

1
BERLIN, 1931

When you knock a bowl of sugar on to your host's carpet, it is a parody of the avalanche that killed his mother and father, just as the duck's beak that your new girlfriend's lips form when she attempts a seductive pout is a quotation of the quacking noise your last girlfriend made during sex. When the telephone rings in the night because a stranger has given a wrong extension to the operator, it is a homage to the inadvertent substitution of telegrams that terminated your adulterous cousin's marriage, just as the resonant alcove between the counterpoised struts of your new girlfriend's clavicle is a rebuttal to the apparent beauty of your last girlfriend's fleshier décolletage. Or this is how it seemed to Egon Loeser, anyway, because the two subjects most hostile to his sense of a man's life as an essentially steady, comprehensible and Newtonian-mechanical undertaking were accidents and women. And it sometimes seemed as if the only way to prevent that dread pair from toppling him all the way over into derangement was to treat them not as prodigies but rather as texts to be studied. Hence the principle: accidents, like women, allude. These allusions are no less witty or astute for being unconscious; indeed, they are more so, which is one reason why it's probably a mistake to construct them deliberately. The other reason is that everyone might conclude you're a total prick.

And that was the final worry to flutter through Egon Loeser's mind before he pulled the lever on his Teleportation Device one morning in April 1931. If it went wrong, they would all say: for what possible reason did you name your experimental stagecraft prototype after the most calamitous

experimental stagecraft prototype in the history of theatre? Why make that allusion? Why hitch those two horses together? Paint the devil on the wall and the devil will come, as every child knows. Or, to sieve the German idiom down to an English one, don't tempt fate. But Loeser was so unsuperstitious he was superstitious about it. He'd once got up on the stage of the Allien Theatre half an hour before a performance to shout 'Macbeth!' until he was hoarse. And one of his father's long-standing psychiatric patients had been an American financier who named his yacht *Titanic*, his daughters Goneril and Regan, and his company Roman Empire Holdings in the same spirit. So he couldn't credit the English idiom's characterisation of fate as something like a hack playwright who never missed a chance to work in an ironic pratfall, any more than he could credit the German idiom's characterisation of the devil as something like a preening actor who checked every gossip column in every newspaper every morning for a mention of himself (although perhaps God was like that). Accidents allude, but they don't ape. Naming one thing after another cannot, logically, increase the chances of the new thing turning out like the old thing. But if the test today went straight to ruin, people would still say he shouldn't have called it the Teleportation Device.

What choice did he have, though? This machine was primarily intended for use in a play about the life of Adriano Lavicini, the greatest stage designer of the seventeenth century. And the climax of the play portrayed the ghastly failure of Lavicini's Extraordinary Mechanism for the Almost Instantaneous Transport of Persons from Place to Place, better known in modern discourse as the Teleportation Device. Since Egon Loeser was, in his own opinion, Lavicini's closest modern counterpart, and since this new Teleportation Device was his finest innovation just as the old Teleportation Device had been Lavicini's, then to stifle the parallel between the two would have been even more perverse than to let it breathe.

Anyway, Lavicini himself had painted the devil on the wall with far bolder strokes than Loeser possibly could. Back in 1679, the Teleportation Device wasn't allowed a test run. Like a siege weapon, it had been constructed in total secrecy. No stagehand had seen more than a single jigsaw piece of the plans. Even Auguste de Gorge, the dictatorial owner of the Théâtre des Encornets, had not been permitted a peek, and even at the final dress rehearsal of Montand's new ballet *The Lizard Prince* the machine had not yet been in operation, so neither the dancers nor their choreographer had any idea what to expect on opening night. But Lavicini insisted that the operations of the Teleportation Device were so precise that it didn't matter, and the essential thing was that no rumours about the nature of the machine should escape.

The comparison to a siege weapon was especially apt here, Loeser always thought, because in the seventeenth century the struggle for supremacy between the great theatres and opera houses of Christendom resembled nothing so much as an arms race. For the ruling family of any major Italian city it would have been a political catastrophe to fall behind, and even within Paris the competition was fierce, which was why a set designer like Lavicini, who had in fact once held a job at the Venetian Arsenal, could expect to be bound as tightly by his contract of employment as the average twentieth-century germ-warfare scientist. (His salary, naturally, was large enough to make up for it.) This was an age in which the audience expected sphinxes pulling chariots, gods dancing in the air, lions transforming into girls, comets destroying city walls – all the really good stuff, of course, towards the middle of the play, because during the first act you would still be on the way to the theatre and by the fifth act you would already be doffing your hat to a platter of oysters. A typical published libretto might proudly list all nineteen contraptions that were to be set into motion during a performance, but neglect to mention the composer. Impresarios were bankrupted in

their dozens, and enlightened critics complained that genuine dramatic values had been surrendered to this obsession with ‘the marvellous’, continuing a debate about the over-use of special effects that had begun with the Reformation and would presumably last until Hollywood fell into the San Andreas fault.

So Lavicini’s employer could forgive him for wanting to keep the Teleportation Device a total secret. Still, even de Gorge, who had once strangled a man while dictating a love letter, must have felt a little nervous as the entire bejewelled elite of Paris, including, last of all, Louis XIV and his queen, arrived at the Théâtre des Encornets for the première of *The Lizard Prince*, greeting each other with hand-kissings so formalised and ostentatious they were like miniature ballets in themselves. For the thousandth time he must have reminded himself of what his mentor Lunaire had once taught him: as an impresario, you shouldn’t flatter yourself that you were really anything to do with the show. You couldn’t conjure a hit. Your job was just to sell tickets. And if you had done that to the best of your ability, said Lunaire, then the only thing left to pray for was that nobody in the audience arrived with a dog bigger than a child or a pistol bigger than an upholstery hammer. But all this without even rehearsing the new machine – that was painting the devil on the wall.

Loeser’s Teleportation Device, by contrast, was about to be demonstrated at the little Allien Theatre in Berlin in front of only two other people: Adolf Klugweil, the putative star of *Lavicini*, and Immanuel Blumstein, the putative writer-director. The latter, at forty, was old enough to have been a founding member of the famous November Group, which seemed really pretty old to his two younger collaborators. Behind his back, they mocked him for his baldness, they mocked him for his nostalgia, and they mocked him for his habit, whenever he thought he might have misplaced his wallet or pipe (which was always), of patting himself down with such impatience,

such savagery and such complete disregard for the actual location of his pockets that it began to resemble some sort of eroto-religious self-flagellation ritual – and yet they also had enormous respect for their mentor’s refusal to let the convictions of his youth fall out along with his hair. The belief all three men shared was that Expressionism had not been pushed nearly far enough. ‘Expressionism is no more a form of theatre than revolution is a form of state,’ Fritz Kortner had written. Perhaps, but in that case the revolution had been botched. The New Objectivity that had replaced Expressionism in the middle of the 1920s was nothing but the old state with a new cabinet. In reply, the New Expressionism would be the old revolution with new bombs.

Klugweil, meanwhile, was a twenty-four-year-old so languid as to be almost liquid, except when he went on stage and broke open some inner asylum of shrieks and contortions, wild eyes and bared teeth – which made him perfectly suited to Expressionist acting and almost useless for any other type. He’d been at university with Loeser, who had always wondered what he was like during sex but had never quite had the cheek to make an enquiry with his dull girlfriend.

‘Is everyone ready?’ said Loeser, who stood in the wings with his hand on the lever. The Allien Theatre had been an old-fashioned music hall before Blumstein took it over, and renovations were still only half complete, so after a few hours backstage your clothes and hair were so thick with paint flakes, dust clumps, loose threads, cushion stuffing, cobwebs, and splinters that you felt like a veal cutlet rolled in breadcrumbs.

‘Yes, get on with it,’ said Blumstein, who sat in seat 3F of the empty auditorium.

‘This pinches under the armpits,’ said Klugweil, who stood on stage, strapped into a harness like a test pilot missing a plane.

Lavicini’s Extraordinary Mechanism for the Almost Instantaneous Transport of Persons from Place to Place was,

as it turned out, genuinely extraordinary. Once, as many as sixteen stagehands communicating with whistles had been required to change a scene. Giacomo Torelli's invention of a single rotating axle had since made possible the simultaneous movement of multiple flats, reducing that number from sixteen to one. But that leap forward was rendered instantly trivial by the magnificence of Lavicini's Teleportation Device. At the end of the first scene, the audience gave a gasp so great you could have marked it on a barometer as the stage suddenly took flight like a flock of birds. A vast hidden assembly of ropes, cranes, cranks, wheels, springs, runners, gantries, pulleys, weights, and counterweights was lifting every part of the set into the air – was rearranging it in a flurry of swoops and swaps and spins – and was setting it down again with barely an audible bump. The Third Temple of the Lizards was replaced by a Dagonite slave-cove before anyone in the room even thought of breathing out. All the violinists missed their cues and one ballerina fainted, but the cheering afterwards was so loud that it didn't matter. At the back of the theatre, Auguste de Gorge decided that, having gone to bed with eight whores after the last première and five whores after the première before that, he would go to bed tonight with thirteen. (Not long ago someone had told him about the Fibonacci sequence and he had construed it as a challenge.) In the wings, Adriano Lavicini stepped back from the controls with a temperate smile. A stagecraft machine so ambitious that it was indistinguishable from magic: that was painting the devil on the wall.

