

CHAPTER I. THE ZONE OF INTEREST

I. THOMSEN: FIRST SIGHT

I was no stranger to the flash of lightning; I was no stranger to the thunderbolt. Enviably experienced in these matters, I was no stranger to the cloudburst – the cloudburst, and then the sunshine and the rainbow.

She was coming back from the Old Town with her two daughters, and they were already well within the Zone of Interest. Up ahead, waiting to receive them stretched an avenue – almost a colonnade – of maples, their branches and lobed leaves interlocking overhead. A late afternoon in midsummer, with minutely glinting midges . . . My notebook lay open on a tree stump, and the breeze was flicking inquisitively through its pages.

Tall, broad, and full, and yet light of foot, in a crenellated white ankle-length dress and a cream-coloured straw hat with a black band, and swinging a straw bag (the girls, also in white, had the straw hats and the straw bags), she moved in and out of pockets of fuzzy, fawny, leonine warmth. She laughed – head back, with tautened throat. Moving in parallel, I kept pace, in my tailored tweed jacket and twills, with my clipboard, my fountain pen.

Now the three of them crossed the drive of the Equestrian Academy. Teasingly circled by her children she moved past the ornamental windmill, the maypole, the three-wheeled gallows, the carthorse slackly tethered to the iron water pump, and then moved beyond.

Into the Kat Zet – into Kat Zet I.

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Something happened at first sight. Lightning, thunder, cloudburst, sunshine, rainbow – the meteorology of first sight.

Her name was Hannah – Mrs Hannah Doll.

In the Officers' Club, seated on a horsehair sofa, surrounded by horse brass and horse prints, and drinking cups of ersatz coffee (coffee for horses), I said to my lifelong friend Boris Eltz,

'For a moment I was young again. It was like love.'

'Love?'

'I said *like* love. Don't look so stricken. *Like* love. A feeling of inevitability. You know. Like the birth of a long and wonderful romance. Romantic love.'

'Déjà vu and all the usual stuff? Go on. Jog my memory.'

'Well. Painful admiration. Painful. And feelings of humility and unworthiness. Like with you and Esther.'

'That's completely different,' he said, raising a horizontal digit. 'That's just fatherly. You'll understand when you see her.'

'Anyway. Then it passed and I . . . And I just started wondering what she'd look like with all her clothes off.'

'There you are, you see? I never wonder what Esther'd look like with all her clothes off. If it happened I'd be aghast. I'd shield my eyes.'

'And would you shield your eyes, Boris, from Hannah Doll?'

'Mm. Who'd have thought the Old Boozer would've got someone as good as that.'

'I know. Incredible.'

'The Old *Boozer*. Think, though. I'm sure he was always a boozer. But he wasn't always old.'

I said, 'The girls are what? Twelve, thirteen? So she's our age. Or a bit younger.'

'And the Old Boozer knocked her up when she was – eighteen?'

'When *he* was our age.'

‘All right. Marrying him was forgivable, I suppose,’ said Boris. He shrugged. ‘Eighteen. But she hasn’t left him, has she. How do you laugh that one off?’

‘I know. It’s difficult to . . .’

‘Mm. She’s too tall for me. And come to think of it, she’s too tall for the Old Boozier.’

And we asked each other yet again: Why would anyone bring his wife and children here? Here?

I said, ‘This is an environment more suited to the male.’

‘Oh, I don’t know. Some of the women don’t mind it. Some of the women are the same as the men. Take your Auntie Gerda. She’d love it here.’

‘Aunt Gerda might approve in principle,’ I said. ‘But she wouldn’t love it here.’

‘Will Hannah love it here, do you think?’

‘She doesn’t look as though she’ll love it here.’

‘No, she doesn’t. But don’t forget she’s the unestranged wife of Paul Doll.’

‘Mm. Then perhaps she’ll settle in nicely,’ I said. ‘I hope so. My physical appearance works better on women who love it here.’

‘. . . *We* don’t love it here.’

‘No. But we’ve got each other, thank God. That’s not nothing.’

‘True, dearest. You’ve got me and I’ve got you.’

Boris, my permanent familiar – emphatic, intrepid, handsome, like a little Caesar. Kindergarten, childhood, adolescence, and then, later on, our cycling holidays in France and England and Scotland and Ireland, our three-month trek from Munich to Reggio and then on to Sicily. Only in adulthood did our friendship run into difficulties, when politics – when history – came down on our lives. He said,

‘You, you’ll be off by Christmas. I’m here till June. Why aren’t I out east?’ He sipped and scowled and lit a cigarette. ‘By the way, your chances, brother, are non-existent. *Where*, for instance? She’s far too conspicuous. And you be careful. The

Old Boozer may be the Old Boozer but he's also the Commandant.'

'Mm. Still. Stranger things have happened.'

'*Much* stranger things have happened.'

Yes. Because it was a time when everybody felt the fraudulence, the sarcastic shamelessness, and the breathtaking hypocrisy of all prohibitions. I said,

'I've got a kind of plan.'

Boris sighed and looked vacant.

'First I'll need to hear from Uncle Martin. Then I'll make my opening move. Pawn to queen four.'

After a while Boris said, 'I think that pawn's for it.'

'Probably. But there's no harm in having a good look.'

Boris Eltz took his leave: he was expected on the ramp. A month of staggered ramp duty was his punishment within a punishment for yet another fistfight. The ramp – the detrainment, the selection, then the drive through the birch wood to the Little Brown Bower, in Kat Zet II.

'The most eerie bit's the selection,' said Boris. 'You ought to come along one day. For the experience.'

I ate lunch alone in the Officers' Mess (half a chicken, peaches and custard. No wine) and went on to my office at the Buna-Werke. There was a two-hour meeting with Burckl and Seedig, mostly concerning itself with the slow progress of the carbide production halls; but it also became clear that I was losing my battle about the relocation of our labour force.

At dusk I betook myself to the cubicle of Ilse Grese, back in Kat Zet I.

Ilse Grese loved it here.

I knocked on the gently swinging tin door and entered.

Like the teenager she still was (twenty next month), Ilse sat

hunched and cross-ankled halfway down the cot, reading an illustrated magazine; she did not choose to look up from its pages. Her uniform was hooked on the nail in the metal beam, under which I now ducked; she was wearing a fibrous dark-blue housecoat and baggy grey socks. Without turning round she said,

‘Aha. I smell Icelander. I smell arsehole.’

Ilse’s habitual manner with me, and perhaps with all her menfriends, was one of sneering languor. My habitual manner with her, and with every woman, at least at first, was floridly donnish (I had evolved this style as a counterweight to my physical appearance, which some, for a while, found forbidding). On the floor lay Ilse’s gunbelt and also her oxbide whip, coiled like a slender serpent in sleep.

I took off my shoes. As I sat and made myself comfortable against the curve of her back I dangled over her shoulder an amulet of imported scent on a gilt chain.

