

Rowohlt Verlag

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Martin Mosebach

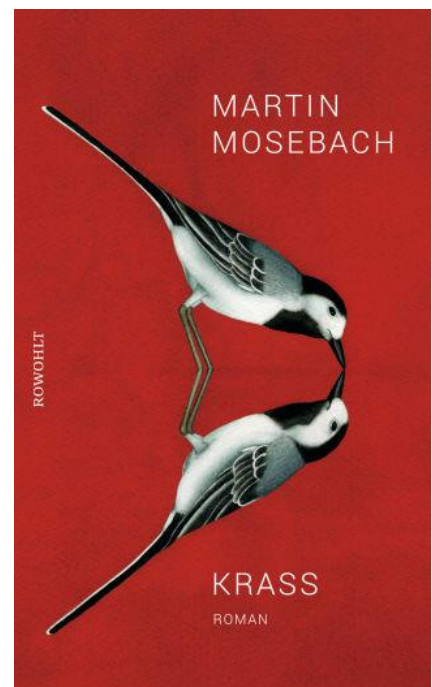
Krass

Rowohlt Verlag

528 pages / February 2021

Ralph Krass – this is the name of a magnanimous and extravagant businessman who chews people up and spits them out. Is he endlessly rich, simply a cold, calculating fraud, or an unbridled dreamer? He wants to buy his own company, always be the benefactor. When Lidewine, a young adventuress who was until recently a magician's assistant – enters his circle in Naples, he offers her an unusual pact. His secretary, the unfortunate Dr Jüngel, observes these events, full of jealousy and envy. But it is only after Krass's company folds due to a scandal that he takes refuge in the French provinces where he manages to rearrange the mosaic pieces of the events into an image – where people like the mute cowherd Toussaint, the cobbler Desfosses and Madame Lemoine with her budgie give him an inkling of how everything is mysteriously connected to everything else.

Krass, this atmospherically dense and vivid novel about how people are affected by the passage of time, is a romance as well as the story of a Mephistophelean figure – sometimes brightened by gentle humour, but above all dark and, in its darkness, hauntingly beautiful. A grand tale that moves from Naples to Frankfurt and all the way to Cairo. It is one of the most captivating books that Martin Mosebach has ever written.



Martin Mosebach was born in Frankfurt am Main in 1951. After passing his bar exams to qualify as a lawyer in 1979, he established himself as a writer in the city of his birth, where he still lives today. His first novel was published in 1983; since then, he has published a further nine acclaimed novels that have been translated into several languages. He has also written stories, poetry, libretti and essays on art and literature, ventured into travel writing and explored religious, historical and political topics. Mosebach has received many accolades and awards, including the Heinrich von Kleist Prize, the Georg Büchner Prize and the Goethe Award.

- Martin Mosebach's new novel – grand European literature
- Rights to *The 21* have been sold to the Czech Republic (Hesperion), Korea (The Voice of Martyrs Korea), Netherland (Royal Jongbloed) and the USA (Plough Publishing).
- Rights to the novel *Mogador* have been sold to Italy (E/O Edizioni).

MARTIN MOSEBACH

KRASS

PART ONE

ALLEGRO IMBARAZZANTE

1.

Harry Renó performed his illusions without a great deal of décor. He stood on the spare stage in his tuxedo as if encased in a black box – his hand very pale, his hair a colorless silver, the few props flashing in the harsh light of the spotlight. The sight of him resembled a black-and-white photo, especially when he suddenly froze, subtle movements giving way to a subtly mannered pose, and left the audience holding their breath, waiting for him to finally come back to life. He had just lit a cigarette, half turned away from the seats as if shielding the flame from a draft. He acted as if he were alone and simply felt like having a smoke. Then he straightened up, inhaled with pleasure, and tilted his head back – and after a moment of utter stillness, smoke streamed out of his half-opened mouth, as solid and distinct as a small ribbon. He took a few steps. The smoke hung in the air; it didn't disperse. And now he wrote, strolling across the stage, his hands in his jacket pockets, in large, elegant cursive, “Amore mio, io sono pazzo di te” – the words hung in the air, clearly legible against the black wall. He meanwhile was looking out into the theatre. Was he searching the crowd for the woman to whom the confession was directed? A moment of mystification. Then the applause surged forth.

The magician made a curt bow, as if his trick were intended above all for his own amusement and he felt the applause to be a downright nuisance. Just then the doors in the back of the theatre opened, and in the darkness a group of people was led single-file to the first row. This party had driven up to the Vomero from Santa Lucia, intending to see a classic Neapolitan play, *Miseria e nobiltà* by Scarpetta, but had arrived on the wrong day and at the wrong time, as became clear only when they reached the lobby.

The young man who led the group, rather short in stature, with glasses on his gaunt face, had arrived in the first taxi; the others were, to his relief, stuck in traffic. He broke into a sweat and ran a hand through his hair, which stood up afterwards like a rooster's comb.

“That which must not happen, happens,” read the poster. The idea was not comforting. Fortunately, despite his misfortune, there were still expensive tickets available way up front. By the time the others arrived, he already had an excuse ready – the performance had been changed at short notice, management sent their apologies, good seats had been reserved for them to make up for the misunderstanding.

The group pushed forward into the darkness, but a heavysset man with a large head and grim countenance held him back.

“How could this happen?”

The question sounded threatening. The young man's face grew so hot that his glasses fogged up.

