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Steffen Kopetzky
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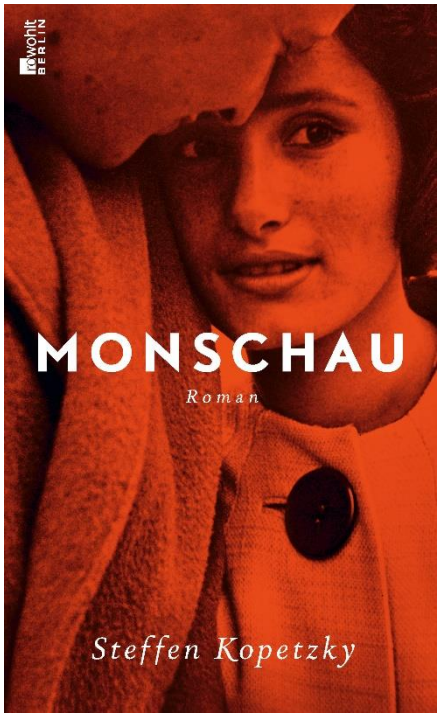

Steffen Kopetzky tells a love story in a state of emergency, against the backdrop of rapid economic growth in Germany – transforming a chapter of German history into gripping literature.

In 1962, when the nuclear arms race is reaching its climax, when bombs are exploding in Algiers and Paris and Germany is in the midst of its economic miracle, young doctor Nikolaos Spyridakis sets off to the Eifel region. It's a delicate mission: smallpox has broken out in the district of Monschau. The disease is highly contagious and dangerous. In the middle of carnival, there's a threat of lockdown and quarantine. The boss of the local Rither factory wants to keep it open at all costs - business is good in the years following World War II. Vera, the sole heiress of the Rither family, has quite different plans: she is studying in Paris, admires Simone de Beauvoir and brings an avant-garde spirit to Monschau. There she meets Nikolaos, who is driven through the snow-covered Eifel to attend patients as the company doctor, protected from infection by a steelworker's overalls. Though they are very different - the Cretan doctor, who as a child witnessed the horrors of the German occupation, and the wealthy orphan - they soon discover that they have more in common than their love for jazz trumpeter Miles Davis. But the cases increase, and the virus takes what it can get.

Steffen Kopetzky, born in 1971, is the author of novels, stories, radio plays and theatre plays. His novel *Risiko* (2015) was on the *Spiegel* magazine bestseller list for months and was nominated for the German Book Prize, while *Propaganda* (2019) was nominated for the Bavarian Book Prize. From 2002 to 2008, Kopetzky was the artistic director of the Theatre Biennale Bonn. He lives in his hometown Pfaffenhofen an der Ilm with his family.

- 75,000 copies sold and for several weeks on the Spiegel bestseller list!

STEFFEN KOPETZKY

MONSCHAU

'The air is swarming now with ghosts we would avoid if we knew how.'

Goethe, *Faust Part Two*, translated by David Luke

VARIOLA

'One last time, sweetie,' the ambulance driver said, taking the shivering blonde girl up into his arms once again on this bitterly cold day. They trudged through the snow together.
The lights were glisteningly bright. Doctors and nurses were already waiting for them to arrive. Just some stairs left to carry her up.

Nearly sixty, the man was just a regional farmer, but had been engaged by the Red Cross for years now due to his excellent driving abilities. He eyed the ramp and the three steps worrisomely before heading towards them with his trembling, already slightly delirious patient cradled up against his chest inside a blanket.

Determined not to stumble, he concentrated on his every motion. Always overly cautious, he would have been no less attentive had he now been walking down one of the dark, overgrown forest paths between his fields. But he had never had a mishap and would not stumble now. Not when carrying this sick child. Hopefully, for the last time today.
After just a few paces, the frosty air aggravated the girl's inflamed airways, and she coughed a deep and involuntary cough. Struck by fever, and not guided by full consciousness, the noise she emitted sounded like a hoarse bark. A raw warning. The driver took a deep breath and proceeded up the stairs. They had arrived. As had something else too.