‘It’s the Icelandic arsehole. What’s he want?’

‘Mm, Ilse, the state of your room. You always look impeccable when you’re going about your work – I’ll grant you that. But in the private sphere . . . And you’re quite a stickler for order and cleanliness in others.’

‘What’s the arsehole want?’

I said, ‘What is wanted?’ And I continued, with thoughtful lulls between the sentences. ‘What is wanted is that you, Ilse, should come to my place around ten. There I will ply you with brandy and chocolate and costly gifts. I will listen as you tell me about your most recent ups and downs. My generous sympathy will soon restore your sense of proportion. Because a sense of proportion, Ilse, is what you’ve been known, very occasionally, to lack. Or so Boris tells me.’

‘. . . Boris doesn’t love me any more.’

‘He was singing your praises just the other day. I’ll have a word with him if you like. You will come, I hope, at ten. After our talk and your treats, there will be a sentimental interlude. That is what is wanted.’

Ilse went on reading – an article strongly, indeed angrily arguing that women should on no account shave or otherwise depilate their legs or their armpits.

I got to my feet. She looked up. The wide and unusually crinkly and undulating mouth, the eye sockets of a woman three times her age, the abundance and energy of the dirty-blonde hair.

‘You’re an asshole.’

‘Come at ten. Will you?’

‘Maybe,’ she said, turning the page. ‘And maybe not.’

In the Old Town the housing stock was so primitive that the Buna people had been obliged to build a kind of dormitory settlement in the rural eastern suburbs (it contained a lower and upper school, a clinic, several shops, a cafeteria, and a taproom, as well as scores of restive housewives). Nevertheless, I soon found a quite serviceable set of chintzily furnished rooms up a steep lane off the market square. 9, Dzilka Street.

There was one serious drawback: I had mice. After the forcible displacement of its owners, the property was used as a builders’ squat for nearly a year, and the infestation had become chronic. Although the little creatures managed to stay out of sight, I could almost constantly hear them as they busied themselves in the crannies and runnels, scurrying, squeaking, feeding, breeding . . .

On her second visit my charlady, young Agnes, deposited a large male feline, black with white trimmings, named Max, or Maksik (pronounced Makseech). Max was a legendary mouser. All I would be needing, said Agnes, was a fortnightly visit from Max; he would appreciate the odd saucer of milk, but there would be no need to give him anything solid.

It wasn’t long before I learned respect for this skilful and unobtrusive predator. Maksik had a tuxedoed appearance – charcoal suit, perfectly triangular white dickey, white spats. When he

dipped low and stretched his front legs, his paws fanned out prettily, like daisies. And every time Agnes scooped him up and took him away with her, Max – having weekended with me – left behind him an established silence.

In such a silence I drew, or rather amassed, a hot bath (kettle, pots, buckets), and rendered myself particularly trim and handsome for Ilse Grese. I laid out her cognac and candies, plus four sealed pairs of hardy pantihose (for she disdained stockings), and I waited, looking out at the old ducal castle, as black as Max against the evening sky.

Ilse was punctual. All she said, and she said it faintly sneeringly, and deeply languidly, as soon as the door closed behind her: all she said was – ‘Quick.’



So far as I could determine, the wife of the Commandant, Hannah Doll, took her daughters to school, and brought them back again, but otherwise she hardly left the house.

She did not attend either of the two experimental *thés dansants*; she did not attend the cocktail party in the Political Department thrown by Fritz Mobius; and she did not attend the gala screening of the romantic comedy *Two Happy People*.

On each of these occasions Paul Doll could not but put in an appearance. He did so always with the same expression on his face: that of a man heroically mastering his hurt pride . . . He had a way of tubing his lips, as if planning to whistle – until (or so it seemed) some bourgeois scruple assailed him, and the mouth recomposed itself into a beak.

Mobius said, ‘No Hannah, Paul?’

I moved closer.

‘Indisposed,’ said Doll. ‘You know how it is. The proverbial time of the month?’

‘Dear oh dear.’

On the other hand, I *did* get a pretty good view of her, and for several minutes, through the threadbare hedge at the far end of the sports ground (as I was walking by I paused, and pretended to consult my notebook). Hannah was on the lawn, supervising a picnic for her two daughters and one of their friends – the daughter of the Seedigs, I was fairly sure. The wickerwork basket was still being unpacked. She didn’t settle down with them on the red rug but occasionally dropped into a crouch and then re-erected herself with a vigorous swivel of her haunches.

If not in dress then certainly in silhouette (with her face occluded), Hannah Doll conformed to the national ideal of young femininity, stolid, countrified, and built for procreation and heavy work. Thanks to my physical appearance, I was the beneficiary of extensive carnal knowledge of this type. I had hoiked up and unfurled many a three-ply dirndl, I had eased off many a pair of furry bloomers, I had tossed over my shoulder many a hobnailed clog.

I? I was six foot three. The colour of my hair was a frosty white. The Flemish chute of the nose, the disdainful pleat of the mouth, the shapely pugnacity of the chin; the right-angled hinges of the jaw seemed to be riveted into place beneath the minimal curlicues of the ears. My shoulders were flat and broad, my chest slablike, my waist slender; the extensile penis, classically compact in repose (with pronounced prepuce), the thighs as solid as hewn masts, the kneecaps square, the calves Michelangelan, the feet hardly less pliant and shapely than the great tentacled blades of the hands. To round out the panoply of these timely and opportune attractions, my arctic eyes were a cobalt blue.

All I needed was word from Uncle Martin, a specific order from Uncle Martin in the capital – and I would act.

‘Good evening.’

‘Yes?’

On the steps of the orange villa I found myself confronted by an unsettling little character in thickly knitted woollens (jerkin and skirt) and with bright silver buckles on her shoes.

‘Is the master of the house at home?’ I asked. I knew perfectly well that Doll was elsewhere. He was out on the ramp with the doctors, and with Boris and many others, to receive Special Train 105 (and Special Train 105 was expected to be troublesome). ‘You see, I have a high-priority—’

‘Humilia?’ said a voice. ‘What is it, Humilia?’

A displacement of air further back and there she was, Hannah Doll, again in white, shimmering in the shadows. Humilia coughed politely and withdrew.

‘Madam, I’m so sorry to impose,’ I said. ‘My name is Golo Thomsen. It is a pleasure to meet you.’

Finger by finger I briskly plucked off the chamois glove and held out my hand, which she took. She said,

“‘Golo’?”

‘Yes. Well, it was my first attempt to say Angelus. I made a mess of it, as you see. But it stuck. Our blunders haunt us all our lives, don’t you think?’

‘. . . How can I help you, Mr Thomsen?’

‘Mrs Doll, I have some rather urgent news for the Commandant.’

‘Oh?’

‘I don’t want to be melodramatic, but a decision has been reached in the Chancellery on a matter that I know is his paramount concern.’