Loeser's Teleportation Device, by contrast, was not supposed to be spectacular. It was just a means to an end. The first half of *Lavicini*, before the protagonist's emigration to Paris, would take place during the Venetian Carnival, when the entire city strapped on masks – when lawyers would wear masks to plead in court, maids would wear masks to go to market, and mothers would put masks on their newborns – and not

just masks, in most cases, but also a long domino-cloak, so that it was impossible to tell a man from a woman until they spoke. Anyone could go anywhere, and anyone could mix with anyone: 'prince with subject', as Casanova wrote, 'the ordinary with the remarkable man, lovely and hideous together. There were no longer valid laws, nor law-makers.' The inquisition, omniscient and omnipotent for the rest of the year, gave up completely. To Loeser and Blumstein, the glamour and intrigue of the old Carnival were nothing compared to its unacknowledged political radicalism. At what other time in history had there been a social experiment on such a scale? No Bolshevik would have had the guts. The plays on which Loeser and Blumstein collaborated always stressed a notion they called Equivalence: the communist was shown to be no different from the Nazi, the priest from the gangster, the wife in furs from the prostitute in army boots. So the Carnival was perfectly suited to their themes. And so was the Teleportation Device. Like Lavicini's machine, Loeser's machine used springs and pulleys and counterweights, but whereas Lavicini's machine moved the scenery around the cast, Loeser's machine just moved the cast around the scenery, which was a lot easier. The idea was that a harnessed actor could make a speech as a stockbroker in the little bank at the top right of the stage, step back out of view, and be whipped across to the little casino at the bottom left, from which he would step back into view almost instantly as a compulsive gambler. This would be an effective if unsubtle way of driving home the point about how the two were just the same. And if in this new play there was some business with masks and cloaks coming on and off, the effect could be even more striking.

At the Théâtre des Encornets, by the time the second act drew to a close, the Teleportation Device was a novelty more than twelve minutes old, and yet the Paris upper crust weren't quite bored to death with it yet. Montand's lovely Dance of the Half-Fish came to an end, the dancers fluttered off stage to

make way for an orchestral interlude, and the scenery began once again to lift into the air. And then there was a rumbling sound like thunder ground up with a pestle.

No two accounts quite agreed on what happened next. The confusion was understandable. Loeser knew only that the Théâtre des Encornets began to crumble – not the entire building, fortunately, but only its south-east corner, which meant one side of the stage and several of the nearby private audience boxes. There was a stampede, and even after all those centuries it was perhaps with a moistness in the eye that one recalled the tragic and senseless sacrifice of some of the most deliriously beautiful couture in the early history of the medium. Most of the inhabitants of that couture, as it happened, were unharmed – as were the musicians, who were shielded from tumbling marble by the position of the orchestra pit, and the dancers, who by great good luck had just exited stage right rather than stage left. The dead, in the end, numbered about twenty-five audience members from the private boxes nearest the collapse, who were recovered from the rubble after the fires had been put out but were in every case too badly mashed to be identified; the swooned ballerina, who had not been in the wings with her sisters but rather languishing on a couch backstage; Monsieur Merde, the Théâtre des Encornets' cat; and Adriano Lavicini himself.

The Teleportation Device, meanwhile, had deleted itself along with the building. No part of it could be salvaged for an investigation into what might have gone wrong, and no plans or even sketches could be found in Lavicini's workshop. Auguste de Gorge was, of course, ruined. And Louis XIV never went to the theatre again.

Two hundred and fifty years later, at the Allien Theatre, a spring sprang. A counterweight dropped. An actor shot across the stage. And a scream was heard.

The original Teleportation Accident was not notorious solely because it was the only time that a set designer was

known to have inadvertently and suicidally wrecked a theatre and flattened sections of his audience. It was notorious also because of claims that appeared in certain reports of the cataclysm. Several reliable witnesses recalled that just before the end of the second act they had detected a stench somewhere between rotten metal and rusty meat. Others had felt an icy draught lunge through the theatre. And one (not very reliable) marquis insisted to friends that, as he fled, he had seen grey tentacles as thick as Doric columns slithering moistly out from behind the proscenium arch. Rumours began that – well, that an aforementioned German idiom was more literally applicable here than any post-Enlightenment historian would be willing to credit. Before his death, Lavicini had, after all, been nicknamed ‘the Sorcerer’.

Whatever the truth, that was Lavicini’s Teleportation Accident. As for Loeser’s Teleportation Accident, that wasn’t nearly so bad. Nobody died. The Allien Theatre was not rended apart. Klugweil just dislocated a couple of arms.

They didn’t confirm that until later, though. All Loeser and Blumstein could see as they rushed over was that Klugweil was dangling half out of the harness, limbs twisted, face white, eyes abulge. The overall effect reminded Loeser of nothing so much as a set of large pallid male genitalia painfully mispositioned in an athlete’s thong.

‘Why in God’s name did you have to call it the Teleportation Device, you total prick?’ hissed Blumstein to Loeser as they struggled to untangle the actor. ‘I knew this would happen.’

‘Don’t be irrational,’ said Loeser. ‘It would have gone wrong whatever I called it.’ Which, judging by the head-butt he then received from the pendulant Klugweil, was not felt to be a very satisfactory reply.

Two hours later Loeser arrived at the Wild West Bar inside the Haus Vaterland on Potsdamer Platz to find his best friend already waiting for him.

‘What happened to your nose?’ said Achleitner.

‘To answer your question,’ said Loeser indistinctly, ‘I don’t think we’re going to be able to get all that coke from Klugweil tonight as we planned.’ He lit a cigarette and looked around in disgust. The Haus Vaterland, which had been opened the year before last by a shady entrepreneur called Kempinski, was an amusement complex, a kitsch Babel, full of bars, cinemas, stages, arcades, restaurants, and ballrooms, with each nationally themed room (Italian, Spanish, Austrian, Hungarian, and so on, but no British or French, because of Versailles) given its own decor, music, costumes, and food. Up in the Wild West Bar where Loeser and Achleitner now sat, a sullen Negro jazz band wore cowboy hats to perform, which gave a sense of the Haus Vaterland’s dogged commitment to cultural verisimilitude, while downstairs you could take a ‘Cruise along the Rhine’ with artificial lightning, thunder, and rain like in one of Lavicini’s operas. It was as if, in some unfashionable district of hell, the new arrivals had established a random topography of small territorial ghettos, each decorated to resemble a motherland that after a thousand years in purgatory they only half remembered. The whole place was full of tourists from the provinces, always strolling and stopping and turning and strolling and stopping again for no apparent reason as if practising some decayed military drill, and it was as loud as a hundred children’s playgrounds. But Achleitner insisted on coming here, maintaining that it was good practice for living in the future. Loeser, he said, might think the whole twentieth century was going to look like a George Grosz painting, all fat soldiers with monocles and tarts with no teeth and gloomy cobbled streets, but that vision of darkness and corruption, that Gothic Berlin, was just as artificial and sentimentalised, in its own way, as the work of any amateur countryside watercolourist. When Loeser disputed Kempinski’s prophetism, Achleitner just alluded to Loeser’s ex-girlfriend Marlene.

Loeser had broken up with Marlene Schibelsky three weeks previously after a relationship of seven or eight months. She

was a shallow girl, and Loeser knew that he ought not to settle for shallow girls, but she was good in bed, and until the day that either Brain or Penis could win a viable majority in Loeser's inner Reichstag there had seemed to be no hope of change. What finally broke the deadlock was something that happened at a small cast party in a café in Strandow.

Quite late in the night, Loeser had overheard part of a conversation in a nearby booth about dilettantism in Berlin cultural life, and one of the five or six occupants of that booth was the composer Jascha Drabsfarben. This was surprising for two reasons. Firstly, it was surprising to see Drabsfarben at a party at all, because Drabsfarben didn't go to parties. And secondly, it was surprising to hear that particular topic arise while Drabsfarben was sitting right there, because in any discussion about dilettantism in Berlin cultural life, Drabsfarben himself was the obvious and unavoidable counter-example, so either at some point someone would have to invoke Drabsfarben's reputation in the presence of Drabsfarben himself, which would be uncomfortable for everyone because it would sound like flattery and you didn't flatter a man like Drabsfarben, or else no one would, which would be uncomfortable for everyone too because that elision would throb more and more conspicuously the longer the discussion went on.