It was already in the air. Having entrusted itself to a random current, it had wafted over child and driver to be picked up by an icy wind that led it to sail upward higher and higher along the brickwork. Reaching the first floor of the building, it was then caught by a stronger gust together with a few snowflakes until it started to disperse.

A window was open on the opposite wall of another hospital building: a post-op patient was leaning out, on the way to recovery and dismissal. She was curious what the commotion was all about, so late at night. The ambulance. Who were they bringing in? The woman leaned forward and inhaled the cold, fresh air. It seemed to do her good. She leaned forward as far as she could to see exactly what was coming. Not able to see, of course, what the air itself had brought.

This story takes place in the northern part of the Eifel. And in this extraordinary mountain region west of the Rhine River near the Belgian border there lies an old clothmaking town abutted by a factory village. Monschau and Lammerath.

The era of Adenauer is coming to a close. Before having become Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer began his career as the mayor of neighbouring Cologne, and cleverly managed to manoeuvre the old royal city of Bonn into position as West Germany's provisional capital. In the coming May, the young republic will celebrate its thirteenth anniversary. And contrary to the popular belief that thirteen is an unlucky number, 1962 is the year with the best economic output in the new state's short history. There is even a labour shortage, and companies have sent emissaries to southern Europe and Turkey, desperate for guest workers. The chancellor has commissioned a government bunker to be installed in a mine formerly used by the Nazis for V2 rocket manufacturing. The name of the US president is John F. Kennedy. He won the elections in 1960, warning against the Soviet's growing arsenal and pledging to revitalise American forces: the arms race. But this does not keep him from being idolised by young people around the world. He has declared the 1960s an era of new opportunities, in all areas of life and even beyond Planet Earth itself, with the commencement of Project Apollo. When President Kennedy says that the US will soon become the first nation to put a man on the moon, it is almost as good as seeing footage of the moon

landing itself. The goal is to surpass the Soviet Union under Secretary General Khrushchev and catch up with its manned space mission, Sputnik. Representing both progress and destruction, rocket technology cannot be called anything but schizophrenic. But this contradiction is not a concern for everyone.

Truth be told - none of this was really of any concern to most people. Not in West or East Germany. Everyone was deeply preoccupied with something else entirely: Who dunnit. Who had killed the beautiful young woman, living in London far beyond her means, making ends meet as a 'mannequin and artiste'? She had been strangled with an English scarf, and never before had a German television station had higher ratings (eighty-nine percent) than the WDR channel did with the crime drama *The Neck Scarf*. The streets were swept clear.

Then again there were others who could not have cared less about the fact that the most successful German TV series of all time would be airing that day. Two of them were driving through the centre of Düsseldorf in an old Volkswagen lost in conversation.

'There's a certain phase with smallpox,' Professor Stüttgen said, shifting into third gear and giving the engine a good rev. Rush hour had already started on Königsallee, everyone was eager to get home on time to catch the last episode of *The Neck Scarf*. Three lanes in each direction were full of homeward-bound cars. At the next traffic light, a brand-new Opel Kapitän pulled up next to them. And when the lights turned green, it moved off with beguiling elegance. Stüttgen and his passenger exchanged impressed nods.

'It is in this phase that a carrier can be highly infectious without displaying any symptoms at all.' The professor turned on the turn signal and raced through the crossing. He had assessed correctly, and they just barely made it on amber. Nikos watched the lights of the vehicles behind them in the rear-view mirror; saw how they flashed in the puddles in this city built for cars.

On the autobahn towards Cologne, the professor then shifted into fourth gear. He would not budge out of the fast lane until they reached the Eifel.

'It's this kind of person who can infect dozens. If they're in a city underground train at peak time, that might even mean thousands. Do you understand what this means, Nikos?'