“Herr Doktor Jüngel, you must prevent such things from happening; I have discerning guests here, they haven't the time for mistakes. I hope the itinerary for the rest of the evening still stands.” He turned around and vanished into the darkness with the others.

The young man, who looked far too old for the name Jüngel, unfresh and not quite healthy, slunk after him with his head hunched between his shoulders, as if after being thus chastised it was incumbent upon him to take up less space. Earlier, when he had announced the plan for that evening in the bar of the Hotel Excelsior, he had suddenly felt ill: the classic play he had selected was about poor people who pretend to be aristocrats while in the company of a rich man, the idea being to dazzle him with so many *marchesi* and *principesse* that he forgets to keep an eye on his pockets – that was the gist, anyway – but could Herr Krass, his fearsome employer, not somehow feel that it was a commentary on him? That he was being placed in the category of thoughtless, easily exploitable rich people? He was uncommonly self-possessed, but one never knew what might touch a sore spot, even with a man such as he. Seen in this light, then, maybe it was a blessing that *Miseria e nobiltà* wasn't slated to be performed until tomorrow.

As the name, and other things besides, made apparent, the magician wasn't Italian, but he had the fluent gift for languages that was indispensable to a nomad such as himself. His paleness was almost albino-like; his white-blond hair, its tight curls plastered to his head with pomade, shone like metal. His eyelashes were so fair as to be invisible; from a distance he seemed to have none, which gave him an uncannily cold and naked look. The magician was not a particularly handsome or attractive man, but he radiated strength and intelligence; one believed him capable of surprises. Did he hail from Finland's eternal darkness, or from Latvia or Estonia? His style of interacting with the crowd differed from the usual ingratiating patter used by others of his trade; never would the words “You're a wonderful audience” have left his lips. He dealt with his audience rather roughly, even mocked them a little. He kept a wary eye on the crowd, like a dragonslayer in an old legend, standing alone before the hundred-headed beast and seeking to deceive it with ruses and feints.

“Now you see, there are people who claim there's a trick behind everything; one only has to find out – what it is. We are here in Naples – even an eruption of Vesuvius or an earthquake: just a trick! If one can but see what sort of cards nature is holding, one knows everything.”

He spoke very quickly. Jüngel, whose Italian was quite good, could barely understand him, and to make matters worse he became increasingly lost in this generalizing and somewhat irrational rhetoric how was an earthquake supposed to be a trick?

“No, wrong! Those who are truly intelligent know: there are things that have no trick behind them, that cannot be explained. There exist phenomena of incomprehensibility, of *imprevisibilità*.”

What was that, was that even a word? The man from the north acted as if it were –but now what he needed was cooperation.

“And above all for your sake, ladies and gentlemen, because after our time here is finished I don't want to hear that I put anything over on you. No, you must see it yourselves, you must be allowed to follow every step and watch my every move. But keep your eyes open! I appreciate a skeptical audience; childish gullibility is of no use to me. You must watch my work as if I were your worst enemy!” From his tuxedo jacket he produced an envelope with a red seal, announcing that he had had it sealed this afternoon in the offices of the renowned notary Cocco Palmiero in the presence of witnesses. And now he would like to ask for six audience members to come up on stage: no need to be shy. “What I need above all is people who don't trust my little operation

here, more inspectors than assistants. Signora, you look so doubtful, won't you come up? And the Signore, a scientist, a rationalist, am I right?"

"Not a rationalist, a *ragioniere*." The man, an older bald man, had the laughter on his side, but Harry Renó, his eyes narrowed, seemed to have nothing against this – go ahead and laugh, he seemed to be thinking. "And what about you, Signora?" He turned to an elegant lady who sat next to Herr Krass, with white hair cut to matchstick length and giant drop earrings made of tortoise shell.

She rose with a scornful smile and walked up the steps to the stage, her tall heels clacking. She returned his greeting in French.

"Ah, Madame est française," the magician had no trouble making the switch. For a very brief moment he might also have had his eye on Herr Krass, who was sitting there right under his nose, but when he met his gaze he read such a threat in his expression that he quickly moved on to a man with sallow cheeks and a motherly matron.

A tall young woman made her way through the rows from the middle of the theatre, confidence radiating from her entire person, right down to the way she walked, proudly showing off her figure, with upright posture, her stomach drawn in, head thrown back, waves of hair falling around it – she would be the last of the six volunteers. She wore a tight outfit with a rather long skirt; a slit enabled her to take long strides. Everything about her begged beholding – her peculiar square face, expressive mouth, expressive eyes darting curiously this way and that, lips half parted. Above all Jüngel stared at her legs, which showed through the slit in her skirt, firm and well-formed, but at the same time somewhat stiff, like the plastic legs in a display window, outstretched feet showing off the stockings drawn over them. It wouldn't have surprised him if they sounded hollow when knocked on.

Where was she from? Harry Renó posed the question to her as well – "From Belgium," came the answer in Italian, and he turned to the French lady as if the two of them were in league together, crying out in mock despair, "Toujours les Belges!" "To whom do I give the envelope? In whom do I have the most trust?" He thoughtfully surveyed his six volunteers, then spun on his heel and handed the letter to the young Belgian woman behind him, who stepped back in surprise.

"But before you put it away, check the seal please!"

She held the envelope with both hands – they were large, like everything else about her – and looked at it, somewhat perplexed.

"The seal is unbroken? Stuck on there properly? Then put the letter away – now it's time to go to work."

In the meantime two stage hands had set up a chalkboard in back of the stage and covered it with a screen.