Loeser, like most of his friends, was mildly enthusiastic about his own artistic endeavours in the usual sort of way, but Drabsfarben was known to have a devotion so formidable that if he were ever shipwrecked on a rocky coast he would probably build a piano from dried kelp and seagull bones rather than let his work be interrupted even for an afternoon. Sex was nothing to him; politics were nothing to him; fame was nothing to him; and society was nothing to him, except when he thought a particular director or promoter or critic could help him get his work heard, in which case he would appear at precisely as many dinners and receptions as it took

to get that individual on his side. His most recent work was an atonal piano concerto derived from an actuary's table of hot-air balloon accident statistics, and indeed most of his music seemed to demand that the intellectual tenacity of its listeners almost outmatch that of its creator. Drabsfarben, in other words, made Loeser feel like a bit of a fraud. But normally Loeser didn't resent this. In fact, Loeser sometimes felt that Drabsfarben might be the only man in Berlin he really respected. Which was why it was so upsetting when Hecht said, 'So many people only seem to have gone into the theatre in the first place because they have some narcissistic social agenda – you know, like . . . like . . .' And then Drabsfarben, who had been almost silent until this point, said, 'Like Loeser?'

While sober, Loeser could have brushed this off, but two bottles of bad red wine had transformed him into the emotional equivalent of one of those strange Peruvian frogs with transparent skin exposing their jumpy little hearts. He rushed from the party, and Marlene followed him out into the chilly street, where she found him sitting on the kerb, heels in the gutter, weeping, almost whimpering. 'Is that what they all think of me? Is that really what they all think of me?' Although he would probably have forgotten all about this small crisis by the following morning, or even by the end of the party, she did her best to comfort him.

And that was when she said it. 'Don't slip into the dark, my darling. Don't slip into the dark.'

Even while drunk, Loeser immediately recognised these words. They were from an atrocious American melodrama called *Scars of Desire* that they had seen at the cinema on Ranekstrasse. Loeser had mocked the film all through dinner and all the way back to his flat, finding himself so funny that he thought he might write a satirical piece for some magazine or other, and confident of Marlene's agreement, until finally he noticed her quietly sobbing, and she confessed that

she had loved the film and felt it was ‘meant just for [her]’. He dropped the subject. Marlene went to *Scars of Desire* four more times, twice with female friends, twice alone. To summarise: late in the film, the male romantic lead has a moral convulsion about marrying the female romantic lead, who was previously engaged to his brother, who was killed in the war. He starts crying and knocking over furniture, and we realise that he is not really angry at his new fiancée, but at the pointless death of his brother. The female romantic lead coaxes him back to his senses by whispering, ‘Don’t slip into the dark, my darling. Don’t slip into the dark.’

The problem wasn’t that Marlene was quoting from the film, although that would have been bad enough. The problem was that she said the line as if it had come not from any film but from deep in her own heart. She had internalised some lazy screenwriter’s lazy offering to the point where she was no longer even vaguely conscious of its commercial origins. *Scars of Desire* had been screwed into her personality like a plastic prosthesis.

Naturally, he split up with her the next day.

‘So you’re trying to tell me that Marlene is herself a sort of avatar of the twentieth century,’ said Loeser, sipping his schnapps.

‘Yes,’ said Achleitner. ‘Because she nurses sentiments that have been sold to her as closely as she nurses sentiments of her own. Or perhaps even more closely. Like a magpie with discount cuckoo’s eggs. Did you ever bring her here?’

‘Once, remember. You were with us.’

‘Did she like it? I would have thought she’d be quite at home.’

The jazz band concluded ‘Georgia on My Mind’ and trooped off stage, presumably ready to return to some sort of art deco hog ranch. ‘That is cruel,’ said Loeser. ‘You know she’ll probably be at the party tonight? Which is why I’m absolutely not going if we don’t get some coke.’

‘Egon, why is it that every single time you’re obliged to be in the same room with one of your ex-girlfriends you have to make it into a huge emergency? It’s incredibly boring.’

‘Come on. You know how it is. You catch sight of an old flame and you get this breathless animal prickle like a fox in a room with a hound. And then all night you have to seem carefree and successful and elated, which is a pretence that for some reason you feel no choice but to maintain even though you know they’re better qualified than anyone else in the world to detect immediately that you’re really still the same hapless cunt as ever.’

‘That’s adolescent. The fact that you are so neurotic about your past lovers makes it both fortunate and predictable that you have so few of them. It’s one of those elegant self-regulating systems that one so often finds in nature.’

‘I can’t lose this break-up. We’ve all seen what happens to the defeated.’

‘You didn’t even like her.’

‘I know. But at least she had sex with me. And it was really good. When am I ever going to have sex with anyone again? I mean, without paying. Honestly – when? Sometimes I wish I was queer like you. I’ve never seen you worry about all this. Upon how many lucky pilgrims have you bestowed your blessing this year?’

‘No idea. I gave up keeping count while I was still at school. Remind me what you’re on now?’

‘Five. Still. In my whole life. Not counting hookers. Sometimes when I walk down the street I look around at them all and I feel as if I’m being crucified on a cross made of beautiful women. Sometimes when I get out of the bath I catch sight of myself in the mirror and I feel as if even my own penis is bitterly disappointed in me.’

Throughout the 1920s, Germany had been full of teachers, doctors, psychoanalysts, sociologists, poets, and novelists who were eager to talk to you about sex. They were eager to

inform you that sex was natural, that sex ought to be pleasurable, and that everyone had the right to a fulfilling sex life. Loeser broadly agreed with the first two claims, and he even agreed, in principle, with the third, but, given his present situation, the establishment of a global Marxist workers' paradise seemed a modest and plausible aim in comparison to this ludicrously optimistic vision of a world in which he, Egon Loeser, actually got close to a non-mercenary vulva once in a while. These well-meaning experts honestly seemed to believe that as soon as people were told that they ought to be having sex, they would just start having sex, as if there could not possibly be any obstacle to twenty-four-hour erotic festivities other than moral reluctance. 'Oh, thank you so much,' Loeser wanted to say to them. 'That's so helpful. I should be enjoying fantastic sex all the time, should I? That had really never occurred to me until you mentioned it. Now that I have been liberated by your inspiring words, I shall go off and enjoy some fantastic sex right away.'

Then again, it was sometimes possible to use this nonsense to one's advantage. Apparently there had been a short halcyon period in the early 20s when all you had to do to make a girl go to bed with you was to convince her that she was inhibited and politically regressive if she didn't, rather in the same way that you might nag someone into contributing to a strike fund. You could cite all manner of progressive thinkers, sometimes by chapter and paragraph. But that trick had expired long before Loeser had been old enough to use it.

Loeser felt particularly unlucky because, as a young man rising through Berlin's experimental theatre scene, he moved in perhaps the most promiscuous social circles of perhaps the most promiscuous city in Europe. If he had lived in, say, a village outside Delft, the contrast probably wouldn't have been quite so agonising. He half envied Lavicini, who got squashed twenty years before Venice entered its century of utter carnal mayhem. Loeser hated politics, but he knew there

were plenty of politicians who wanted to reverse Germany's descent into libertinism, and he wished them the best. A bit of good old-fashioned sexual repression could only improve his comparative standing. Back in the 1890s, for instance, he wouldn't have felt nearly so depressed that he never got laid, because no one else would have been getting laid either – the same principle they now used in Russia with potatoes and electricity and so on. Before the Great War, women knew that their dear daddies had spent years saving up to pay for them to be married, so they wanted their wedding night to mean something. But ever since all those dowries had been turned to dead leaves by the Inflation, women had realised that they might as well just have fun. That was Loeser's theory, anyway.

'So how long has it been now?' said Achleitner.

'Since the day I broke up with Marlene.'

'Before or after you told her?'

'Shortly before.' This final strategic indulgence had been especially enjoyable for Loeser because for once he didn't feel as if he had to bother about giving Marlene an orgasm. Normally, there was only one damnable way this could be done: Loeser would sit up in the bed with his back against the wall like an invalid receiving his breakfast, Marlene would straddle him, they would begin to rock back and forth, and then Loeser would simultaneously stick his tongue deep in her ear and reach down between their jostling bellies to – well, he sometimes had dreams afterwards where he was a vet in handcuffs who had to deliver a tiny, tiny calf from a tiny, tiny cow. The procedure with Marlene was incredibly awkward, it took so long that his fingertips wrinkled, and by the end his wrist and forearm were so embattled with cramp that he scarcely had the patience to attend to the needs of any other appendage. But for most of their time together he had been quite content to perform this little duty because she was such an exceptional lover in every other category. 'So that's three weeks,' he told Achleitner.