Despite having no particular aptitude for maths, Nikos Spyridakis's passion for microscopy had taught him how to handle numbers and exponential logic. Recalling London's Tube trains from visits to a cousin, he made a few cool calculations and imagined how things could play out. One sole image formed in his mind: anyone infected with the virus was a walking angel of death.

'A biological time-bomb, is that what you mean?'

'Exactly. But the state authorities have at least assured me that we'll get all the support we need. They seem to have recognised the mistakes that have been made. We can still minimise the damage, I'm sure of it. But we must track and trace everything. We'll impose strict isolation and quarantine. We have to start working very precisely, Nikos. The first few days of an epidemic are crucial. The most decisive.'

When Nikos had announced to Professor Ruska that he wouldn't be available for the dissection course that weekend, despite a long line of specimen jars waiting to be prepared, Ruska had reacted with something akin to bitterness.

'I don't understand how Stüttgen can subject you to such danger. With so little preparation. It's a kamikaze campaign. But so be it, the ministry did call.' Resigned, he had shaken Nikos's hand and watched the ambitious dermatologist Stüttgen steal his best laboratory assistant away from him. The young resident had not yet decided what to specialise in, and Ruska hoped he would choose to join his Virology Institute. Many young doctors showed great interest in becoming specialists in electron microscopy; in fact, it was all the rage. But most applicants lacked something quite key – cutting skills.

Electron microscopy was a high technology based on many years of German glass processing know-how. It took the fine art of glass grinding to a molecular level – given one had the right specimens. Spyridakis, son of a long line of Cretan fishermen, was adept at working with sharp blades, knew how to fillet. And he had an outstanding eye for detail, which was also extremely important in specimen interpretation. And now he'd be gone. Epidemic duty in the Eifel. His best man drafted to the smallpox front.

Though aware of Ruska's critical stance on his assignment, Nikos himself took things less seriously. Firstly, he was twenty-four and befitting his age felt immortal. Secondly, there was the allure of something called a *daily rate*, which was reason enough for any young man whose only constant in life was never having enough money. Until now, Nikos had been cleaning lab equipment for Professor Stüttgen: test tubes and petri dishes for three deutschmarks an hour, which was not bad. But forty marks a day – that was a small fortune.

Stüttgen had made no secret of the fact that all the other, more experienced doctors at the institute had turned down his request to accompany him. Being doctors, they were vaccinated, of course, but a certain risk of infection remained. And none of them had any practical experience in dealing with such a dangerous disease outside of a lab. They had expressed their regret, referred to lack of time, other obligations, or the needs of their families – all considered feeble excuses, in the mind of Stüttgen. Although he himself had a wife and two sons of his own.

Nikos Spyridakis knew very well that he was the youngest conceivable candidate at the academy. In his favour: he had no ties and was physically fit; a competitive swimmer. And he was not a daredevil, no matter how hard his grandmother had tried to convince him otherwise, often referencing stories of his grandfather: 'There wasn't a day that went by that didn't include your grandfather telling me some crazy story about a scar, scratch or wound. We hadn't even been married for a week before I had to bandage his knee. I don't think there was ever a fortnight that he didn't get himself into some kind of scrape.'

Nikos's grandfather had taught him to dive, fish, work with sharp knives, and how to shoot a gun. All rather risky activities. But it is a well-known fact that we never walk more carefully - and more safely - than at the dead of night. A person is always the most cautious when treading on dangerous terrain.

'Please think it over, Nikos,' Stüttgen had said. 'The decision's easy for me. I'm a doctor. I see it as my duty. But as for you – I don't want to talk you into anything.'

'Was Hippocrates not a Greek? How could I say no?' had been Nikos's answer, not without pride that Stüttgen wanted to entrust him with such a task. And embarking on this together with the professor felt more like going on a weekend adventure in the mountains, anyway. Perhaps for some

winter sports or climbing, with a little work on the side. Not known as the safest of pastimes, of course, but the joy easily overruled.