"Now, I will ask each of you to step behind the screen one by one and write a single word on the chalkboard: You, Signora, please begin by writing the name of a city – but not Naples, please, make it hard for us!"

A tremor of laughter in the audience. The illusionist knew: the lamest jokes worked best.

"Our French friend will please write the name of a historic figure – if I know the French: Napoléon!"

More dutiful laughter.

"I'll take that as a compliment," said the lady, who seemed unflappable, and disappeared behind the screen. The screeching of chalk was heard; she took her time and then stepped back out, her gait dignified, earrings fluttering on either side of her.

The man with sallow cheeks and somewhat bulging eyes was instructed to write down a brand of automobile – "You know a thing or two about cars, don't you? Our own race car driver . . ."; the older bald man, pushing his belly in front of him, was asked to write down a color, and the older lady a flower – "You love roses, do you not? I know everything!"

Finally it was the Belgian woman's turn. The letter was a white stripe, jutting out of her suit jacket pocket. It was clear that being in possession of the letter had imparted to her a special role.

"Now, what all do we have again?" Harry Renó feigned confusion. "Names, colors, cities, cars, now comes numbers – you, mademoiselle, will please write a number."

The Belgian woman seemed amused. She looked around, as if she were prepared for the most brazen trickery; it would all come to light eventually. With resolute steps that resounded on the stage, she disappeared behind the screen. A moment of silence – then she called out, "But how many figures should my number have?"

"How many figures? However many you want – your boyfriend's telephone number, maybe, or no, let's make it simple: eight figures."

The chalk screeched. She reemerged. She had done her part.

Oh no, she was in charge of the letter, too, of course. The stagehands reappeared and took away the screen. There stood the chalkboard, and on it were written, one after the other: Venice, de Gaulle, Ferrari, blue, carnation, and finally the number two-four-one-one-two-zero-zero-eight.

The illusionist, pointing at each line in turn, read out the choices and sent the volunteers back to their seats – wait, no, Mademoiselle from Belgium should stay. "Now, please open the sealed envelope!" He pulled a small letter opener from his breast pocket, a shining golden dagger; she received it as though it were a magic key. The envelope was slit open, she pulled out the letter inside. "Please read what it says!"

Her sparkling eyes were nearsighted, as now became clear; she wasn't prepared for such a test. She brought the paper very close to her face: "Venice, de Gaulle, Ferrari, blue, carnation, and a number: two-four-one-one-two-zero-zero-eight."

She had to concentrate so hard on reading that she barely registered the wave of astonishment that went through the theater.

"Anyone who still doubts can examine the letter during intermission, and anyone who asks themselves how this unheard of coincidence could have occurred, to them I say: whatever rational solution you might come up with would be infinitely more complicated and more unlikely than simply recognizing that something has happened here that cannot be explained. Wait!" he cried, as the Belgian woman turned away from him; she had placed the letter on a little table next to a porcelain vase. "I would like to thank you for your assistance, after all, we are always polite to the ladies," and he stepped forward, poured a pitcher of water into the vase, and look at that, a small bouquet of flowers now rose from it – he grabbed it and handed it to the Belgian woman, who stuck it in the buttonhole of her suit jacket.

The applause was considerable. The pale magician tried to direct it toward the Belgian woman. "The instrument of Providence" – he actually said something to that effect.

The light came up, intermission, the crowd made for the lobby. Jüngel was about to hurry to the buffet to order champagne for the guests when Herr Krass held him back.

“That's enough of this” – Jüngel was to get the cars as quickly as possible; he was hungry, the guests were too. Jüngel had at least managed to make their dinner reservation, yes?

2.

Jüngel understood that the mixup at the theater would count as a deficit against him for a long while yet. To his relief, conveying the eight members of Herr Krass's party to their next destination went like clockwork. He had had the taxis in which the group had ridden up to the Vomero wait outside, and so it seemed the result of yet another magic trick when in no time the entire group found itself reassembled at a restaurant at sea level in the Posillipo. Here a table was set. Before the individual guests' orders were taken, Jüngel whispered to a waiter and had a large platter of lobsters, oysters, and other shellfish brought out; dripping as though it had just been hauled out of the waves slapping gently against the shore outside, it was whisked to the table with magical dispatch.

Herr Krass seated himself at the head of the table, next to him the French lady with the matchstick-length white hair, Madame Lecœur-Jouët, wife of the likewise present Docteur Lecœur-Jouët, chief of medicine at a hospital in the South of France – because Herr Krass didn't speak a word of French, and the French couple didn't speak English, constant translation was required, and Jüngel provided it, so long as he wasn't called on to do something else just then. He was pulled in a thousand directions at once, and looked like it, too; now and again he tried to play up the humor of this situation, but left off immediately when his gaze met that of Herr Krass.

Across the table sat a stocky man with large, hairy paws, thick, hide-like, tanned skin, prominent jowls, and disconcertingly watery eyes, which gazed at every person, man or woman, with insinuating irony. This was a business friend of Herr Krass, Herr Levcius; at one point he let on that the two of them had “done quite a number of things together” – it was clear from the look on Herr Krass's face that he didn't appreciate such reminiscing. Levcius was accompanied by a certain Frau Roslovski, who, neither young nor old, had not taken particularly good care of herself in her life up to this point. She too had rather thick gray skin, plus a mouth smeared with thick red lipstick that left stains on her teeth. She had the air of an actress whose star once shone bright but who, after her time on the stage was over, began to herself go, taking up with whomever, one comradely companion after the next; a woman with a weary knowledge of the world and the people in it; Herr Krass barely paid attention to her.