‘Three weeks? You’ve gone longer than three weeks before.’
‘Of course I’ve gone longer than three weeks. I seem to remember I once went nineteen years.’

‘So why are you complaining?’

‘If my platoon is stranded in the mountains and our rations have just run out, I’m not allowed to start worrying until we actually begin to starve?’

‘Won’t be long before you resort to cannibalism, I imagine.’

‘Anton, I resorted to cannibalism one afternoon in 1921 and I have hardly stopped since. The point is, it could be another six months before even the most rudimentary lines of supply can be re-established. It could be a year. Or, who knows? I may never have sex again without paying. Never. It could happen.’

‘You’ll meet someone.’

‘That is a groundless probabilistic calculation, and therefore of no value. I thought you knew better than to try to reassure me. There is nothing more sickening than reassurance.’

‘If you are going to be like this all evening then I really am going to need some coke too. I wish you hadn’t pissed off Klugweil.’

And Littau was in Munich, and they both owed money to Tetzner, and the toilet attendant at Borchardt would sell them crushed aspirin. ‘Or the one at the Mauve Door?’ said Achleitner finally. ‘The one with no ears.’

‘Even worse – I don’t know what he sold us last time but it nearly made me soil myself in the street on the way back to Brogmann’s house. I’m fed up with buying it from strangers. Come on, you must be able to think of someone. You lot’ – by which Loeser meant homosexuals – ‘always seem to know twice as many people for this sort of thing.’

‘Thank you for your confidence, but I don’t think I can help in this case. Oh, although that Englishman from last night had excellent stuff with him.’

‘Which Englishman?’

‘Some blond aspiring writer from London. I met him at the Eden Bar. Hung like one of those Norse giants from the *Ring* Cycle.’

‘Can we find him again?’

‘I think I’ve got a number for his boarding house.’

Loeser sighed. ‘Listen, Anton, as fondly as I remember the many, many evenings of our youth that we’ve squandered running round Berlin searching in vain for adequate drugs, I just don’t think I’m in the mood tonight. And anyway, my septum is still convalescing.’

‘But we have to go to this party. I heard Brecht is going to be there.’

‘Oh, ha ha.’ There was nobody in Berlin that Loeser loathed more than Bertolt Brecht, and there was nothing about Berlin theatre parties that he loathed more than the ubiquitous cry of ‘I heard Brecht is going to be there’.

‘And Adele Hitler.’

‘What?’

‘She’s back from Switzerland, apparently.’

Adele Hitler was a giggly teenage girl from a rich family whom Loeser had tutored in poetry for two lucrative years before she went off to finishing school. ‘So? I’d stop to chat if I saw her in the street but I’m not going to the party just to catch up with the latest on her doll collection.’

‘She’s eighteen now,’ said Achleitner, raising an eyebrow.

‘What are you implying? I’m hardly likely to try to get her into bed.’

‘Pedagogical ethics?’

‘None whatsoever, but she was a grotesquely fat little thing.’

‘They say she looks very different. Ugly duckling and all that.’

Loeser considered this. ‘I did always think she had a bit of a crush on me.’ He finished his drink. ‘Well, all right, it’s not as if I have any dignity left to lose. Let’s find this Wagnerian gallant of yours.’

An hour later they met the Englishman in the street outside his boarding house on Konigslandstrasse. The evening was blustery, and nearby a hunchbacked balloon seller with two dozen red balloons stood shifting his weight against the tug of the wind like a Zeppelin breeder out promenading a whole litter of excitable pups.

'I'd love to introduce the two of you,' said Achleitner, nodding at the Englishman, 'but I'm afraid on this napkin next to your telephone number I seem just to have written "London, blond, incomparable dong".'

'Rupert Rackenham. And for accuracy's sake I'm originally from Devon. Have you been in a fight?' he asked Loeser.

'Of a kind.'

'We were wondering if you had any more of that coke,' said Achleitner.

'Quite a cache of it, yes,' said Rackenham. His German was good.

'Can we buy some?' said Loeser. 'We're going to a party later and it's the only way we know how to endure the company of our friends.'

'What sort of party?'

'It's in an old corset factory up in Puppenberg,' said Achleitner. There had been a craze recently for parties like this: in disused ballrooms, bankrupt coffin warehouses, condemned gymnasia. Loeser's attitude was that if a place was abandoned it was probably abandoned for a reason and reviving it voluntarily was perverse.

'Well, as we're all intimates now, why don't I give you each a few lines as a gift? And then perhaps you'd be kind enough to bring me along to this party and introduce me to a few more of these unendurable friends that you mentioned.'

'How many lines between the two of us?'

'Let's call it a sonnet.'

Achleitner shrugged at Loeser and Loeser shrugged back at Achleitner. So Achleitner said, 'Fine. I should think once

you're there you'll sell out the rest of your stock in about thirty seconds.'

'Splendid. I'll just go upstairs and get my camera.' He had an educated, ironic, very English manner, at once sharply penetrating and affably detached, like someone who would always win the bets he made with strangers at weddings on how long the marriage would last but would never bother to collect the money.

'We'll find a cab.'

When he came back down, Rackenham had a Leica on a strap around his neck. He took a photo of Loeser and Achleitner and then the cab set off for Puppenberg. At the corner, a coachman was feeding his nag out of a wide-mouthed coal scuttle, pigeons pecking grudgingly at the spilled oats as if what they really craved was a few scraps of fresh horse brisket.

'I assume you're an artist of some kind, Herr Loeser,' said Rackenham.

'Why do you assume?'

'Because since coming to Berlin I never seem to meet anyone who isn't an artist. At least by their own description.'

Loeser thought of what he'd overheard at that cast party. 'Yes, it's a state of affairs I find pretty sickening, but as you correctly surmise I'm guilty of contributing to it myself. I'm a set designer. I work mostly at the Allien Theatre.'

'What have you got on at the moment?'

'Nothing quite yet. We're just starting a new project.' Loeser gave Rackenham a brief sketch of *Lavicini* as it was currently conceived. He always felt a bit self-conscious talking about his work in the earshot of taxi drivers.

'So it's a historical drama? I hope you won't take offence, Herr Loeser, but I've never seen the point of historical drama. Or historical fiction for that matter. I once thought about writing a novel of that kind, but then I began to wonder, what possible patience could the public have for a young man

arrogant enough to believe he has anything new to say about an epoch with which his only acquaintance is flipping listlessly through history books on train journeys? So I stick to the present day. I really think it's the present day that needs our attention.'

'By accident, Herr Rackenham, you've led me to one of the great themes of the New Expressionist theatre,' said Loeser. And he explained Equivalence. Yes, whenever one began a play or a novel, there was a choice to be made: whether to plot your Zeppelin's course for present-day Berlin, or seventeenth-century Paris, or a future London, or some other destination entirely. But the choice meant nothing. Consider Germany under the Weimar Republic in 1931. Thirteen years since its inception, five years since its acknowledged zenith, two years since there was last any good coke: a culture old enough, in other words, that journalists were already beginning to judge it in retrospect, as history. And they were calling it a Golden Age, an unprecedented flourishing. But if you were part of it – and even if you were only part of its decline, like Loeser – you couldn't help but say to yourself: all these thousands of young people, all in a few nearby neighbourhoods, all calling themselves artists, as Rackenham had said. And all this spare time. And all these openings and all these premières and all these parties. And all this talk and talk and talk and drink and talk. For nearly fifteen years. All of this. And what had it produced for which anyone would really swap a bad bottle of Riesling in eight decades' time? A few plays, a few paintings, a few piano concertos – most of which, anyway, went quite unnoticed by the boys and girls who made such a fuss about being at the heart of it all. If that was a Golden Age then an astute investor might consider selling off his bullion before the rate fell any further. There had been so many Golden Ages now, and Loeser was confident that they had all been the same, and always would be. Compare the Venice of the late Renaissance, where Lavicini came of age,

to the Berlin of Weimar, or compare the Berlin of Weimar to whatever city would turn out to be most fashionable in 2012, and you would find the same empty people going to the same empty parties and making the same empty comments about the same empty efforts, with just a few spasms of worthwhile art going on at the naked extremities. Nothing ever changed. That was Equivalence. Plot a course for another country, another age, and the best you could hope for was that you would circumnavigate the globe by accident, and arrive at the opposite coast of your own homeland, mooring your Zeppelin trepidatiously in this rich mud to find a tribe you did not recognise speaking a language you could not understand. If Loeser could ever get his Teleportation Device working, then in future productions it might sling actors not just through space but through time.

