them, without the others. Freya did not let Helmuth get out of sight for one moment. She stuck to his side from breakfast until their separation late in the evening. Freya's mother threw up her hands in horror.

"Freya, child, what do you think you are doing! You are throwing yourself at him. Freya, I won't tolerate this, tomorrow you will stay at home the whole day."

But it was too late. Freya was gone. Her mother locked an empty room. Freya had eloped, flown away, and nobody would be able to call her back. Freya looks at the letter. She reads again,

This summer has so absolutely become a part of me that everything else would be incomprehensible without this summer. It is you I have to thank for that, I owe you everything I will ever be able to attain, no matter how the future will deal with us.

This is what he wrote. And how can Freya answer such a letter? That is very simple. Freya will tell Helmuth about Cologne. She will write about her studies, about her efforts to finish school. Everything is clear, after all. Freya's path now leads to Kreisau.

Helmuth has described the manor to her. It is situated between the hills of the Eulengebirge and the Zobten, nestling in a hollow south of the old highway that connects the West to the East. It is beautiful there. Freya is yearning for Kreisau. That is very strange. She has never been there, after all. Still, she does not yearn for it like for some adventurous distance. She yearns for it the way one does after a long time abroad. She yearns for it like for some lost place to which one ultimately seeks to return. But maybe this is not so strange, after all.

After all, home is not this house any more, with its dining halls and ballrooms, its chambers and nooks, its gates and yards and stairways, where Freya has been raised, but Helmuth von Moltke. That cannot be changed any more: It is not a feeling, but a fact. Freya looks at the letter in her hand. She reads the last lines again,

I feel fresh, well, full of strength, full of elation, that is solely your doing. I hope that one day I will be able to love you with all intensity, because what I feel now is only a beginning, the start of a development that will open up heights to me that even four weeks ago were unattainable to me – a development, the pinnacle of

which as yet defies estimation, and that is capable of making everything of me.

Freya looks past the letter, out of the window. Ahead, the chamber of the future lies, open. It is a vast room/space, dusky. It is unknown, but not completely unfamiliar. Some things in the foreground can even be perceived quite clearly: her answering letter, then his. Her leather suitcase, which she has not yet unpacked, open, newly packed for the journey from Cologne to Silesia, from West to East, across the whole Reich. The confusion of Cologne's main station. A jolt, the puffing of a train. A handkerchief in the wind. The familiar gables and squares of Cologne, spotted once more through the train window: looking for the very last time exactly like that, from a train window. A bit further back in the chamber of the future, things start to become hazy.

Her suitcase on a strange railway platform that is narrow and rural. A horse and carriage come to collect her. A house on a hill. Faces she does not know, voices, hands stretched out. And even further back in the room, everything disappears, dissolves into a luminous twilight, like into thin milk.

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„Helmuth, may I introduce Harald Poelchau to you, the Prison Chaplain of Tegel and Plötzensee.“

Horst von Einsiedel has brought Harald Poelchau with him to the Derfflingerstraße. Einsiedel and Poelchau know each other through their teachers: Einsiedel has studied with sociologist and economist Adolf Löwe, who taught at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research in the early Thirties, just like Paul Tillich. Helmuth has regaled his guests with fried squabs from Kreisau. Now the table has been cleared. The conversation has turned to Poelchau's tasks.

“Inconceivable“, Helmuth says. “Incomprehensible how you cope with the experience.“ He says: “What do you do, how do you bridge those hours? Those hours of the night, alone with a human being who knows they are his last. What goes on in a person then? What does sustain you when the end has come, when there is absolutely no hope any more?“

In Kreisau Freya is pacing up and down. Once more she has spared Helmuth. Helmuth left yesterday, and today, she has promptly gone into labour. Freya is pacing the bedroom, up and down, up and down, leaning on her sister-in-law Asta. Nothing else exists any more now. There is neither past nor future. There is only the task ahead, this enormous, utterly ordinary task. Freya has to give birth to a child.

“How might these hours pass?“ Helmuth says. “Of course, it is dreadful. But still, it raises questions that do not normally emerge in such totality, such stark absoluteness. Do you offer Holy Communion to the condemned?“

“No“, Harald Poelchau says. “I do not offer it. But more than half request it.“

Freya has sat down on the bed. The pains come now at short intervals. Freya tries not to fight them. Fighting pain only sharpens it. She tries not to wrestle with the pain, but to affirm it. This is a necessary transition. This is a beginning.