Then there was a gaunt old bald man, hard of hearing and solely conversant in Italian, Dottore Rizzi, whom Herr Krass addressed exclusively as *Cavaliere* in reference to the order of distinction recently bestowed upon him. Jüngel had to step in to make conversation possible here as well; Herr Krass's instructions were that the *Cavaliere* be treated with particular consideration. He was married to a German woman much younger than he, plump, rouged, with small green eyes that were nearly squeezed shut by the round cheeks beneath them – a loquacious woman who wouldn't stop talking even when no one was listening to her, a talent she had perhaps developed from her day-to-day life with the Cavaliere. Unable to control herself when the platter stood in front of her, she reached for it unabashedly. Red fingernails knocked against red shell, fat white fingers felt for white crab meat.

“Watching shows always makes me hungry,” she declared in a strong Düsseldorf accent, whose charm would forever remain inaccessible to her husband. Would the marriage have taken place if the bride and groom had each been able to judge the dialect of the other?

Madame Lecœur-Jouët was now saying that she thought the prettiest trick was the one where the magician took two fans and made bits of tissue paper dance in the air like butterflies – “So little effort, and so enchanting,” she exclaimed. Jüngel tried to convey this to the table; Levcius helped. Her very dignified husband, with his full head of white hair, the storybook image of the wise doctor, was determined to find fault with the “mental feat,” as the illusionist had called it – such displays served only to dull the senses. His wife, he continued, was right in praising the butterfly act, as it was the product of stupendous dexterity, but the mental incident – even to describe it as “mental” was a bald-faced lie – bolstered people's belief that such a thing was possible, and it wasn't possible. “I am a man of science, and I know of many cases in which we may say that this or that is impossible, even if we are not in the position to prove it. Not everything on which we may firmly rely must be proven.”

Serious words. The conversation had been lent distinction. Levcius nodded his head and gave the doctor a flirtatious look. Were there not, he asked, astounding phenomena, things that were inexplicable, that never the less took place? Did one not hear of primitive peoples with unsullied instincts who performed downright breathtaking feats of telepathy over distances of hundreds of kilometers?

“I have heard nothing of the sort.”

The doctor wasn't having it; Frau Roslovski, ignoring him, said in her husky fortuneteller's voice: “There's some gimmick to it, some hidden signal, some sleight of hand. They come up with the craziest things. You have to think of it as fun, as entertainment.”

Not troubling to be particularly quiet about it, and in perfect confidence that the Cavaliere couldn't understand what she was saying, Signora Rizzi whispered to Frau Roslovski, “I went to a psychic recently – she said I was going to meet a man, around fifty-four years old, divorced, with a villa in Capri and serious intentions. She said I'd seen him once before – I keep racking my brain and I can't think of anything, but he must be very close by.”

“Careful,” replied Frau Roslovski, “hold onto the old man and keep looking, but whatever you do don't jeopardize the sure thing.” Signora Rizzi was most certainly not the kind of woman Frau Roslovski would consider friend material, but nevertheless, she was happy to help her out with some honest advice. After many disappointments, one finally learned to be sensible. It was a hard school; Signora Rizzi had not yet been through it, and still dawdled blithely in the realm of illusion.

Herr Krass had listened to his guests' conversation in silence. He ate and drank quickly, as if the meal would soon be over. As he ate his eyes wandered this way and that. Was he unsatisfied with something? Was an outburst imminent? Meanwhile his guests acted like schoolchildren before the bell rang. For as long as he tolerated it, one could speak without paying him any mind. Jüngel had made it clear to the waiters that no glass must ever be left empty, especially the host's; the best thing would be to have a waiter posted nearby solely for him.

The restaurant was large, but empty today; actually it was closed. As Herr Krass was absolutely intent on dining here, Jüngel had negotiated a solution. “Find the argument that opens the doors for us,” Herr Krass had ordered, giving him a meaningful look. “As you well know, I care about the result, not the route it takes to get there.” In the hotel room at the beginning of Jüngel's

employ in Naples he had handed him a briefcase full of cash, deutschmarks and lira, but above all dollars. "I would like for you to settle any liabilities that you incur in my service in cash. You will keep track of the larger amounts and inform me of the totals every morning before breakfast. I don't need receipts; I know what things cost. In everything you do, keep in mind that my time is valuable, the most valuable of all the things you might encounter. Everything else is subordinate." Now Herr Krass wiped his mouth and threw his napkin down next to his plate. "I'd like to set a few things straight." What they had seen, he began, was uncommon, but not outside the realm of possibility. This magician was a man of international renown – this he claimed without a second thought, as if the global fame a person might possess proceeded from the mere fact of his, Herr Krass's, having come into contact with him – a master of his craft, doubtless an expert prestidigitator, et cetera, et cetera; he leaned towards Madame Lecœur-Jouët, into whose ear Jüngel hissed his translation like an interpreter at a conference. Over and above this, Herr Krass continued, he was probably a genius, an unacknowledged genius, of which there were not quite so few as one might believe. He himself had known such people. What was genius, really; for whom did we use the term? A genius was a person – he closed his eyes and spoke softly and carefully, as if he were reading from a text in glowing script that shone in the darkness of his inner self.

Everyone was silent and listened reverently. The long period of silence from him that preceded this had placed an aura of respect around him; the confused conversation around him had now ceased completely.