‘Equivalence is all very well,’ said Rackenham. ‘But political conditions, at least, must change. And for a revolutionary dramatist that must mean something.’

‘Good grief, don’t talk to me about politics,’ said Loeser. ‘In the thirteen years since the war there have been how many governments, Anton?’

‘Fifteen?’ guessed Achleitner. ‘Seventeen?’

‘Exactly. And we’re supposed to keep biting our nails as we wait for the next arbitrary plot development? Politics is pigshit. Hindenburg and MacDonald and Louis XIV, they’re just men. I will bet you anything you like that . . . Anton, you still read the newspapers: name somebody who’s making a lot of noise at the moment.’

‘Hitler.’

‘I will bet you anything you like – sorry, Hitler? Do you mean Adele’s father?’

‘No relation.’

‘Right. As I was saying, I will bet you anything you like that this other Hitler, whoever he is, will never make one bit of difference to my life.’

‘Careful, Egon,’ said Achleitner. ‘That’s the sort of remark that people quote in their memoirs later on as a delicious example of historical irony.’

‘What about the Inflation?’ said Rackenham. ‘That was politics’ fault. And you can hardly say it didn’t affect you.’

‘Actually, he can,’ said Achleitner. ‘He’s a special case. His parents were psychiatrists and most of their clients paid in Swiss francs or American dollars. The Inflation worked out very well for the Loeser family. That’s why he’s such a cosseted little darling. He wasn’t eating cakes made of fungus like the rest of us.’

‘Anton is partly correct,’ said Loeser, ‘but he neglects to mention that both my parents then died in a car accident. Thus cancelling out any egalitarian guilt I might otherwise have felt.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ said Rackenham.

‘Yes, I think of them often.’

‘No, I mean, I’m sorry to hear that people here have to feel guilty about growing up in comfort. In England even my socialist friends wouldn’t be so tiresome.’

‘And this so-called Depression makes no difference to us either,’ said Achleitner. ‘Six million jobless doesn’t seem like so many when none of us ever had any wish for a real job in the first place.’

‘Still, what is one supposed to do with six million surplus people?’ said Rackenham.

‘Perhaps they can all become full-time set designers,’ said Achleitner.

‘We’d better stop and get some wine,’ said Loeser. ‘There won’t be anywhere open near the party.’

When Loeser came back with four cheap bottles they got the driver to carry on waiting so they could do some of Rackenham’s coke. Rackenham obligingly opened the back of his camera and took out a little paper parcel like a mouse’s packed lunch.

‘Is that where you always keep your coke?’ said Loeser.

‘Yes.’

‘Isn’t that where the film is supposed to go?’

‘Yes.’

‘So how does it take pictures?’

‘Don’t be so literal. Photography, as a ceremonial gesture, is a convenient way to make people feel like they’re having a good time, but the technical details are a bore. I picked this machine up for a song because it wouldn’t work even if there were film in it. Meanwhile, I may as well point out that the meter is running.’ There was no flat surface near by so they just sniffed the coke off the sides of their hands and then licked up the residue. One of the great skills of Berlin social life was to make this awkward self-nuzzling into an elegant gesture; Loeser knew that he resembled a schoolboy trying to teach himself cunnilingus. Then, afterwards, always that furtive, startled look, as if somehow you’d only just realised that you weren’t alone in the room.

The cab drove on. Now that they were further up into Puppenberg, most of the buildings they passed had sooty bricks and squinty windows. ‘Whatever I may just have said about drugs these days, this stuff is not bad,’ said Loeser. And then they pulled up outside the corset factory.

No one could remember whose party it was. Inside, long black rows of sewing machines still stood ready like cows for milking, but the electricity was disconnected so the whole factory had been lit up with candles, and at the far end a jazz band (Caucasian, hatless) played on a stage made out of upturned wooden crates – all of which Loeser would have found very imaginative and refreshing four or five years ago.

The first familiar faces they saw were Dieter Ziesel and Hans Heijenhoort, which was not an auspicious start. Both were research physicists who had hung on to the scrubby cliff edge of Loeser’s social circle with the help of some old university friendships that had withered but not quite died. They

were both olympically dull, but Loeser had nonetheless felt a special warmth for Dieter Ziesel ever since one drunken evening in the third year of his degree.

He had been in the college bar and something had just happened – he couldn't now remember what, but it was most likely some rejection by a girl – to melt him into the same sort of doldrums that would one day prove indirectly fatal to his relationship with Marlene Schibelsky. 'I know perfectly well that I'm better than everyone else around here, except maybe Drabsfarben,' he had said to Achleitner. 'But what if that makes no difference? I mean, girls don't seem to care, so why should the rest of the world? If I achieve anything really important, I won't mind about being unhappy, and if I did end up really happy, I suppose I could just about tolerate not achieving anything important. But what if I get neither? My whole life I've been so scornful of anyone who could make peace with failure, but what if I have to? Not everyone can get to the top. Someone's got to be at the bottom. It could happen. Except I think I'd gnaw out my own spleen first.'

'You're never going to be at the bottom,' Achleitner had said.

'How can you know?'

'Because of Dieter Ziesel.'

'Who's that?'

Achleitner had pointed, and Loeser had looked over to see a fellow student with all the classical good looks and muscle definition of a shop-window dummy dipped in birthday-cake icing, who sat alone with a glass of beer. Ziesel was in their year at university, Achleitner explained, but almost nobody knew him. He was still a virgin because he had been too nervous ever to undress in front of a prostitute, and in fact he had never even kissed a girl. He vomited down his shirt whenever he had more than two drinks. He was miserably conscious of his flab jiggling up and down whenever he ran for the tram, which he often did because he was always late. Every weekend he took the train back to

his parents' house in Lemberg and all afternoon would cry into his mother's lap while she cooed to him like a baby. He spent his evenings drawing maps of imaginary planets. 'And he even plays the tuba! Isn't that too perfect? So you'd think he'd be a mathematical genius, wouldn't you? Specimens like him usually are. But he's not. He does all right in his exams because he spends so many hours in the library without bothering to wash, but all his Professors say he lacks any real feeling for his subject.'

'How do you know all this?'

'He left his diary somewhere and somebody found it. The point is, however bad you may think your life is, you can be sure that Dieter Ziesel's is worse. You're never going to be at the bottom, because Dieter Ziesel is always going to be at the bottom. In mathematical terms, he is the n minus one.'

'That may be the most gladdening thing I have ever heard,' Loeser had said.

'Yes. Dieter Ziesel is a gift to us all. I often feel that in some respects he is our Jesus.'

In the years that followed, Loeser took strength thousands of times from the thought of Dieter Ziesel. At one point he considered commissioning a miniature portrait of Ziesel and keeping it in his wallet. When his great redeemer won a prestigious research fellowship it was a bit of a blow, but apparently a particular Professor had championed Ziesel's cause to the selection committee, and that Professor was no doubt taking pity on the fellow, knowing that he would have no prospects in any other walk of life.

What Loeser found especially hilarious was that Ziesel still refused to accept his role. When he heard about a party thrown by people he knew, he always turned up, even though it must have been clear that nobody wanted him there. He had recently bought a suit in the gross American style that was now fashionable among the middlebrow public – huge shoulders, slim legs, leather belt – as if everyone would suddenly

change their opinion about him as soon as they had a chance to admire this up-to-date garb. And, most absurd of all, he maintained his abusive relationship with Heijenhoort. The two had been good friends at university, but at some point Ziesel must have realised that his skinny classmate was the one person he could bully who was certain not to bully him back. This was because Heijenhoort – also a bit like Jesus, but in a less useful way – was basically the nicest man in the entire world. He wasn't all that charming or funny, he was just nice. He had incomprehensible reserves of friendliness, optimism, self-effacement, generosity, and tact. A gang of dockers could kick him to mush in the street and even his death rattle would be polite. Ziesel was safe with Heijenhoort. So he made constant little jokes at Heijenhoort's expense whenever he was in the presence of anyone who he thought might be impressed, hoping that it might at least infinitesimally elevate his social status, like a provincial civil servant writing to a minister about the incompetence of a colleague and expecting a promotion in return. But in fact it only had the effect of making Ziesel look like even more of a failure, since no sane person could possibly dislike Heijenhoort.