“When a man has reached the end“, Helmuth Moltke says. “What happens to him then?“

“Then there is only eternity to advice and comfort you.“

“You mean the Christian belief in eternal life.“

“Not necessarily. A firm, unshakeable belief is essential, in something that transcends your own life.“

Freya has lain down. The child’s head is now entering his mother’s pelvis. The child has been lying on the side in order to be able to pass through the transverse diameter of the pelvic inlet. Now he turns so that he faces backwards, in the direction of the coccyx. The pain is strong. Meanwhile the midwife has arrived, and the doctor is there.

„Do you want anesthesia?“

„No. No. I think I can manage without it.“

“Is it easier for simple people?“ Helmuth asks.

He sits leaning forward, he searches Poelchau’s eyes.

“Waiting for death. Would you say that these last hours are easier for those who are uneducated, less intellectual? Or maybe even harder?“

“I do not think it is a question of education“, Harald Poelchau says. They still sit around the table at Derfflingerstraße. It has grown quite late. “Young people usually die easier than older ones“, Harald Poelchau says. “They are still quite free. Death ist hardest for those who were actively engaged in the most fields. It is hardest for those who have to cut many roots.“

It is hard work. Freya is wet with sweat. She gasps. Sie pushes. The child pushes forward into the world. The mother wants to deliver it into the world. Mother and child are working together. This work is a Yes full of passion: With every child, everything begins from scratch. With every child, the world is created anew.

„Push. Push. Push.“

“Everyone who looks back on his life, needs forgiveness“, Harald Poelchau says. “Even the best need forgiveness. Maybe they long for it most of all. For God’s forgiveness. For the forgiveness of others, those they did not do justice to during their lifetime.“

The child’s head has arrived. There is a pause. Freya pants. The midwife stands ready. Asta wipes the sweat off Freya’s face. The next pain comes. Again, the child turns.

“At the end, it is all about dying at peace with yourself“, Poelchau says. “To be able to face yourself with a clear conscience. After all, nobody faces death as well-prepared as a sentenced man, who has been waiting for his execution.“

The telephone rings.

“Excuse me.”

Helmuth walks out into the hall.

When he returns, the subject of the conversation has changed: Harald Poelchau und Horst von Einsiedel are now talking about the progression of the war. Helmuth joins them at the table. He is silent for a while, then participates in a discussion about General Timoschenko, the siege of Leningrad, the conquest of Kiev. Only when his guests are already saying goodbye does he mention the call. Kreisau has telephoned. Helmuth Moltke has a second son.

In the night, Helmuth sleeps, wakes up, sleeps again. When he is awake, pictures drift by: the blossoming linden trees full of bees during his mother's funeral on the 14th of June, 1935. The castle in October, in a whirl of falling leaves. The tasks waiting for him at home, the Berghaus, his two little sons, one of them only a few hours old. He thinks of Freya, who is now lying there. Is she asleep? Is she awake? Does she hold the child in her arms? Has little Caspar seen his brother already? Probably not, it is night. Asta is with them, though. She will watch over Freya. All thoughts are quiet and clear, peaceful. Helmuth thinks of Poelchau, of his talk with the Pastor. He thinks that the murderer ist to be pitied more than his victim. He has always thought that. He feels it, deeply. And what is there left to do? Does it make sense what Helmuth Moltke is doing? The effort, the struggle, the risk? But do not only those things that you undertake with the full awareness of the futility of all efforts make sense? The world cannot be saved, it cannot be redeemed. So you have to keep struggling. The thought passes. The night passes. He thinks of Freya, weeding the beds in the vegetable garden, of little Caspar. Of the child he has not yet seen. He dozes, half asleep. He sleeps.

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Marion crosses the dooryard. She tears off the seal the Gestapo has fastend to the door lock, she inserts the key. The key turns. The door opens. Marion enters her house. It is completely silent. Mariechen is in Silesia. Helmuth Moltke, Eugen Gerstenmaier and Peter are in jail. Has Marion ever been all by herself, in this house?

Marion enters the living room. The Bible still lies on the armrest of his chair. Marion enters the kitchen. She opens the cupboard. She touches the cups out of which they drank, morning after morning: a man and a woman, chatting, or reading the paper in mute intimacy that the objects shared. The faithful objects that accompany their owners, that adapt to them, silent and real, so that life, in its rhythm of little everyday activities, could be expressed through them: through the objects without which life would be unthinkable, and which are all still there. The house surrounds Marion. It safeguards cup, spoon, comb, lamp, Peter's slippers in the hall, his winter coat in the closet, his scarf. Marion climbs the stairs.