"The strength of a genius consists in subjecting reality to his will, in forming it in accordance with his will." This could clearly be seen in the events of world history – these were nothing else than the extensions of a personality. War, peace, conquest – they were above all character traits projected into the world at large and become fact, easily recognizable in the deeds of Alexander, Caesar, Attila the Hun, Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin. "These men were what they did. Men of their sort march through the world of mystery and fate and radiate an anonymous power – sometimes they are afraid of themselves."

Was he still talking about the magician? None other than he. This was a man who used the power of his own mind to influence other minds, to penetrate into them, force thoughts upon them – in the theater all he'd done was to get his test subject to think "blue" or "Venice," but what if he were ever to truly unleash his powers?

"The phenomenon of possession, the incubus." This interjection came from Jüngel, grown bold on a few glasses of wine, but it met with such disregard that he might as well have been talking to himself.

No, it was clear to one or another of those seated at the table of what, or better yet, of whom, Herr Krass had spoken. This man who subjected reality to his will, who formed it according to said will and who, like a sun gracing others with his radiance, was best left to do just as he pleased, because his doing so was of the greatest benefit to all those around him – was this man not close enough to touch?

"You see," he forced himself, after taking note of his words' effect, to assume a certain obliging tone, "one must only take a closer look at how this mental feat unfolded to recognize how this man operates. Did you notice how he told the woman who was to write the name of a city that she shouldn't write Naples? This was followed by laughter, somewhat at the lady's expense, and after that she was probably a bit dazed. She was now under his spell, he had quite casually

subjected her to his control. He also had a distracting dialogue with the man who had to write a brand of car, and if I'm remembering correctly, he also tried, successfully, to distract the man who was supposed to write a color" – no? Not him? One would have to analyze this closely, with video recordings, then it would doubtless be revealed that he had also expertly and nearly imperceptibly exerted his influence – he, Herr Krass, had noticed it of course; he knew how one did such things. "The last person was a struggle for him, though, she sensed his power and tried to resist him – she even tried to throw him off by asking how many figures the number should have. This was dangerous, but he managed to regain the upper hand."

Certainly there were some who felt they didn't quite follow him – weren't there a few things left to explain? But they declined to question him further; it all seemed so clear to him that they would have been embarrassed to acknowledge the sluggishness of their own minds.

Two particularly large *loups de mer* were now served. What advanced age might these fish have reached, only to land, in the end, on this table?

Signora Rizzi cried, "I'm hungry again!" Madame Lecœur-Jouët turned to Jüngel and whispered to him, "This was a good choice on your part – I wonder if there's anything they can't do here," which caused him both to blush and at the same time to look around, worried.

The flanks of the two fish yielded to the forks of the waiters serving out portions and revealed the rosemary sprigs with which their bodies had been stuffed. After Herr Krass's speech, none of the guests would have been surprised if there had been a ring inside.

3.

Back at the hotel, Herr Krass and Herr Levcius headed for the bar; Jüngel was dismissed with a curt nod of the head. An hour later, however, he could again be seen in the lobby. At the reception desk he asked to send a fax, but insisted on waiting until it had gone through and the sheet of paper had been returned to him. On this paper, in a minuscule, slightly affected hand, he had written the following:

Naples, 24.11.1988

Dearest,

Here comes a report of my day. To sum up right here at the start: everything's going well, though there have been some close calls. It's incredibly exciting for me, I've never been around a person like Herr Krass before. It would be too stupid if this weren't to work out now, not just for me but for both of us, a chance like this only comes around once and never again, especially for me, under normal circumstances I'd never have found myself moving in such circles. Just thinking about how the arrangement was made in the first place, it was like being chosen, like in the Gospel – to hire me with no examination, no credentials, no recommendations. And I'm dealing with hefty sums of money here, everything in cash; he never touches any money himself, never signs anything. He says he prefers to pass through the world without being seen, which is a joke – wherever he goes, everybody stares.

My having a Ph.D. definitely helped my case with him, he's impressed by that kind of thing, he even keeps calling me "doctor." "You took your Ph.D.?" That was the one question he asked

about my background. That and: “You're free, you can travel?” It pains me to think that I just said yes – of course I'm not free, and don't want to be free: we're together and hopefully will be forever. And if everything goes well with Herr Krass, we'll be even closer to that goal: I won't write the M word because it makes you nervous, but you know what I'm talking about.

The fact that I have no trouble with French or Italian is key, although it means that I'm constantly having to translate. The best people in our party joined it quite by accident: Herr Krass lost his footing on the street, his ankle swelled up, I asked at the hotel for a doctor, and there he stood before me, a distinguished doctor from the South of France, an orthopaedist, no less, along with his wife, elegant but very down to earth, almost a little crude. “Please, may I take a look at the foot?” Herr Krass lay on an ottoman in the parlor of his suite – I have to admit it was awkward for me seeing his big, bare foot, it seemed like in my position I shouldn't be privy to such a thing. Doctor Lecœur-Jouët then examined it with the utmost care and purpose. Herr Krass furrowed his brow, but didn't let out any cry of pain. “From what I can tell it's not broken – I can't see the bones through the skin of course, but I suspect the risk is minimal.” Whereupon Herr Krass, speaking solemnly from his sickbed: “I trust your expertise, Herr Doktor, it is worth more to me than the readings of a machine. Would you do me the honor of joining me for lunch?” And the two of them have been with us ever since. The doctor is very impressed by him, and he by the doctor – they're wealthy people in any case, I could even imagine that before their marriage the wife was a bit more wealthy than him. She's got the frank manner of old money.