No sane person, that is, except Egon Loeser. To be that nice all the time, thought Loeser, just didn't make sense. It was inhuman, illogical, saccharine, and cowardly. You couldn't truly love anything if you didn't hate at least something. Indeed, perhaps you couldn't truly love anything if you didn't hate almost everything. What, he wondered, would it actually mean to be 'friends' with Heijenhoort, knowing that Heijenhoort, the skimmed milk to Ziesel's rancid butter, would bestow his insipid affection so indiscriminately? But even Achleitner said he didn't mind Heijenhoort, so Loeser kept his contempt to himself.

Loeser introduced Rackenham to the two mismatched messiahs and then asked them how the party was. 'Not very good,' Ziesel replied. 'There's no corkscrew.'

‘What do you mean?’ said Achleitner.

‘No corkscrew,’ said Ziesel. ‘No one can open their wine. And there are no shops for miles.’

‘There must be two hundred people here. How can there not be one corkscrew?’

‘Hildkraut does have a penknife with a corkscrew attachment but he’s hiring it out and no one wants to pay,’ said Heijenhoort.

‘There have already been some casualties.’ Brogmann, apparently, had smashed his bottle on the wall to break off the neck and then tried to drink from what was left and cut his lip, while Tetzner had told Hannah Czenowitz that, given her curriculum vitae, she should have no trouble sucking out a cork, and she’d punched him in the eye.

‘This is ridiculous,’ said Achleitner.

‘Yes, it’s a disappointment, but at least Brecht is supposed to be coming later,’ said Ziesel.

‘If there’s not even any wine, thank God we found some coke,’ said Loeser. Then he felt a tap on his shoulder, and turned.

Achleitner had been right. Adele Hitler had changed.

The first thing Loeser noticed was her hair. It was hopelessly unfashionable. Where every single one of his female friends had a bob that looked like a geometric diagram of itself, often snipped so close at the back that in the morning there would be stubble at the nape, pale Adele wore a flock of black starlings, a drop of ink bursting in a glass of water, an avalanche of curls that could hardly be called a cut because if it were ever to come across a pair of scissors it would surely just swallow them up.

And where most 1931 frocks, like the medieval Greek merchant and geodesist Cosmas Indicopleustes, argued for flatness in the face of all available evidence, Adele had on a blue dress that wrote limericks about her bust and hips, no matter that her figure was actually pretty girlish – with

a printed pattern of clouds, skyscrapers and biplanes that seemed to be the garment's lone, almost touchingly clumsy, concession to the zeitgeist.

And then, above all, her eyes. She didn't wear goggles of eyeshadow like the other girls did, just a little eyeliner and a little mascara, but both were quite redundant, since no artificial pigment could possibly augment what were not only the biggest and brightest and most tender eyes that Loeser had ever seen but also the most astonishingly baroque, with each iris showing a spray of gold around the pupil like the corona around an eclipse, within a dappled band of blue and green, within an outline of grey as distinct as a pencil mark, and then beyond that an expanse of moist white that did not betray even the faintest red vein but sheltered at its inner corner a perfect tear duct like a tiny pink sapphire. They were eyes that should have belonged to the frightened young of some rare Javanese loris.

Loeser could hardly believe that a beauty this intense had ever existed under all those layers of puppy fat – or not so much puppy fat, he recalled, as pony fat. He could hardly believe that lesson after lesson had seemed so tedious, that he had once felt positively unlucky to have been hired to teach this particular schoolgirl and not one of those schoolgirls one sometimes saw on the tram who had so much more . . . well, one shouldn't dwell on that. He could hardly believe that he had been so ungrateful when right in front of him, hanging tightly on his every word, had been this revelation, his pupil in pupa. And he could hardly believe that his blinkered pursuit of modish girls like Marlene Schibelsky who knew how to dress and paint their face and cut their hair had just been rendered so utterly absurd.

He had never wanted to fuck anything so much in his life. 'Herr Loeser,' she said. 'Do you remember me?'

He composed himself. 'Adele Hitler! I certainly do. You're looking . . . very well.'

‘Thank you. And I see you’ve smartened up. Do you know a lot of people here?’

‘Too many.’

‘Is it true Brecht is going to come?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘I’d love to meet him.’

‘You’d be disappointed. You’d see right through the man.’

‘How can you be so sure?’

‘Because of that exquisite critical eye that I remember so well from all our hours of Schiller.’ He remembered no such thing.

‘Unless those jealous Swiss matrons have quite gouged it out.’

Adele smiled. ‘Do you still teach, Herr Loeser?’

‘You can call me Egon now. And, no, I don’t teach any more. I’m in the theatre.’

‘Oh, I’m thrilled, I always thought you might become a playwright! I’ve been so desperate to meet some writers. You’re my first. Are you even bolder than Brecht?’

There was almost no component of his self-respect that Loeser wasn’t occasionally willing to leave at the pawnbrokers, but he did have one rule: he wouldn’t falsify himself to please. No one was worth that. The world could take him as he was. So although it would have been very easy to skate along with Adele’s assumption, he had no choice but to correct her. ‘I’m not a writer, actually. I’m a set designer.’

‘You mean a sort of carpenter?’

Loeser was about to explain that his work was fundamental to the conception of *Lavicini*, but then he heard something click behind his head. He looked round. There was Rackenham with his Leica. Another interruption, but this was all right: it would be good if Adele thought he was ringed with cosmopolitan associates.

‘Oh, you didn’t give me a chance to pose,’ said Adele, fussing belatedly at her fringe.

‘I don’t think it would be possible to take an unflattering photo of you, my dear,’ said Rackenham.

‘Certainly not with that particular camera,’ said Loeser evenly.

‘Why don’t you introduce me, Egon?’

‘Fraulein Hitler, this is Herr Rackenham. He’s a very distinguished young novelist.’

‘A real writer! What’s your book called?’

‘My latest is *Steep Air*,’ said Rackenham.

‘Oh, I haven’t heard of that. I’m sorry to say I don’t read much English fiction.’

‘Don’t be sorry. You’re very wise. English fiction is dead. It’s disloyal of me to say, because I went to university with so many of its brightest hopes, but it is dead.’

‘Then who am I to read?’

‘The Americans. A critic friend of mine says that deciding between English fiction and American fiction is like deciding between dinner with a corpse and cocktails with a baby; but at least the baby has a life ahead of it.’

‘I love American books,’ said Adele.

Loeser, at present, was reading *Berlin Alexanderplatz* by Alfred Döblin. Unfortunately, after seventeen months, he was still only on page 189. Achleitner, who had bought it the same day, was about three quarters of the way through page 12. ‘I cannot tolerate this infatuation with the Yanks,’ he said. ‘Rackenham, you’re as bad as Ziesel over there in his new suit.’

‘I think he might have heard you,’ said Rackenham.

‘I hope he did. If you want to understand what American culture really is you should go and look at the new escalators in the Kaufhaus des Westens on Tauentzienstrasse. They’re American-made. Never in your life will you have seen so many apparently healthy adults queueing up for the privilege of standing still.’

‘What about jazz?’ said Adele.

‘Jazz is castration music for factory workers. This band are playing in the right place but they got here too late.’

‘There must be something American you like.’

‘Nothing.’

‘Nothing?’

‘Nothing.’

This was a lie, but it didn’t feel like a lie, because it had only one very specific exception. About a year earlier, he had taken a slow train to Cologne to visit his great aunt, and on the journey he had deliberately brought nothing to read but *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, on the basis that after six hours either he would have finished the book or the book would have finished him. He lasted one stop before turning to the other man in the carriage and saying, ‘I will give you fifty-seven marks, which is everything I have in my wallet, for that novel you’re reading.’

‘I’m sorry, I don’t speak German,’ said the man in a thick American accent.

Loeser repeated the offer in English. (He had grown up speaking both languages to his parents.)

‘Don’t you care what it is?’

‘Is it by any chance *Berlin Alexanderplatz*?’ said Loeser.

‘No.’

‘Then I don’t care what it is.’

The book turned out to be *Stifled Cry* by Stent Mutton. It was set in Los Angeles and it was about a petty criminal who meets a housemaid on a tram, becomes her lover, and then makes a plan to steal a baby so that the housemaid can sell it to her infertile mistress for enough money to elope. Loeser finished it in less than two hours, which might have represented bad value for money if he hadn’t been delighted to have the chance to read it a second and third time before they arrived in Cologne, and then a fourth time by candlelight in his great aunt’s guest room. The narrator had no name, no history, no morals, and no sense of humour. He had a vocabulary about the size of a budgerigar’s, and yet he had a strangely poetic way with the grease-stained American

vernacular. He seemed to find everyone and everything in the world pretty tiresome, and although he rarely bothered to dodge the women who threw themselves at him, the only true passion to which he was ever aroused was his ferocious loathing for the rich and those deferential to the rich. Loeser found all this captivating, but what he found most captivating of all was that Mutton's protagonist always, always, always knew what to do. No dithering, no procrastination, no self-consciousness: just action. Loeser yearned to be that man. He had soon afterwards sent off to Knopf in New York for all five of Mutton's remaining books, which were now hidden under his bed beside an expensive photo album of Parisian origin called *Midnight at the Nursing Academy*.