She continued to look at me in frank appraisal.

‘I saw you once,’ she said. ‘I remember because you weren’t in uniform. Are you ever in uniform? What is it you do exactly?’

‘I liaise,’ I said and gave a shallow bow.

‘If it’s important then I suppose you’d better wait. I’ve no idea where he is.’ She shrugged. ‘Would you care for some lemonade?’

‘No – I wouldn’t put you to the bother.’
‘It’s no bother for me. Humilia?’

We now stood in the rosy glow of the main room, Mrs Doll standing with her back to the chimney piece, Mr Thomsen poised before the central window and gazing out over the perimeter watchtowers and the bits and pieces of the Old Town in the middle distance.

‘Charming. This is charming. Tell me,’ I said with a regretful smile. ‘Can you keep a secret?’

Her gaze steadied. Seen up close, she was more southern, more Latin in colouring; and her eyes were an unpatriotic dark brown, like moist caramel, with a viscid glisten. She said,

‘Well I *can* keep a secret. When I want to.’

‘Oh good. The thing is,’ I said, quite untruthfully, ‘the thing is I’m very interested in interiors, in furnishings and design. You can see why I wouldn’t want that to get about. Not very manly.’

‘No, I suppose not.’

‘So was it your idea – the marble surfaces?’

My hope was to distract her and also to set her in motion. Now Hannah Doll talked, gestured, moved from window to window; and I had the chance to assimilate. Yes, she was certainly built on a stupendous scale: a vast enterprise of aesthetic coordination. And the head, the span of the mouth, the might of the teeth and jaws, the supple finish of her cheeks – square-headed but shapely, with the bones curving upward and outward. I said,

‘And the covered veranda?’

‘It was either that or the—’

Humilia came through the open doors with the tray and the stone pitcher, and two platefuls of pastries and biscuits.

‘Thank you, Humilia dear.’

When we were again alone I said mildly, ‘Your maid, Mrs Doll. Is she by any chance a Witness?’

Hannah held back till some domestic vibration, undetectable by me, freed her to go on, not quite in a whisper, 'Yes, she is. I don't understand them. She has a religious face, don't you think?'

'Very much so.' Humilia's face was markedly indeterminate, indeterminate as to sex and indeterminate as to age (an unharmonious blend of female and male, of young and old); yet, under the solid quiff of her cress-like hair, she beamed with a terrible self-sufficiency. 'It's the rimless glasses.'

'How old would you say she is?'

'Uh – thirty-five?'

'She's fifty. I think she looks like that because she thinks she's never going to die.'

'Mm. Well, that would be very cheering.'

'And it's all so simple.' She bent and poured, and we took our seats, Hannah on the quilted sofa, I on a rustic wooden chair. 'All she's got to do is sign a document, and that's the end of it. She's free.'

'Mm. Just *abjure*, as they say.'

'Yes, but you know . . . Humilia couldn't be more devoted to my two girls. And she's got a child of her own. A boy of twelve. Who's in state care. And all she's got to do is sign a form and she can go and get him. And she doesn't. She won't.'

'It's curious, isn't it. I'm told they're meant to *like* suffering.' And I remembered Boris's description of a Witness on the flogging post; but I would not be regaling Hannah with it – the way the Witness pleaded for more. 'It gratifies their faith.'

'Imagine.'

'They love it.'

Seven o'clock was now nearing, and the room's blushful light suddenly dropped and settled . . . I had had many remarkable successes at this phase of the day, many startling successes, when the dusk, as yet unopposed by lamp or lantern, seems to confer an impalpable licence – rumours of dream-strange possibilities. Would it be so unwelcome, really, if I quietly joined her on the

sofa and, after some murmured compliments, took her hand, and (depending on how that went) gently smoothed my lips against the base of her neck? Would it?

‘My husband,’ she said – and stopped as if to listen.

The words hung in the air and for a moment I was jarred by this reminder: the ever more bewildering fact that her husband was the Commandant. But I endeavoured to go on looking serious and respectful. She said,

‘My husband thinks we have much to learn from them.’

‘From the Witnesses? What?’

‘Oh, you know,’ she said neutrally, almost sleepily. ‘Strength of belief. Unshakeable belief.’

‘The virtues of zeal.’

‘That’s what we’re all meant to have, isn’t it?’

I sat back and said, ‘One can see why your husband admires their zealotry. But what about their pacifism?’

‘No. Obviously.’ In her numbed voice she went on, ‘Humilia won’t clean his uniform. Or polish his boots. He doesn’t like that.’

‘No. I bet he doesn’t.’

At this point I was registering how thoroughly the invocation of the Commandant had lowered the tone of this very promising and indeed mildly enchanting encounter. So I softly clapped my hands and said,

‘Your garden, Mrs Doll. Could we? I’m afraid I have another rather shameful confession to make. I adore flowers.’

It was a space divided in two: on the right, a willow tree, partly screening the low outbuildings and the little network of paths and avenues where, no doubt, the daughters loved to play and hide; to the left, the rich beds, the striped lawn, the white fence – and, beyond, the Monopoly Building on its sandy rise, and beyond that the first pink smears of sunset.

‘A paradise. Such gorgeous tulips.’

‘They’re poppies,’ she said.

‘Poppies, of course. What are those ones over there?’

After a few more minutes of this, Mrs Doll, having not yet smiled in my company, gave a laugh of euphonious surprise and said,

‘You know *nothing* about flowers, do you? You don’t even . . . You know nothing about flowers.’

‘I *do* know something about flowers,’ I said, perhaps dangerously emboldened. ‘And it’s something not known to many men. Why do women love flowers so?’

‘Go on then.’

‘All right. Flowers make women feel beautiful. When I present a woman with a plush bouquet, I know it will make her feel beautiful.’

‘. . . Who told you that?’

‘My mother. God rest her.’

‘Well she was right. You feel like a film star. For days on end.’

Dizzily I said, ‘And this is to the credit of both of you. To the credit of flowers and to the credit of womankind.’

And Hannah asked me, ‘Can *you* keep a secret?’

‘Most assuredly.’

‘Come.’

There was, I believed, a hidden world that ran alongside the world we knew; it existed *in potentia*; to gain admission to it, you had to pass through the veil or film of the customary, and *act*. With a hurrying gait Hannah Doll led me down the cindery path to the greenhouse, and the light was holding, and would it be so strange, really, to urge her on inside and to lean into her and gather in my dropped hands the white folds of her dress? Would it? Here? Where everything was allowed?

She opened the half-glass door and, not quite entering, leaned

over and rummaged in a flowerpot on a low shelf . . . To tell the truth, in my amatory transactions I hadn't had a decent thought in my head for seven or eight years (earlier, I was something of a romantic. But I let that go). And as I watched Hannah curve her body forward, with her tensed rump and one mighty leg thrown up and out behind her for balance, I said to myself: This would be a *big* fuck. A *big* fuck: that was what I said to myself.