Then there's a man who I don't much like, but who seems important to Herr Krass: Herr Levcius, short and fat and full of insinuating remarks, which clearly bothers Herr Krass, but he doesn't say anything. Whenever I knock on his door he always answers wearing an open bathrobe, even though he doesn't know who's at the door – hairy as an ape, his wife or mistress behind him in the room somewhere, she too a rather common woman, but not unfriendly.

Of course it's none of my business, all of this. As assistant and secretary I am only to see to the day-to-day business of the trip, including entertainment, tours, and things like that, but above all I'm to show Herr Krass houses. Apparently he'd like to move to the gulf and is looking for something large, ideally historic – he made it clear to me that it was to be “a stately residence.” This is my trial period, that's been made explicit. But already my pay includes a very ample allowance! I had to buy suits and shirts at the airport. I had the green jacket on – “As my representative you can't go around looking like that!”

Strangeness aside though he's an extraordinary man. Silent most of the time, which can be somewhat disconcerting, and then this evening he propounded to us his theory of genius – unbelievable! No education, but a natural-born intellectual! Genius is a big word, it makes you think of Goethe or Michelangelo, but what does it mean, really? That there is something inside a person that is bigger than he is, that he has no control over; rather it controls him – and I can imagine something along those lines in Herr Krass's case. What you first encounter in Herr Krass is the intimidating side, the pompous side – but what lies behind it and only gradually reveals itself is what drives him to the sudden decisions he makes. And I myself of course am the object of one such decision, so I guess I'll just have to go along with it.

I'm writing you all this because lately we haven't been as happy together as I would like, and also because you were so dissatisfied with my inability to find a steady position somewhere – all too understandable. Now, all of a sudden, everything looks different – isn't that wonderful? And even if much of it isn't really my doing, still, I have to prove myself, and this won't be easy, in fact it's a

strain on the nerves. But there's a talent even to being happy, and maybe in the end it will turn out that I can be happy after all. I most certainly can with you, the greatest source of happiness in all my life!

P.S. If you answer by fax, please write only what's suitable for anyone to read. You never know when a fax of this nature might end up in the wrong hands!

In this same spirit of caution, Jüngel burned the original letter in his bathroom sink.

5.

Her entrance had not gone unnoticed. At another table sat a fairly large group that was working itself up to lunch. She cast the group only the occasional, casual glance, though she noticed that they were clearly talking about her. Did one of them even point in her direction? They were trying at least to be secret about it. A heavyset man sat stonily in his chair; he didn't take part in the group's conversation and had three women clustered around him. One of them seemed familiar to her – had she seen her at an opening in Paris? Then there was a chubby one in a silk ensemble with lots of red hair, and next to her a somewhat manly, uncoquettish woman whose mouth was painted the same fiery shade of red. She observed the group without judgement – “I have no point of view,” as she often liked to say; people were what they were, any one of them could surprise you. Men in general she looked favorably upon. An ugly man – for her such a thing didn't exist; men were by nature so different from women that their outward appearance conveyed not nearly enough information about them.

It was crazy to be a woman who concerned herself with men – she did in fact think this from time to time – but concern herself she did. She seemed entirely unaware of the effect she made and was naturally cordial towards every woman she met – but she wasn't interested in them. She forgot whichever woman she was with immediately whenever a man walked up, and she took up a different tone, scoffing and a bit provocative.

Her glass was empty; she had drunk in large gulps. She ordered a second. There were women who sat alone at hotel bars; sometimes they were in league with the head bellhop. She guessed that the whispering at the other table had to do with the suspicion that she belonged to this category of woman. This did not embarrass her. Her attention was directed only at the volcano, smoldering low in the bright grey mist, though it was filled to the brim with burning fire. It would have been good if she'd brought something to read. She picked up the menu, opened it, and began to study the offerings. There wasn't much there, but she took it in with the utmost interest. The prices were what the prices always were in a hotel like this one: so far outside her budget that she couldn't have afforded to dine here even if she wanted to, but this was an objective thought; no hand seized hold of her heart. With herself as audience, she played the role of the splendidly entertained lady; it fit well with the idea of sitting at this bar. And she had something to occupy her; it would hardly be an uncommon situation for her if the group over there continued staring at her – and the staring was even emboldened by her reading.

A young man stood up from the table, very correct in his lightly tailored dark suit and dark tie – the only tie wearer in the party. Before getting up he had inclined his ear towards the overweight man, clearly receiving instructions, and now he was walking up to her, seeming in her estimation

more manikin than man, with glasses and ruffled hair – here was another type that could be found at openings; they wrote the catalog entries that no one read but that no art book could possibly do without. He bowed to her and said, in French with a strong German accent, “Madame, if you will allow me to make a proposal. A party is seated just over there, the guests of Monsieur Ralph Krass” – he said the name as if anyone must know it. “We would consider ourselves fortunate, Monsieur Krass most of all, if you would join our party for lunch. Hopefully you are free.”

Well now, was she free? The train to Bari was supposed to leave that afternoon at three o'clock. Harry Renó ought somehow to be informed that she was no longer in the hotel but rather was headed straight for the train station. These were the thoughts that went through her head, but then they ran up against another thought: if nothing else, the two glasses of champagne would be paid for. So really there was no choice. Plus, she found Herr Krass – only the silent massive one could be him – attractive. Literally: he exerted an attraction on her; she felt his pull. She rose and walked slowly over to the group. The men stood up; a man with a white head of hair kissed her hand in greeting, to which she readily assented. The people muttered their names. She said hers only after the tall, heavy man had said ponderously, “I am Ralph Krass.”