But he didn't tell Adele and Rackenham any of this. Instead, he started trying to nudge the conversation back to his impressive work in the theatre. Before he had done so, though, Achleitner appeared. Loeser introduced Achleitner to Adele. 'I shall enjoy watching you make a fool of yourself with this girl,' is what Achleitner said with the smile he gave Loeser. 'Apparently Brecht has just got here,' is what he said out loud.

Back at the entrance to the factory there was indeed a small crowd of what might have been Brecht's parasites. But Loeser didn't see Brecht. He did, however, see Marlene, who had evidently also just arrived. He felt dispirited by how chic she looked. She was even wearing a vogueish monocle. Adele, meanwhile, was standing on tiptoes to try and catch sight of the playwright.

A monstrous thought sank its fangs into Loeser's brain.

He blurted something to Achleitner about how he ought to tell Adele the story of Brogmann and the lifeguards while he had a word with Rackenham. Then he took Rackenham aside.

'I know we've only just met,' he said, 'but I'm going to ask a favour. Brecht will leave after twenty minutes. He always

does. Could you just sort of distract Adele until then? Dance with her or something. Take some more “photos”.’

‘Why?’

‘I’m sure even a man of your proclivities can tell that Adele is the most beautiful female at this party. And not only that but she’s new blood. If he sees her, Brecht will go after her like Ziesel after a coffin full of ice cream sundae. And she’s hardly going to say no to him. Even though he doesn’t wash or brush his teeth.’

‘Why don’t you distract her yourself?’

‘My ex-girlfriend’s here.’ He looked around. ‘I’m not sure where she’s gone now, but she is. And if she sees me trying to seduce a naive eighteen-year-old ex-pupil then she may get the impression that my new life without her is not quite the model of mature sexual prosperity that you and I know it absolutely is. I can’t have that.’

‘Loeser, the child seems very lovely, but if I don’t sell the rest of this coke I shall have to hide from my landlady all weekend.’

‘Please, Rackenham. If Brecht doesn’t fuck her then I really think I might be able to. And I know it’s silly but I can’t help feeling that if I did fuck her . . .’

‘What?’

‘I can’t help feeling that if I did fuck her, just once, then everything would be all right,’ said Loeser hesitantly. ‘For me. Even if I didn’t fuck anyone else this year. I know it sounds pathetic, but look at her. Look at her eyes. And I’d probably be her first. Imagine that! You and Achleitner wouldn’t understand because you two can just fuck whom-ever you want whenever you want. But it doesn’t work like that if you prefer women. Unless you’re Brecht.’ Or a Stent Mutton hero.

‘Well, I can hardly say no after you’ve been so frank, can I?’ There was a sardonic edge to Rackenham’s tone but there was also a genuine sympathy, and for just a moment,

as Loeser looked into the Englishman's handsome blue eyes, he felt a befuddling combination of tearful gratitude, unaccustomed optimism, and perhaps even a small homoerotic tremor. Probably something in the coke. Regardless, he thanked Rackenham warmly and they rejoined Adele and Achleitner, then Rackenham went off with the girl. He was about to explain the situation to Achleitner when he saw Tetzner standing near by, and he didn't want a conversation about his drug debts, so he rushed off in the other direction, and that was when he collided with Klugweil.

The actor had his arms in a double sling that bore a regrettable resemblance to the harness that had injured him in the first place. And he was in mid-conversation with, of all people, Marlene, which was unfortunate but wasn't a total surprise, since he had always been the first man she flirted with at parties, even when she was going out with Loeser. Thankfully, Klugweil was devoted to his boring girlfriend Gretel, and in Loeser's experience it was always boring girlfriends who lasted the longest – like some Siberian brain parasite, they seemed to shut down their host's capacity to imagine a more exciting life.

'Hello, Adolf,' said Loeser. 'Hello, Marlene.'

Klugweil just glared at him, and Marlene said, 'The doctor says that his arms will never quite go back to how they were before. That's what you accomplished today, and here you are at a party as if nothing had happened.'

'I did almost get my nose broken.'

'And worst of all, Adolf says you made some comment afterwards about how the machine was actually designed to injure him, and that's why you gave it that name.'

'No, I didn't say that, I was only making a theoretical point about how the name of the thing couldn't logically make any difference to whether or not—'

'Oh God, you're always making some point, aren't you? Always some useless fucking point. Well, what about his arms?'

Loeser shrugged. 'At least they didn't get ripped off completely.'

Marlene gasped in disgust and led Klugweil away, presumably to counsel him not to slip into the darkness. 'Hey, calm down,' Loeser called after them. 'I was joking. Adolf! You know I'm sorry about it really. I am!'

'Oh, just fuck off!' Klugweil shouted back at him, not very languidly.

Loeser thought this might be a good time to do some more coke. So he found Achleitner and they went off into a corner and started drafting lines on top of a sewing machine.

'That wasn't actually Brecht, by the way,' said Achleitner. 'It was Vanel, but he happened to be wearing one of those long red overcoats like Brecht always wears.'

'So why was there all that commotion by the door?'

'It turned out he had a corkscrew on him.'

'Oh, I might as well get Adele back from Rackenham, then.'

'What do you mean?'

'I left her with him so that Brecht wouldn't notice her. He was very helpful about it.'

'That was brave,' said Achleitner.

'Brave?' said Loeser. Near by he heard one of those startling explosions of communal laughter that are distributed at random intervals through parties like moisture pockets in a fireplace log.

'He's very charming.'

'Yes, but he's hardly going to make a move himself, is he? He's queer. Ideal chaperone.'

Achleitner cocked his head. 'Not exactly.'

Another monstrous thought sank its teeth into Loeser's brain, which made the previous monstrous thought look like an adorable snuffly pet. 'What do you mean?'

'As everyone knows, all those English public-school boys are Gillette blades. They cut both ways.'

'But you said he was queer.'
'I didn't, Egon. I just said I fucked him. Not the same thing.'
'You're playing games with me.'
'No.'
'You must be.'
'No.'
'You must be because otherwise I will kill you and then kill myself.'
'I'm afraid I'm not.'

Loeser made a run for the dance floor, but Adele and Rackenham were nowhere to be seen. He collared Hildkraut, who looked as if he were mourning the loss of his corkscrew monopoly. 'Have you seen that girl with the long black hair and the big eyes?' he shouted over the music. 'She's with an Englishman in a waistcoat.'

'The short bony girl? Looks about twelve?' said Hildkraut.
'I suppose so,' said Loeser. That others might not find Adele as attractive as he did had not even occurred to him.
'They were here, but they left.'
'Where did they go?'
'Well, they were doing some coke, not very discreetly—'
'He gave her coke?'
'Yes. And then I think they went out by the back entrance.'
'Fuck!'

Outside, there was nobody but Klein vomiting methodically into an upturned copper corset mould. Loeser dashed past him and out into the street beyond, but it was deserted, so he hurried back to the party, wondering if Hildkraut might have got it wrong about the other two leaving.

Like a faithful old butler who quietly begins preparations to auction the antique furniture and dismiss the French chef several weeks before his master has even begun to wonder if all that fuss about the stock market might have cut a little bit into his income, there was an inferior part of Loeser's brain which had long since accepted that it was going to be Rackenham,

not him, who fucked Adele tonight, and which was already getting ready for the moment when the superior part had no choice but to accept the same thing. Until then, however, Loeser would just go on running back and forth, looking in cupboards, tripping over dancers, asking incoherent questions of possible witnesses, inventing optimistic excuses (she might have become suddenly and disruptively menstrual!), and generally behaving as if what was now obviously true might still, somehow, be false. In the end, though, after a frantic, undignified and predictable twelve-minute crescendo of desperation, the last hope finally departed Loeser like a last line of credit finally withdrawn. 'That worthless cunt!' he howled, stamping on the ground. He realised he didn't have a drink, and just at that moment he saw Gobulev put down his bottle of black-market vodka to light a cigarette, so he grabbed it and sloshed as much of its contents into him as he could before it started to dribble down his chin. Then he slipped unsteadily back into the crowd, away from the dance floor.