Now righting her body, she faced me and opened her palm. Revealing what? A crumpled packet of Davidoffs: a packet of five. There were three left.

'Do you want one?'

'I don't smoke cigarettes,' I said, and produced from my pockets an expensive lighter and a tin of Swiss cheroots. Moving nearer, I scraped the flint and raised the flame, protecting it from the breeze with my hand . . .

This little ritual was of high socio-sexual signifiqance – for we dwelt in a land, she and I, where it amounted to an act of illicit collusion. In bars and restaurants, in hotels, railway stations, et cetera, you saw printed signs saying Women Asked Not To Use Tobacco; and in the streets it was incumbent on men of a certain type – many of them smokers – to upbraid wayward women and dash the cigarette from their fingers or even from their lips. She said,

'I know I shouldn't.'

'Don't listen to them, Mrs Doll. Heed our poet. *You shall abstain, shall abstain. That is the eternal song.*'

'I find it helps a bit', she said, 'with the smell.'

That last word was still on her tongue when we heard something, something borne on the wind . . . It was a helpless, quavering chord, a fugal harmony of human horror and dismay. We stood quite still with our eyes swelling in our heads. I could feel my body clench itself for more and greater alarms. But then came a shrill silence, like a mosquito whirring in your ear, followed, half a minute later, by the hesitantly swerving upswell of violins.

There seemed to be no such thing as speech. We smoked on, with soundless inhalations.

Hannah placed the two butts in an empty bag of seeds which she then buried in the lidless rubbish barrel.

‘What’s your favourite pudding?’

‘Um. Semolina,’ I said.

‘Semolina? Semolina’s *ghastly*. What about trifle?’

‘Trifle has its points.’

‘Which would you rather be, be blind or deaf?’

‘Blind, Paulette,’ I said.

‘Blind? Blind’s *much* worse. Deaf!’

‘Blind, Sybil.’ I said. ‘Everyone feels sorry for blind people. But everyone *hates* deaf people.’

I reckoned I had done pretty well with the girls, on two counts – by producing several little sachets of French sweets and, more saliently, by dissimulating my surprise when told that they were twins. Being non-identical, Sybil and Paulette were just a pair of sisters born at the same time; but they looked not even distantly related, Sybil taking after her mother while Paulette, several inches shorter, helplessly fulfilled the grim promise of her forename.

‘Mummy,’ said Paulette, ‘what was that dreadful noise?’

‘Oh, just some people fooling about. Pretending it’s Walpurgis Night and trying to scare each other.’

‘Mummy,’ said Sybil, ‘why does Daddy always know whether I’ve cleaned my teeth?’

‘What?’

‘He’s always right. I ask him how and he says, *Daddy knows everything*. But how does he know?’

‘He’s just teasing you. Humilia, it’s a Friday but let’s get their bath going.’

‘Oh, Mummy. Can we have ten minutes with Bohdan and Torquil and Dov?’

‘Five minutes. Say goodnight to Mr Thomsen.’

Bohdan was the Polish gardener (old, tall, and of course very lean), Torquil was the pet tortoise, and Dov, it seemed, was Bohdan’s teenage helper. Under the swathes of the willow tree – the crouching twins, Bohdan, another helper (a local girl called Bronislawa), Dov, and tiny Humilia, the Witness . . .

As we looked on Hannah said, ‘He was a professor of zoology, Bohdan. In Cracow. Just think. He used to be there. And now he’s here.’

‘Mm. Mrs Doll, how often do you come to the Old Town?’

‘Oh. Most weekdays. Humilia sometimes does it, but I usually take them to school and back.’

‘My rooms there, I’m trying to improve them, and I’ve run out of ideas. It’s probably just a question of drapery. I was wondering if you might be able to look in one day and see what you thought.’

Profile to profile. Now face to face.

She folded her arms and said, ‘And how do you imagine that might be arranged?’

‘There’s not much to arrange, is there? Your husband would never know.’ I went this far because my hour with Hannah had wholly convinced me that somebody like her could have no fondness, none, for somebody like him. ‘Would you consider it?’

She stared at me long enough to see my smile begin to curdle.

‘No. Mr Thomsen, that’s a very reckless suggestion . . . And you don’t understand. Even if you think you do.’ She stepped back. ‘Let yourself in through the door there if you still want to wait. Go on. You can read Wednesday’s *Observer*.’

‘Thank you. Thank you for your hospitality, Hannah.’

‘It’s nothing, Mr Thomsen.’

‘I’ll be seeing you, won’t I, Mrs Doll, on Sunday week? The Commandant was kind enough to ask me to attend.’

She folded her arms and said, 'Then I suppose I will be seeing you. So long.'

'So long.'

With impatiently quaking fingers Paul Doll upended the decanter over his brandy balloon. He drank, as if for thirst, and poured again. He said over his shoulder,

'D'you want some of this?'

'If you wouldn't mind, Major,' I said. 'Ah. Many thanks.'

'So they've decided. Yea or nay? Let me guess. Yea.'

'Why're you so sure?'

He went and threw himself down on the leather chair, and roughly unbuttoned his tunic.

'Because it'll cause me more difficulties. That seems to be the guiding principle. Let's cause Paul Doll more difficulties.'

'You're right, as usual, sir. I opposed it but it is to come about. Kat Zet III,' I began.

On the chimney piece in Doll's office there stood a framed photograph of perhaps half a metre square with a professional burnish to it (the cameraman was not the Commandant: this was pre-Doll). The background was sharply bisected, a hazy radiance on one side, and a felt-thick darkness on the other. A very young Hannah stood in the light, centre stage (and it *was* a stage – a ball? a masquerade? amateur theatricals?), in a sashed evening gown, cradling a bunch of flowers in arms gloved to the elbow; she was beaming with embarrassment at the extent of her own delight. The sheer gown was cinched at the waist, and there it all lay before you . . .

This was thirteen or fourteen years ago – and she was *far* better now.

They say that it is one of the most terrifying manifestations in nature: a bull elephant in a state of *must*. Twin streams of vile-smelling liquid flow from the ducts of the temples and into the corners of the jaws. At these times the great beast will gore giraffes and hippos, will break the backs of cringeing rhinoceri. This was male-elephantine *heat*.

Must: it derived via Urdu from the Persian *mast* or *maest* – ‘intoxicated’. But I had settled for the modal verb. I must, I must, I just *must*.

The next morning (it was a Saturday) I slipped out of the Buna-Werke with a heavy valise and went back to Dzilka Street, where I began to go through the weekly construction report. This of course would include a mass of estimates for the new amenity at Monowitz.

At two I had a caller; and for forty-five minutes I entertained a young woman called Loremarie Ballach. This meeting was also a parting. She was the wife of Peter Ballach, a colleague of mine (a friendly and capable metallurgist). Loremarie didn’t love it here, and neither did her husband. The cartel had finally authorised his transfer back to HQ.