“I am Lidewine Schoonemaker.”

All eyes rested upon her. Madame Lecœur-Jouët flashed a scornful smile; Frau Roslovski wore a bleary expression, as if to say, “I’ve been waiting for this, this just had to happen”; Signora Rizzi showed unabashed curiosity. But then, all at once, with a uniformity that was thoroughly comical, they all turned back to one another, as if propriety dictated that they leave Herr Krass alone with his latest acquisition, and he too seemed to count on such tact. Signora Rizzi, seated at his side up until now, had to move over; the waiter brought another chair. Jüngel quietly instructed him to add the young lady's drinks to the bill for the table. He hadn't much practice in his role, had never been in a situation like this before and was practically bursting with discretion. He kept far away from his employer so as not to interfere with his conversation, but kept eye contact, that he might be able to spring into action immediately at the first sign that he was needed. In the meantime he filled the role of host for the others on Herr Krass's behalf. The drink of choice at the table was likewise champagne, as suited the time of day. A second bottle was brought, in clear glass with a golden label.

They had done a bit of sightseeing that morning. Jüngel had prepared a walking tour through the old city center – torture for him, since in the crush of people in the narrow streets the group didn't stay together long enough for them to be able to attend to his informative commentary; nor did one sense a great deal of curiosity in that regard. As they strolled down the *Cardo* and *Decumanus*, the main streets of ancient Neopolis, there was so much to see that no one listened and everyone found something they wanted to show everyone else. Jüngel had therefore stuck with Herr Krass, who didn't take part in these conversations, but simply moved through the crowd, thoughtful and ponderous of step, as if he were the unrecognized lord of this city, at whose command the cannons of *Fortezza Sant' Elmo* high above could be fired at any time.

“Naples, you said, means 'new city.'” Suddenly he emerged from the depths into the light of day.

“That means there must have been an old city as well.”

“Quite so.” Jüngel wanted to offer praise without calling attention to his superior learning.

“There was a city that came before this one: Neopolis was founded in 700, but its predecessor, Paleopolis, the old city, is lost to history.”

“So we must say, then, that there was always a city here, always culture, long before European history actually began?”

Jüngel hurried to state his agreement. “Yes, a Greek city, the best there is.”

This clearly made a good impression on Herr Krass. A superlative, a lucid *aperçu*, that was something a man could sink his teeth into. “A city of culture, you would say, high culture even. But why build such a city in the most dangerous spot in Europe, where a volcanic eruption can wipe out all of it within mere hours? And of course such a thing did happen. Why does one produce architecture and painting precisely where the probability is highest that they will be destroyed? And why is it that one cannot learn over the millennia from this unerringly hostile disposition? Why does man learn so little?” And then, with an unexpected turn: “Why do you, Herr Doktor Jüngel, learn so little? This tour of the old city is a disaster. We will cut it short now. The ladies are thirsty.”

If there was anything to compare to the peaceful, cheerful, pleasure-loving air with which Herr Krass's guests had strolled through the city and subsequently allowed themselves to be split up and bundled into taxis, offering no resistance, Signora Rizzi even explicitly welcoming it – “I'm starting to get hungry” – then it was how nerve-wracking the whole experience was for Jüngel. He was charged with ensuring that it all happened smoothly, and in carrying out this task his dutifulness was exaggerated to a downright insane degree: he felt himself responsible even for the caliber of the conversation, over which he of course had no influence, and even though, really, he was not obliged to take part in the conversation at all. But in the sunlight-flooded comfort of the Excelsior Bar, its ambience enriched by the sparkling of the sea outside, the conversation had reached a nadir that contrasted quite markedly from the festiveness of the setting. Granted, the group was somewhat worn out from the walk, but it was twelve noon, the hour of perfection, and if nothing else the champagne should have had an enlivening effect. Instead, Frau Roslovski broke the silence:

“There are two Hermès bags that you basically can't buy – artificial scarcity! Anyone who thinks they can just go out and buy a Kelly or a Birkin is going to come up empty. All these Chinese women lining up outside the stores in Paris and Munich, crying, and all they want is a Kelly or a Birkin – not a chance. The saleswomen look the customers right in the face – we're sorry, not for you, I can put you on the list, but don't get your hopes up. That's how it is! I'm friends with the executive director in Frankfurt – I get the Kelly and the Birkin, I've got access. I could get rich, buy a Kelley or a Birkin every week and then sell it for four times as much . . .”

Herr Levcius had attempted to rein in his consort by making low grumbling noises, but she, who otherwise tended not to speak, had talked herself into a frenzy; Kelly and Birkin had taken possession of her, though strangely enough she didn't have either type of bag with her. Clearly she had been gripped by something that wouldn't let her go.

Madame Lecœur-Jouët, after hearing a translated summary of the outburst from Jüngel, turned to whisper to her husband – could she be suggesting to him that they give lunch with the others a pass? He shook his head. Conversation was apparently not so important to him. His gaze was fixed on the person of Herr Krass. His silence in response to Frau Roslovski's tirade made him seem to grow even greater in stature; it didn't seem outside the realm of possibility that he was floating a few inches above his chair.

Then the unexpected had taken place. Herr Krass signaled to Jüngel and whispered an order in his ear, and he marched off and came back with the young lady. Well now, and who was this?