What now? The main thing was not to dwell on it. There were alternatives. He could just go back to his flat, where whatever hour happened to show on the clock it was always, mercifully, *Midnight at the Nursing Academy*. But for once the book might not quite be enough to satisfy him. He could try and fuck someone else at this party. But he didn't have the spiritual stamina to fix upon a new target and begin a whole seduction from nothing when he was almost certain to fail as usual. What about Marlene? Could he persuade Marlene to go to bed with him for old times' sake? That was the sort of thing people did, wasn't it? But she hated him too much. Which only left the Zinnowitz Tearooms. He wasn't often drunk enough to want to go to the Zinnowitz Tearooms. But if he forced down the rest of Gobulev's vodka, he would definitely be drunk enough before long.

If some confidant had learned that the sole reason Loeser didn't like going to prostitutes was that they made him feel

so uncomfortable, he might have deduced that Loeser had no moral sentiments at stake in the matter – or otherwise he might have deduced that this very feeling of awkwardness was itself a sort of moral sentiment – a sickly, selfish, and impotent sort of moral sentiment, but a moral sentiment nonetheless. Whatever the case, Loeser hadn't gone to a prostitute sober since he was nineteen, and he hadn't even gone to a prostitute drunk since late last year. That last occasion had been particularly bad. About a minute into the act he had stopped thrusting and cleared his throat nervously.

The girl, who called herself Sabine, turned her head to look back at him. 'What's wrong?' she said. Loeser's forehead felt riverine with sweat but hers, as usual, was somehow still talcum dry.

'Look, if it's all the same to you . . .'

'What do you want me to do, darling?'

'It's not that I don't appreciate the effort you put in, with all the moans and the lofty commendation of my dick and so forth, but the truth is . . .'

He'd never had the courage to say this before. 'I don't like it when a waiter or a clerk pretends to be a bosom friend, and I don't like it when you pretend to be enjoying all this, either. No offence meant. I know it's part of the job. But we both know you're not really enjoying it. The suspension of disbelief isn't quite there. And on the whole it just puts me off.'

He'd expected her to get a bit sulky but in fact she just said, 'Whatever you say.' Relieved, he went back to work, but straight away she started squirming away from him and gasping, 'No, no, please, let me go, please, it's too big!'

He stopped in horror. 'I'm so sorry.'

She looked back at him again. 'Why did you stop? Did I get it wrong?'

He hadn't realised she'd been acting. 'What were you doing?'

'You told me to pretend I wasn't enjoying it.'

‘No, I just told you to stop pretending that you *were* enjoying it.’

‘So am I supposed to be enjoying it or not?’ she said.

‘No,’ he said.

‘Well, then.’

‘But not in that way.’

‘If I’m not enjoying it, then I’m going to want you to stop, aren’t I?’

‘But you weren’t enjoying it previously, and you didn’t want me to stop. Well, I mean, I’m sure on some level you did want me to stop, actually, that’s part of my point, but the difference is you didn’t say anything.’

‘You didn’t ask me to say anything.’

The exasperation in her voice was murdering Loeser’s erection. ‘I know, but . . . Look, can we just agree that I’m not giving you hundreds of orgasms, but I’m also not raping you, I’m just a polite stranger offering you a fair wage in exchange for the efficient completion of a specific service within a capitalist system of alienated labour, all right? That’s my shameful fantasy.’

From then on she was as silent and still as a coma patient. Which was by far the worst of the three scenarios. After another few minutes he had to pretend he’d ejaculated just so that he could leave, which was not something he’d ever anticipated he’d have to do with a paid consort, but he knew it was his own fault.

So it was with a rucksack of apprehension that he stepped out of the taxi outside the Zinnowitz Tearooms on Lieblingstrasse. At two in the morning the streets of Strandow were crowded with screeching drunks from the beer halls near by, many now queuing up like a congealed riot to buy boiled meatballs with caper sauce from stalls to eat on the way home. He nodded to the brothel’s bouncer and went inside, where he was greeted straight away by Frau Diski, the dwarfish proprietor. ‘Herr Loeser! What a pleasure. It’s been

a long time, hasn't it? Sit down, sit down. What would you like to drink?'

'I suppose I've probably had enough tonight.' He couldn't remember what he'd done with the bottle of vodka.

'Some tea, then.'

'Fine.' Around the room sat six or seven other men, alone or in pairs, some of them with girls on their laps. Mercifully there was no one among them he knew. With its floral wallpaper, bentwood chairs, and Blandine Ebinger records playing softly on the gramophone in the corner, the Zinnowitz Tearooms, even after midnight, really did retain the stolid atmosphere of the sort of place your aunt would take you for chocolate cake, which was presumably a calculated psychoanalytic strategy on Frau Diski's part to stop her customers from getting rowdy: they had all been nice boys once and there were some deep bourgeois instincts that even a barrel of beer couldn't drown.

'You seem to be in low spirits, Herr Loeser.'

'I haven't had a fantastically good evening.'

Frau Diski sat down beside him. 'Why don't you tell me about it?'

'There's no point.'

'I want to know.'

'Well . . . I was after a girl, of course. And I should have got her. But someone else got her instead. And what makes it really intolerable is that it was my fault that he did.' He meant that he'd handed Adele over to Rackenham, but now he remembered that he'd also been too stubborn to let her believe he was a writer. Would that have made a difference? Did writers really get more sex just because they were writers? Presumably writers hoped and prayed that they might. He'd read somewhere that Balzac only took up writing because he thought it might help him meet women. And it worked, of course: he married one of his fans. But that was after he'd written ninety-two novels, and they were married for just five

months before Balzac died of a lung complaint. Even assuming they'd fucked every day since the wedding, that meant Balzac had written about half a book for every wheezy sexual encounter. Not a very efficient rate of return. Still, it was better than nothing, and if Countess Ewelina Hańska was as good in bed as Marlene Schibelsky, it might just about have been worthwhile.

'Who is she, this object of desire?' said Frau Diski.

'Oh, I used to tutor her when she was about fifteen. But naturally she's older now,' he added hastily.

'What's her name?'

'Adele.'

'What does she look like?'

'Ravishing long black hair like nobody has any more except peasants. Huge innocent eyes. Perfect pale skin. Musical laugh. So slender you just want to reach out and stroke her collarbone and her shoulderblades and her spine and her hips and her spine and all the rest.' He wondered if it was possible to vomit with lust.

'You needn't say any more, Herr Loeser. Come this way.' Frau Diski got up again and led him down the carpeted corridor towards the bedrooms.

'But I haven't chosen a girl yet. Have I?' He realised he was staggering a bit.

'There's no need to bring them all out on parade as usual when your description is so evocative. You should be a writer.'

'I mean, not that I really mind. Just as long as it's not Sabine again. Not that there's anything wrong with Sabine.'

'Here you are, Herr Loeser.' They stopped, and Frau Diski opened the door to the bedroom before them. Inside, a girl sat on the bed brushing her hair with her back to the doorway. She wore nothing but lacy white underwear, and in the gaslight her skin looked as soft as water, the vertebrae of her spine a row of pebbles half submerged in a stream. The room smelled of clean linen. For a dilated instant Loeser felt as if he were looking at

something unreal behind glass, like a photograph in an old locket, but then Frau Diski said, 'This is . . . Anneliese,' and the girl turned and Loeser felt his heart leap into his mouth.

'Frau Diski, I think you must have misunderstood me,' he stammered. 'Just now, I wasn't trying to explain the sort of girl I wanted, I was only trying to explain what had happened to me tonight. Like you asked me to. I'm not – I don't . . .'

'I'll leave the two of you alone,' said Frau Diski with a smile. She gave Loeser a gentle push into the room and then closed the door, trapping him inside the locket.

'Anneliese', who could not have been more than fifteen years old, looked like Adele, but she did not look like Adele at fifteen, nor did she look like Adele at eighteen. Rather, she looked just as Adele would have looked at fifteen if she had already been beautiful, if she hadn't been pudgy and half finished. She had the hair, the eyes, the skin, the bones, but she also had the youth – she was the old Adele he had once known so well, combined with the new Adele he had met only for a few minutes. The likeness was uncanny, but it was a likeness to somebody who had never existed, a loan from a parallel world.

He knew, though, that this was not a job that anyone should be doing at this girl's age. Even his own atrophous moral faculties could tell him that. He tried not to look at her body because he knew he'd feel so guilty if he got an erection. Naturally he'd seen very youthful harlots on street corners before, but he wouldn't have known that there were any to be found here in the cosy Zinnowitz Tearooms.

Loeser stared at the girl, and the girl smiled shyly back at Loeser. Cries of synthetic pleasure seeped very faintly through the wall to his left.

He couldn't, of course. He couldn't.

Could he?