‘Don’t write,’ she said as she dressed. ‘Not until it’s all over.’

I worked on. This much cement, this much timber, this much barbed wire. At odd moments I registered my relief, as well as my regret, that Loremarie was no more (and would have to be replaced). Adulterous philanderers had a motto: *Seduce the wife, traduce the husband*; and when I was in bed with Loremarie, I always felt a sedimentary unease about Peter – his plump lips, his spluttering laugh, his misbuttoned waistcoat.

That wouldn’t apply in the case of Hannah Doll. The fact that Hannah had married the Commandant: this was not a good reason to be in love with her – but it was a good reason to be in bed

with her. I worked on, adding, subtracting, multiplying, dividing, and yearning for the sound of Boris's motorbike (with its inviting sidecar).

Around half past eight I got up from my desk, intending to fetch a bottle of Sancerre from the roped fridge.

Max – Maksik – sat erect and still on the bare white slats. In his custody, restrained by a negligent paw, was a small and dusty grey mouse. Still trembling with life, it was looking up at him, and seemed to be smiling – seemed to be smiling an apologetic smile; then the life fluttered out of it while Max gazed elsewhere. Was it the pressure of the claws? Was it mortal fright? Whichever it was Max at once settled down to his meal.

I went outside and descended the slope to the Stare Miasto. Empty, as if under curfew.

What was the mouse saying? It was saying, All I can offer, in mitigation, in appeasement, is the totality, the perfection, of my defencelessness.

What was the cat saying? It wasn't saying anything, naturally. Glassy, starry, imperial, of another order, of another world.

When I got back to my rooms Max was stretched out on the carpet in the study. The mouse was gone, devoured without trace, tail and all.

That night, over the black endlessness of the Eurasian plain, the sky held on to its indigo and violet till very late – the colour of a bruise beneath a fingernail.

It was the August of 1942.

*

2. DOLL: THE SELEKTION

‘If Berlin has a change of heart,’ said my caller, ‘I’ll let you know. Sleep well, Major.’ And he was gone.

As you might expect, that ghastly incident on the ramp has left me with a splitting headache. I have just taken 2 aspirin (650 mg; 20.43) and shall doubtlessly rely on a Phanodorm at bedtime. Not a word of solicitude from Hannah, of course. Whilst she could clearly see that I was shaken to the core, she simply turned away with a little lift of the chin – as if, for all the world, *her* hardships were greater than my own . . .

Ah, what’s the matter, dearest sweetling? Have those naughty little girls been ‘playing you up’? Has Bronislawa again fallen short? Are your precious poppies refusing to flower? Dear oh dear – why, that’s almost too tragic to bear. I’ve some suggestions, my petkins. Try doing something for your country, Madam! Try dealing with vicious spoilers like Eikel and Prufer! Try extending Protective Custody to 30, 40, 50,000 people!

Try your hand, fine lady, at receiving Sonderzug 105 . . .

Well, I can’t claim I wasn’t warned. Or can I? I was alerted, true, but to quite another eventuality. Acute tension, then extreme relief – then, once again, drastic pressure. I ought now to be enjoying a moment of respite. But what confronts me, on my return home? *More* difficulties.

Konzentrationslager 3, indeed. No wonder my head is splitting!

There were 2 telegrams. The official communication, from Berlin, read as follows:

JUNE 25

BOURGET–DRANCY DEP 01.00 ARR COMPIEGNE
03.40 DEP 04.40 ARR LAON 06.45 DEP 07.05 ARR REIMS
08.07 DEP 08.38 ARR FRONTIER 14.11 DEP 15.05

JUNE 26

ARRIVE KZA(I) 19.03 END

Perusing this, one had every reason to expect a ‘soft’ transport, as the evacuees would be spending a mere 2 days in transit. Yes, but the 1st missive was followed by a 2nd, from Paris:

DEAR COMRADE DOLL STOP AS OLD FRIEND
ADVISE EXTREME CAUTION VIZ SPECIAL TRAIN
105 STOP YOUR ABILITIES TESTED TO LIMITS
STOP COURAGE STOP WALTHER PABST SALUTES
YOU FROM SACRE COEUR END

Now over the years I have developed a dictum: *Fail to prepare? Prepare to fail!* So I made my arrangements accordingly.

It was now 18.57; and we were primed.

Nobody can say that I don’t cut a pretty imposing figure on the ramp: chest out, with sturdy fists planted on jodhpured hips, and the soles of my jackboots at least a metre apart. And look of what I wielded: I had with me my number 2, Wolfram Prufer, 3 labour managers, 6 physicians and as many disinfectors, my trusty Sonderkommandofuhrer, Szmul, with his 12-man team (3 of whom spoke French), 8 Kapos plus the hosing crew, and a full Storm of 96 troops under Captain Boris Eltz, reinforced by the 8-strong unit deploying the belt-fed, tripod-based heavy machine gun and the 2 flamethrowers. I had also called upon a) Senior Supervisor Grese and her platoon (Grese is admirably firm with recalcitrant females), and b) the current ‘orchestra’ – not the usual dog’s breakfast of banjoes

and accordions and didgeridoos, but a ‘septet’ of 1st-rate violinists from Innsbruck.

(I *like* numbers. They speak of logic, exactitude, and thrift. I’m a little uncertain, sometimes, about ‘one’ – about whether it denotes quantity, or is being used as a . . . ‘pronoun’? But consistency’s the thing. And I *like* numbers. Numbers, numerals, integers. Digits!)

19.01 very slowly became 19.02. We felt the hums and tremors in the rails, and I too felt a rush of energy and strength. There we stood, quite still for a moment, the waiting figures on the spur, at the far end of a rising plain, steppelike in its vastness. The track stretched halfway to the horizon, where, at last, ST 105 silently materialised.

On it came. Coolly I raised my powerful binoculars: the high-shouldered torso of the locomotive, with its single eye, its squat spout. Now the train leaned sideways as it climbed.

‘Passenger cars,’ I said. This was not so unusual with transports from the west. ‘Wait,’ I said. ‘3 *classes*’ . . . The carriages streamed sideways, carriages of yellow and terracotta, *Première, Deuxième, Troisième* – *JEP, NORD, La Flèche d’Or*. Professor Zulz, our head doctor, said drily,

‘Three classes? Well, you know the French. They do everything in style.’

‘Too true, Professor,’ I rejoined. ‘Even the way they hoist the white flag has a certain – a certain *je ne sais quoi*. Not so?’

The good doctor chuckled heartily and said, ‘Damn you, Paul. Touché, my Kommandant.’

Oh yes, we bantered and smiled in the collegial fashion, but make no mistake: we were ready. I motioned with my right hand to Captain Eltz, as the troops – under orders to stand back – took up their positions along the length of the siding. The *Golden Arrow* pulled in, slowed, and halted with a fierce pneumatic sigh.