Was it really her? Hadn't someone just said it? The woman from the magic show! She too had attended Harry Renó's performance and had especially felt the force of his attraction, even more so than Madame Lecœur-Jouët: she had been permitted to open the letter, she had read out the words; she must know best of all of them how it had all transpired.

The party's spirits lifted. In a foreign city it's always something of an event to encounter someone by chance for a second time.

7.

At a shared table, something can always arise that breaks the old mood and ushers in a new one. Herr Krass's having left the table allowed the conversations to flow a bit more briskly at first. A kind of supervision had been lifted: for even if he didn't often join in on the conversation, when it did happen it was usually accompanied by a severe assessment of whatever mindless chatter had prevailed up to that point. His guests never forgot that their role in his presence was to carry on a show conversation, as if he were a medieval monarch who ordered scholars to debate before his throne without himself uttering a word.

By now he was out of sight; the quay outside the restaurant, along which he had walked back and forth with the gentlemen in sunglasses, was now empty. Jüngel peered outside, trying to see him, and spotted the group on the dam that led from the shore to the island of Castel dell'Ovo. Already quite small, they walked slowly toward the castle, and although he could no longer tell the shadowy figures apart, he believed he could be certain that two of the strange men had placed themselves on either side of Herr Krass. Meanwhile he assumed the duties of host, called for wine glasses to be filled and asked if anyone would like dessert, addressing each of them in turn, as though it were a matter requiring the utmost discretion.

More quickly than expected, Herr Krass was back, as if he had returned by some other route, though of course another route did not exist. His expression seemed indifferent; explanations, to say nothing of apologies, were foreign to him. The waiter – it was again the one with pale skin and dark, curly hair – brought his plate, which had been kept warm for him in the interim. On it were white filets of sole; all traces of his having begun and then interrupted his meal had been removed in the kitchen, either that or an entirely new plate had been prepared. He devoured the fish in minutes, rose, throwing his napkin down on the table, and said in a tone that was without any urgency, indeed rather subdued:

“Herr Doktor Jüngel will come with me to my room at once, followed in ten minutes by Herr Levcius.”

It was demonstrative of the effect of his person that no one at the table wondered at this pronouncement, at least not audibly. Jüngel was trembling all over as he followed him out of the restaurant and into the hotel lobby. He expected to be severely reprimanded for an offense unknown to him; to prepare a defense was impossible. Herr Krass slowed his gait. He let Jüngel draw closer. Jüngel felt as if he were about to receive a massive blow; it would shoot out from the midst of this towering indifference and strike him like a bolt of lightning. He actually flinched. This did not escape Herr Krass's notice. He smiled mildly.

“You're about to be given a special task. You can use it as an opportunity to prove your abilities. But I don't want to hear any questions. You will receive the information you require, that will have to suffice.”

Jüngel was so relieved that in his eagerness to please he made a little bow and was about to take his leave when an unexpectedly scornful look on Herr Krass's face made him aware that of course he hadn't received any instructions yet. He expected utmost delicacy, stressed his employer, and he would like to see Jüngel succeed.

"Don't come back if you don't succeed." The scorn was gone again. "By now you know that it is my custom to buy people. I buy advice, I buy company. What I am interested in now is the society of the young lady who happened to join us just now." He paused and looked at Jüngel, looked him directly in the eye.

For a fleeting moment Jüngel considered whether it might be appropriate in this situation to risk a slight knowing smile, from one man to another, but he decided against it. Herr Krass did not invite such a thing; there was nothing shared between them. If he showed interest in a woman, it was something infinitely different than if Jüngel were to do so; the actions were incomparable.

"You will convey to her the following proposal: she comes to stay at the hotel, in her own suite. She receives a new wardrobe. I don't want to see that blouse again. She takes part in our itinerary; she is one of my party. There will under no circumstances be intimacies between her and me; she needn't harbor any expectations in this regard, nor need she feel obliged to take initiative to this end. One condition: during the time we are together, she maintains no other intimate relationship. And I don't want that magician turning up here either." Let this be clear, he continued: if over the next ten days she was caught with another man, then she was out of here immediately, and she forfeited any claim to a fee. And she should know that he heard and saw everything. There was no keeping secrets from him.

"What sort of fee may I propose?" Jüngel had regained his composure. He now played his role in such manner as he hoped Herr Krass would appreciate.

"What do you get? Make it triple that – plus gifts, which in the event of breach of contract are of course to be returned. I expect your report before dinner."

Levcius now joined them. The two men crossed the lobby and got on an elevator.

It was one of Herr Krass's idiosyncrasies that he never uttered a word of greeting and never took leave of anyone. He began a conversation immediately, without transition, without preliminaries, and when he lost interest he went silent. Jüngel understood the nature of his job to be that these pleasantries had devolved to him, as if he, in Herr Krass's stead, had been charged with the task of carrying out those lesser duties for which his master neither took the time, nor needed to, because he moved in different spheres. This was accepted by everyone. Even the French couple was understanding, or at least Monsieur le Docteur. His wife occasionally raised her eyebrows, but when Jüngel noticed such a thing he instantly set about outdoing himself in assiduousness, just as the emissary of a potentate showers his auditors in kindness in an effort to lessen the affront his ruler has caused.

So it was now after his return to the table: smoothing things over with the prospect of a large dinner, the interrupted meal was explained to be merely a foretaste of even more sumptuous culinary joys to come. And the day after tomorrow would bring with it the boat ride to Capri; Herr Krass requested the honor of all of their company.