'Alright then, pack your bag: a change of clothes, a toothbrush, and maybe a book or two. I have no idea how long we'll be there.' Stüttgen knew very well that it might be a while, but he wasn't one to make a fuss.

The professor took the opportunity during the rest of the drive to teach Nikos the basics of what he had learned during his study visits to Bombay's King Edward Memorial Hospital.

And so they departed, leaving the damp and foggy Rhineland behind them, heading west into the frosty Rhenish Slate Mountains, where they soon found themselves in the depths of winter. It was the snowiest January in human memory, with walls of snow two metres high along the sides of the road. Stained black by dirt at the bottom, sprayed, encrusted, and yet solid, forming clean ramparts at the top, shining white in the half-moon's glow. It almost felt like they were driving straight into a gigantic glass snow globe.

And at the centre of this idyllic setting a monster lay in waiting: tiny, invisible, and deadly.

Lammerath near Monschau, bordering on the Kingdom of Belgium on the outermost edge of West Germany, was, oddly enough, demarcated just so that it looked like a pocket on the map. The railway line running east of it, as a metaphorical zipper, only served to accentuate this. The Fens Railway had been built to be the fastest connection between Aachen and Luxembourg, through the Ardennes, the High Fens, and the Eifel. For many years, Lammerath was little more than a farming village encircled on three sides by Belgium. It was, however, also located on a high plain, which meant that it was practically predestined to becoming a deployment zone. And at the end of World War II, it became exactly that for German troops commandeered to defend the Hürtgen Forest. Twenty years prior, building upon Monschau's lost clothmaking heritage, a factory had been erected there. It had remained in place and in production ever since: the Rither Works.

Director Richard Seuss had spoken with the night-shift foreman, then stepped outside, and was now watching from a distance as the plant manager instructed his men to clear the latest layer of snow from the square outside the foundry, the wide path beside the administration building, and the driveway leading up to the Rither Villa. It was snowing heavily, the flurries of snowflakes were dense in the cones of light beneath the factory yard lamps.

'Good evening, Mr Seuss.'
'Good evening, Tillich. The snow didn't want to let up today!'
'And it's supposed to get colder in the next few days. I'll make sure that the paths are salted. All the way back to the house. Miss Vera's coming at the weekend, and we wouldn't want her to slip.'
'Vera is coming ... Do you know what time?'
'Landing at seven at Cologne airport. I've already given Behrends the details to pick her up.'

Dammit, Seuss thought to himself. She always does this, she always does everything in her power to annoy. That girl has no respect and no manners. The plant manager knows she's coming, but she doesn't care to say a word to me.

Those were his thoughts, despite the fact that he had decided to become Vera's legal guardian after her father died a little over a year ago, going to great lengths to stand by the tragically orphaned girl until she came of age. Vera, however, took little notice of his good- heartedness.

He didn't want the manager to notice his annoyance, of course.
'Very good, Tillich, thank you. It's nice that Vera is paying us a visit.'

Seuss wanted to move on but his plant manager, wiping a drip from his nose red from the cold with his sleeve, leaned forward in confidence. The sharp scraping sounds of the snow clearers filled the factory yard.

'So, what do you reckon, boss?'
'I beg your pardon, Tillich?'
'Who do you think killed her?'
'Oh, that …' he shook his head and chuckled.

Seuss then put two fingers to the brim of his hat, adjusted it, and proceeded across the yard. When he reached his car, a black BMW 3200S, the driver, named Max Lembke, tried to get out as quickly as possible, but this was not an easy task for him. His walking stick always had to come first.

‘Good evening, Max. I need to head over to the engineering building before we leave. You go to the canteen and get the thermos flask filled. Chamomile tea. My stomach has been troubling me again. We’ve got to head over to Monschau later. And bring me a couple of rissoles, will you?’