Now they’re quite right when they say that 1,000 per train is the soundest ‘rule of thumb’ (and that up to 90% of them will be

selected Left). I was already surmising, however, that the customary guidelines would be of scant help to me here.

First to disembark were not the usual trotting shapes of uniformed servicemen or gendarmes but a scattered contingent of baffled-looking middle-aged ‘stewards’ (they wore white bands on the sleeves of their civilian suits). There came another exhausted gasp from the engine, and the scene settled into silence.

Another carriage door swung open. And who alighted? A little boy of about 8 or 9, in a sailor suit, with extravagant bell-bottomed trousers; then an elderly gentleman in an astrakhan overcoat; and then a cronelike figure bent over the pearl handle of an ebony cane – so bent, indeed, that the stick was too high for her, and she had to reach upwards to keep her palm on its glossy knob. Now the other carriage doors opened, and the other passengers detrained.

Well, by this time I was grinning widely and shaking my head, and quietly cursing that old lunatic Walli Pabst – as his telegram of ‘warning’ was clearly nothing more than a practical joke!

A shipment of 1,000? Why, it comprised barely 100. As for the Selektion: all but a few were under 10 or over 60; and even the young adults among them were, so to speak, selected already.

Look. That 30-year-old male has a broad chest, true, but he also has a club foot. That brawny maiden is in the pink of health, assuredly, and yet she is with child. Elsewhere – spinal braces, white sticks.

‘Well, Professor, go about your work,’ I quipped. ‘A stern call on your prognostical skills.’

Zulz of course was looking at me with dancing eyes.

‘Fear not,’ he said. ‘Asclepius and Panacea wing their way to my aid. *I will keep pure and holy both my life and my art.* Paracelsus be my guide.’

‘Tell you what. Go back to the Ka Be,’ I suggested, ‘and do some selecting there. Or have an early supper. It’s poached duck.’

‘Oh, well,’ he said, producing his flask. ‘Now we’re about it. Care for a drop? It’s a lovely evening. I’ll keep you company, if I may.’

He dismissed the junior physicians. I too gave orders to Captain Eltz, and pared my forces, retaining only a 12-strong platoon, 6 Sonders, 3 Kapos, 2 disinfectors (a wise precaution, as it transpired!), the 7 violinists, and Senior Supervisor Grese.

Just then the little bent old lady detached herself from the hesitantly milling arrivals and limped towards us at disconcerting speed, like a scuttling crab. All atremble with ill-mastered anger she said (in quite decent German),

‘Are you in charge here?’

‘Madam, I am.’

‘Do you realise,’ she said, with her jaw juddering, ‘do you *realise* that there was no restaurant wagon on this train?’

I dared not meet Zulz’s eye. ‘No restaurant wagon? Barbaric.’

‘No service at all. Even in 1st class!’

‘Even in 1st class? An outrage.’

‘All we had were the cold cuts we’d brought with us. And we almost ran out of mineral water!’

‘Monstrous.’

‘... Why are you laughing? You laugh. Why are you laughing?’

‘Step back, Madam, if you would,’ I spluttered. ‘Senior Supervisor Grese!’

And so, whilst the luggage was stacked near the handcarts, and whilst the travellers were formed into an orderly column (my Sonders moving among them murmuring ‘*Bienvenu, les enfants*’, ‘*Etes-vous fatigué, Monsieur, après votre voyage?*’), I wryly reminisced about old Walther Pabst. He and I campaigned together in the Rossbach Freikorps. What sweating, snorting chastisements we visited on the Red queers in Munich and Mecklenburg, in the Ruhr and Upper Silesia, and in the Baltic lands of Latvia and Lithuania! And how often, during the long years in prison (after we settled accounts with the traitor Kadow in the Schlageter affair in ’23), would we sit up late in our cell and, between endless games of 2-card brag, discuss, by flickering candlelight, the finer points of philosophy!

I reached for the loudhailer and said,

'Greetings, 1 and all. Now I'm not going to lead you up the garden path. You're here to recuperate and then it's off to the farms with you, where there'll be honest work for honest board. We won't be asking too much of that little young 'un, you there in the sailor suit, or of you, sir, in your fine astrakhan coat. Each to his or her talents and abilities. Fair enough? Very well! 1st, we shall escort you to the sauna for a warm shower before you settle in your rooms. It's just a short drive through the birch wood. Leave your suitcases here, please. You can pick them up at the guest house. Tea and cheese sandwiches will be served immediately, and later there'll be a piping hot stew. Onwards!'

As an added courtesy I handed the horn to Captain Eltz, who repeated the gist of my words in French. Then, quite naturally, it seemed, we fell into step, the fractious old lady, of course, remaining on the ramp, to be dealt with by Senior Supervisor Grese in the appropriate manner.

And I was thinking, Why isn't it always like this? And it would be, if I had my way. A comfortable journey followed by a friendly and dignified reception. What needed we, really, of the crashing doors of those boxcars, the blazing arc lights, the terrible yelling (*'Out! Get out! Quick! Faster! FASTER!'*), the dogs, the truncheons, and the whips? And how civilised the KL looked in the thickening glow of dusk, and how richly the birches glistened. There was, it has to be said, the characteristic odour (and some of our newcomers were sniffing it with little upward jerks of their heads), but after a day of breezy high-pressure weather, even that was nothing out of the . . .

Here it came, that wretched, that accursed *lorry*, the size of a furniture van yet decidedly uncouth – positively thuggish – in aspect, its springs creaking and its exhaust pipe rowdily backfiring, barnacled in rust, the green tarpaulin palpitating, the profiled driver with the stub of a cigarette in his mouth and his tattooed arm dangling from the window of his cab. Violently it braked and

skidded, jolting to a halt as it crossed the rails, its wheels whining for purchase. Now it slumped sickeningly to the left, the near sideflap billowed skyward, and there – for 2 or 3 stark seconds – its cargo stood revealed.

It was a sight no less familiar to me than spring rain or autumn leaves: nothing more than the day's natural wastage from KL1, on its way to KL2. But of course our Parisians let out a great whimpering howl – Zulz reflexively raised his forearms as though to fend it off, and even Captain Eltz jerked his head round at me. The utter breakdown of the transport was but a breath away . . .

Now you don't go far in the Protective Custody business if you can't think on your feet and show a bit of presence of mind. Many another Kommandant, I dare say, would have let the situation at once degenerate into something decidedly unpleasant. Paul Doll, however, happens to be of a rather different stamp. With 1 wordless motion I gave the order. Not to my men-at-arms, no: to my musicians!

The brief transitional interlude was very hard indeed, I admit, as the first strains of the violins could do no more than duplicate and reinforce that helpless, quavering cry. But then the melody took hold; the filthy truck with its flapping tarps lurched free of the crossing and bowled off down the crescent road (and was soon lost to sight); and on we strolled.