She enters the bedroom. She sits down on the bed for a moment. She touches the bedspread, the pillow. The house envelops the objects, and Marion. It envelops everything, golden and warm, eternal, withdrawn from time. Already gone. Already part of a time that has ended, has been ended. Marion goes downstairs again. Maybe tomorrow a bomb will hit her house, maybe the day after tomorrow, the Gestapo will empty it. In the living room, dust dances in the sunlight. Beyond the windows, there is that which does not need humans. That which lives and breathes without them: flowers, trees, earth, and sky. Marion sits down in her armchair, across from his.

She sits in her chair while the dust dances in the sealed house, in the gradually fading light. She thinks of him the way she thinks of herself, without thinking a name. It seems he is breathing next to her. It seems he has left the room for a moment, to return straight away, any second, now. From somewhere, it strikes five.

Sonderaktion. The Plötzensee jail holds its breath. The inmates have all been locked up in their cells, nobody is working any more. The librarian and his cellmate have pushed the table under the window. They are balancing on their toes, clinging to the bars of the window. The yard is crawling with Gestapo. Then the prisoners are being brought in. They are led across Yard III, their hands bound, each of them flanked by two policemen.

“Those must be men of July 20, for sure.“

“That one there. I think I recognize him. I think that is – yes. That’s him. Man! That is General von Hase. The townmajor of Berlin.“

“The townmajor. Unbelievable. And who might that be?“

A tall slim man. A finely cut face.

“No idea.“

“There’s a camera. They are bringing a movie camera.“

The man with the fine features raises his head before he enters the jail. One last time, he raises his face to the sun.

The executions of August 8 are supposed to start at 17:25 with the hanging of Fiel Marshal Erwin von Witzleben. Next will be Paula Bonhoeffer’s brother, the townmajor of Berlin Paul von Hase. After him, Colonel-General Erich Hoepner will die, then Major General Hellmuth Stieff, Lieutenant Colonel Robert Bernardis, Captain Friedrich Karl Klausung, First Lieutenant Albrecht von Hagen, and last, at 17.46, Peter Graf Yorck von Wartenburg. Peter Yorck had asked to once again receive Communion from Pastor Hanns Lilje. Of course, his request was refused.

“Count Yorck.“

“Dear Poelchau. Oh, this is wonderful.“

Harald Poelchau has made it. He has managed to get through to Peter Yorck. Until the beginning of the executions, the Gestapo has kept him and his colleague Pastor Buchholz from entering the cells. But now nobody pays any heed to the clergymen any more. Peter Yorck and Harald Poelchau have precisely as long now as it takes the other condemned men to die.

“How wonderful that you could come“, Peter Yorck says. “I did not expect such a dear visitor any more. They seem to be in a great hurry with us.“ Peter leans forward. He lowers his voice. “Not all connections have been discovered yet. Many will be able to save themselves. I will not mention any names. But let this become general knowledge, if at all possible.“



And why does this man have to die? Why he, amidst the great universal dying? But of course, all those who die are individuals, each one of them a unique gift to the world.

“I have written to Marion, also to my mother and Bia“, Peter says. “Still, please convey to them once again my deepest, most heartfelt greetings. Tell them that even in here, I never lost the certainty of being a child of God. I feel free of the enslaving powers, free of sin and death. I go to meet my Judge full of confidence. We have not kept the fifth commandment, that is true. We have not belonged to the peaceful ones. But that was just not possible for us, not in these times. Would you say the Lord’s Prayer with me?”

Our Father, which art in heaven

Outside in the hall footsteps, voices, the rattle of keys. They are coming. Harald Poelchau und Peter Graf Yorck von Wartenburg are holding hands. They stand forehead to forehead.

And forgive us our trespasses,

as we forgive them that trespass against us

The door of the cell flies open. Glaring spotlights. A camera.

And lead us not into temptation

But deliver us from evil

“Vacate the cell. Out, everybody out!”

For thine is the kingdom

“Get that pastor out!”

“Pastor Poelchau, please come.“

and the power, and the glory

Hands grab Poelchau, drag him away.

“I saw her“, Peter Yorck calls after him. “My wife. I saw her standing by the side of the road!”

“I will tell her!”

for ever and ever.

Amen

From over by the church, it strikes six. Marion gets up. She looks around in the living room of Hortensienstraße 50 one more time. She takes her bag, she takes her key. Every moment, every movement, every activity is separated from the ordinary run of things like the moment of Holy Communion. Every



moment, every movement, every activity is a single drop, its fall into the river of time clearly audible. Marion crosses the hall. She opens the front door. She closes the front door. She crosses the yard. Behind her stands the house, in which the objects keep their place, grave and silent. Inside her is black water that rises and rises.

(written/translated by Sabine Friedrich, edited by Myriam Fullard)