It was just as I had instinctively sensed: our guests *were utterly incapable of absorbing what they had seen*. I later learned that they were the inmates of 2 luxurious institutions, a retirement home and an orphanage (both of which were underwritten by the most outrageous swindlers of them all, the Rothschilds). Our Parisians – what knew they of ghetto, of pogrom, of razzia? What knew they of the noble fury of the folk?

We all of us walked as if on tiptoe – yes, we tiptoed through the birch wood, past trunks of hoary grey . . .

The peeling birchbark, the Little Brown Bower with its picket fence and potted geraniums and marigolds, the undressing room,

the chamber. I turned on my heel with a flourish the instant Pruffer gave his signal and I knew the doors were all screwed shut.

Now *that's* better. The 2nd aspirin (650 mg; 22.43), is going about its work, its labour of solace, of ablution. It really is the proverbial 'wonder drug' – and I'm told that no patented preparation has ever been cheaper. God bless IG Farben! (Reminder: order in some rather *good* champagne for Sunday the 6th, to tickle Frauen Burckl and Seedig – and Frauen Uhl and Zulz, not to mention poor little Alisz Seisser. And I suppose we'll have to ask Angelus Thomsen, considering who he is.) I also find that Martell brandy, when taken in liberal but not injudicious quantities, has a salutary effect. Moreover, the stringent liquor helps soothe my insanely itching gums.

Whilst I can take a joke as well as the next man, it's clear that I'll have to have a few very serious words with Walther Pabst. In financial terms, ST 105 was something of a disaster. How do I justify the mobilisation of a full Storm (with flamethrowers)? How do I vindicate my costly use of the Little Brown Bower – when normally, in handling so light a load, you would look to the method employed by Senior Supervisor Grese on the little lady with the ebony cane? Old Walli, doubtlessly, will claim 'an eye for an eye': he's still brooding about that prank at the barracks in Erfurt with the meat pie and the chamber pot.

Of course it's an almighty pain, having to watch the pennies as closely as we do. Take the trains. If money were no object, all the transportees, so far as I'm concerned, could come here in *couchettes*. It would facilitate our subterfuge, or our *ruse de guerre*, if you prefer (as it *is* a war, and no error). Fascinating that our friends from France saw something that they were quite unable to assimilate: this is a reminder of – and a tribute to – the blinding *radicalism* of the KL. Alas, however, one can't 'go mad' and throw money around as if the stuff 'grew on trees'.

(NB. No gasoline was used, and this must count as an economy, albeit minor. Usually those selected Right go by foot to KL1, do you see, whilst those selected Left proceed to KL2 by means of the Red Cross trucks and the ambulances. But how could I induce those Pariserinnen to board a vehicle, after seeing that damned lorry? A very slight saving, agreed, but every little helps. No?)

‘Enter!’ I called out.

It was the Bible Bee. On the tasselled tray: a glass of burgundy, and a ham sandwich, if you please.

I said, ‘But I wanted something hot.’

‘Sorry, sir, it’s all there is for now.’

‘I do work quite hard, you know . . .’

Fussily Humilia began to clear a space on the low table in front of the chimney piece. I must confess it’s a mystery to me how a woman so tragically ugly can love her Maker. It goes without saying that what you really want with a ham sandwich is a foaming tankard of beer. We’re all awash in this French muck when what you desire is a decent flagon of Kronenbourg or Grolsch.

‘Did you prepare that or did Frau Doll?’

‘Sir, Frau Doll went to bed an hour ago.’

‘Did she now. Another bottle of Martell. And that’ll be all.’

On top of everything else I foresee no end of complication and expense in the proposed construction of KL3. Where are the materials? Will Dobler release matching funds? No one is interested in difficulties, no one is interested in ‘the objective conditions’. The schedules of the transports I’m being asked to accept next month are outlandish. And, as if I didn’t have ‘enough on my plate’, who should telephone, at midnight, but Horst Blobel in Berlin. The instruction he adumbrated made my flesh go hot and cold. Did I hear him aright? I cannot possibly carry out such an order whilst Hannah remains in the KL. The dear God! This is going to be an absolute nightmare.

*

‘You’re a good girl,’ I said to Sybil. ‘You cleaned your teeth today.’

‘How do you know? Is it my breath?’

I love it when she looks so sweetly affronted and confused!

‘Vati knows everything, Sybil. You’ve also been trying to style your hair. I’m not cross! I’m glad *someone’s* taking a bit of care with their appearance. And not lounging around all day in a grubby housecoat.’

‘Can I go now, Vati?’

‘So you’re wearing pink panties this morning.’

‘No I’m not. They’re blue!’

A shrewd tactic – to get something wrong every now and then.

‘Prove it,’ I said. ‘Ahah! Homer nods.’

Now here’s a common fallacy I want to knock on the head without further ado: the notion that the Schutzstaffel, the Praetorian Guard of the Reich, is predominantly made up of men from the Proletariat and the Kleinburgertum. Granted, that might have been true of the SA, in the early years, but it has never been true of the SS – whose membership rolls read like an extract from the *Almanach de Gotha*. Oh, *jawohl*: the Archduke of Mecklenburg; the Princes Waldeck, von Hassen, and von Hohenzollern-Emden; the Counts Bassewitz-Behr, Stachwitz, and von Rodden. Why, here in the Zone of Interest, for a short time, we even had our own Baron!

The bluebloods and also the *intelligent*, professors, lawyers, entrepreneurs.

I just wanted to knock that 1 on the head without additional fuss.

‘Reveille is at 3,’ said Suitbert Seedig, ‘and Buna’s a 90-minute march. They’re exhausted before they begin. They knock off at 6 and get back at 8. Carrying their casualties. And tell me, Major. How can we get any work out of them?’

‘Yes, yes,’ I said. Also present, in my large and well-appointed office in the Main Administrative Building (the MAB), were

Frithuric Burckl and Angelus Thomsen. 'But who's going to pay for it may I ask?'

'Farben,' said Burckl. 'The Vorstand has agreed.'

At this I perked up somewhat.

Seedig said, 'You, my Kommandant, are asked only to provide inmates and guards. And overall security will of course remain in your hands. Farben will defray construction and running costs.'

'Well now,' I said. 'A world-renowned concern with its own Konzentrationslager. Unerhort!'

Burckl said, 'We'll also provide the food – independently. There'll be no back-and-forth with KL1. And therefore no typhus. So we hope.'

'Ah. Typhus. That's the crux, nicht? Though the situation was eased, I rather fancy, by the substantial selection of August 29th.'

'They're still dying,' said Seedig, 'at a rate of 1,000 a week.'

'Mm. Look here. Are you planning to increase the rations?'

Seedig and Burckl glanced sharply at one another. It was clear to me that they were in disagreement on this question. Burckl twisted in his chair and said,

'Yes I *would* argue for a modest increase. Of, say, 20 per cent.'

'20 per cent!'

'Yes, sir, 20 per cent. They'll have that much more strength and they'll last a bit longer. Obviously.'

Now Thomsen spoke. 'With respect, Mr Burckl – your sphere is that of commerce, and Dr Seedig is an industrial chemist. The Kommandant and I can't afford to be so purely practical. We dare not lose sight of our complementary objective. Our political objective.'

'My thought exactly,' I said. 'And by the way. On this matter the Reichsfuhrer-SS and myself are of 1 accord.' I smacked my palm down on the desktop. 'We'll *not* stand for any pampering!'

'Amen, my Kommandant,' said Thomsen. 'This is not a sanatorium.'

‘No mollycoddling! What do they think this is? Some sort of rest home?’

In the washroom of the Officers’ Club what do I find but a copy of *Der Sturmer*. Now this publication has for some time been banned in the KL, and on my orders. With its disgusting and hysterical emphasis on the carnal predations of the Jewish male, *Der Sturmer*, I believe, has done serious anti-Semitism a great deal of harm. The people need to see charts, diagrams, statistics, the scientific *evidence* – and not a full-page cartoon of Shylock (as it might be) slaving over Rapunzel. I am far from alone in this view. It is the policy championed by the Reichssicherheitshauptamt itself.

In Dachau, where I launched my meteoric rise through the custodial hierarchy, a display case of *Der Sturmers* was erected in the prisoners’ canteen. It had a galvanising effect on the criminal element, and violence frequently ensued. Our Jewish brethren wormed their way out of it in typical fashion, with bribes – as they all had plenty of money. Besides, they were mainly persecuted by their co-religionists, notably Eschen, their Block Senior.

The Jews were of course aware that over the long term this foul rag actually helped their cause rather than hindered it. I offer the following as a footnote: it is well known that the editor of *Der Sturmer* is himself a Jew; and he also writes the worst of the incendiary articles it features. I rest my case.

Hannah smokes, you know. Oh, ja. Ah, yech. I found an empty packet of Davidoffs in the drawer where she keeps her underwear. If the servants talk it will soon get about that I can’t discipline my wife. Angelus Thomsen is an odd bird. He’s sound enough, I dare say, but there’s something impudent and embarrassing about his manner. I wonder if he is perhaps a homosexualist (albeit deeply repressed). Does he have even an honorary rank, or is everything reliant on his ‘connection’? Curious, because no one is more widely

and thoroughly loathed than the Brown Eminence. (Reminder: the lorry, from now on, to follow the more roundabout route north of the Summer Huts.) It calms you down and it numbs the gums, but brandy also boasts a third property: that of an aphrodisiac.

Ach, there's nothing wrong with Hannah that the good old 15 centimetres won't cure. When, after a final glass or 2 of Martell, I wend my way to the bedroom, she should be suitably prompt in the performance of her spousal duty. If I do encounter any nonsense, I will simply invoke that magic name: *Dieter Kruger!*

For I am a normal man with normal needs.

. . . I was halfway to the door when I was struck by an unpleasant thought. It so happens that I've not yet seen the balance sheet for Special Train 105. And I left the Little Brown Bower, that evening, without specifically telling Wolfram Prufer to bury the pieces in the Spring Meadow. Was he stupid enough to fire up a Topf & Sons 3-retorter to deal with a smattering of brats and dodderers? Surely not. No. No. Wiser heads would have prevailed. Prufer would have listened to 1 of the old hands. For example, Szmul.

Oh, Christ, what am I going on about? If Horst Blobel meant what he said, then the whole bloody lot of them'll all have to come up anyway.

I see I'd better have a brood about this. I'll sleep in the dressing room, *as usual*, and tackle Hannah in the morning. 1 of those 1s where you slip in beside them whilst they're all warm and somnolent, and ease up against them and into them. I won't stand for any hogwash. And then we'll both be in excellent spirits for our little gathering here at the villa!

For I am a normal man with normal needs. I am *completely normal*. This is what nobody seems to understand.

Paul Doll is completely normal.

3. SZMUL: SONDER

Ihr seit achzen jehr, we whisper, und ihr hott a fach.

Once upon a time there was a king, and the king commissioned his favourite wizard to create a magic mirror. This mirror didn't show you your reflection. It showed you your soul – it showed you who you really were.

The wizard couldn't look at it without turning away. The king couldn't look at it. The courtiers couldn't look at it. A chestful of treasure was offered to any citizen in this peaceful land who could look at it for sixty seconds without turning away. And no one could.

I find that the KZ is that mirror. The KZ is that mirror, but with one difference. You can't turn away.

We are of the Sonderkommando, the SK, the Special Squad, and we are the saddest men in the Lager. We are in fact the saddest men in the history of the world. And of all these very sad men I am the saddest. Which is demonstrably, even measurably true. I am by some distance the earliest number, the lowest number – the *oldest* number.

As well as being the saddest men who ever lived, we are also the most disgusting. And yet our situation is paradoxical.

It is difficult to see how we can be as disgusting as we unquestionably are when we do no harm.

The case could be made that on balance we do a little good. Still, we are infinitely disgusting, and also infinitely sad.

Nearly all our work is done among the dead, with the heavy scissors, the pliers and mallets, the buckets of petrol refuse, the ladles, the grinders.

Yet we also move among the living. So we say, '*Viens donc, petit marin. Accroches ton costume. Rappelle-toi le numéro. Tu as quatre-vingt-trois!*' And we say, '*Faites un nœud avec les lacets, Monsieur. Je vais essayer de trouver un cintre pour votre manteau. Astrakhan! C'est toison d'agneau, n'est-ce pas?*'

After a major Aktion we typically receive a fifth of vodka or schnapps, five cigarettes, and a hundred grams of sausage made from bacon, veal, and pork suet. While we are not always sober, we are never hungry and we are never cold, at least not at night. We sleep in the room above the disused crematory (hard by the Monopoly Building), where the sacks of hair are cured.

When he was still with us, my philosophical friend Adam used to say, *We don't even have the comfort of innocence*. I didn't and I don't agree. I would still plead not guilty.

A hero, of course, would *escape* and *tell the world*. But it is my feeling that the world has known for quite some time. How could it not, given the scale?

There persist three reasons, or excuses, for going on living: first, to bear witness, and, second, to exact mortal vengeance. I am bearing witness; but the magic looking glass does not show me a killer. Or not yet.

Third, and most crucially, we save a life (or prolong a life) at the rate of one per transport. Sometimes none, sometimes two – an average of one. And 0.01 per cent is not 0.00. They are invariably male youths.

It has to be effected while they're leaving the train; by the time the lines form for the selection – it's already too late.

*

*Ihr seit achzen johr alt, we whisper, und ihr hott a fach.
Sie sind achtzehn Jahre alt, und Sie haben einen Handel.
Vous avez dix-huit ans, et vous avez un commerce.*

You are eighteen years old, and you have a trade.