‘Of course, sir.’ Lembke slammed the car door and marched off, his left hand – inside an especially thick glove – gripping his stick. His right hand held the briefcase. He propelled his left leg forward vehemently, which sent his right shoulder up. He then pulled his right leg after it, causing his right shoulder to move to a surprisingly low position, and his entire body underwent a painful-looking twist. Despite the effort that walking exerted, Lembke crossed the yard at a rapid pace.

Director Seuss entered the engineering building, gave the draftsmen still working at their brightly lit desks a nod, strode down the corridor, and once reaching the end of it knocked once on the chief engineer’s open door.

‘Ah, Director Seuss. Please come in,’ Dr Velbert called out. The chief engineer had started working at the factory shortly after the war and had been shown the ropes by the younger Rither brother, Vera’s father. He had taken over his employer’s office after his fatal heart attack. Dr Velbert was leaning over a intricate construction plan, studying it with a pleased look on his face.

‘What’s so urgent?’

It certainly is urgent, Seuss thought to himself. So urgent, in fact, that even panicking about it now would be too late. The entire thing had been jinxed from the start, and would have been almost laughable, were it not such a serious yet infuriating matter.

Seuss took a deep breath. He looked around Dr Velbert’s office. Hardly a thing had changed since the company’s founding. Not even after all of the the progress and the factory’s great success. The death of the younger of the two Rither brothers left equally little trace, except that it was now Dr Velbert sitting at the desk, presided over for decades by a painting of the older Rither brother, the company founder who back then had brought Seuss in as a manager.

Rither the Elder now gazed down at Seuss, assessing him from within the frame, perhaps even with a slight hint of judgement. It was a passable work by a half-decent artist from the Düsseldorf Academy. Rither the Elder – now he had been an entrepreneur! A genius without a doubt. Full of vigour and absolutely determined in his plans. During the golden years after the First World War, when a great deal of money had been obliterated, he had stomped a company out of the barren farming ground right here on the family’s forest property. It was unparalleled thanks to his ingenious ideas on thermal conduction.

The Bernhard Rither Works were essentially a forge for forges: the manufacturing of industrial furnaces. Mainly for the production of steel, but also for the toolmaking industry, and the copper industry. They also built induction furnaces, which were, for one, in demand for papermaking.

The Indian subcontinent was currently in a paper frenzy, fuelled mainly by an appetite for newspapers and magazines, but also by a need for new textbooks for the two competing states set onc hanging their futures: India and Pakistan. Especially the wealthy entrepreneurs on the west coast of India were moving en masse into publishing and also spearheaded the moviemaking industry. They needed paper, and its production was underway on the still-forested eastern coast – using Rither furnaces.

The high volume of orders over the past few years had given the company a huge innovation boost. And the new generation of furnaces that would make Rither a global leader in the market was nearly ready for release. There was also a major contract with a consortium from nearby Luxembourg. A longstanding and very important customer. The order was highly lucrative but tied to severe penalties should delivery be delayed.

The best mechanics and engineers available to Seuss were already working around the clock. The company's workforce had no additional capacity left, which is why receiving a call from the district council, where he had a very good contact, had given him great cause for concern.

All Seuss knew so far was that the ten-year-old daughter of an employee, who had been assembling furnaces in India and had returned shortly before Christmas, had been ferried back and forth between Aachen and Monschau in an ambulance the day before. A suspected case of black pox. The link was clear: the father had spent six months in India, so his daughter may very well have been infected with a dangerous virus that was currently raging on the subcontinent.

'Well, I do hope they can help the child. We've known the family a long time. The father's been working for us for more than twelve years. He trained with us, didn't he?'

Seuss bit his lip. It pained him that comprehension could be so slow. But this was nothing new. Rither the Elder had had a good overall understanding of the world at large, but now Seuss constantly ran up against the naivety of his engineers, who in a state of reverie would develop new types of thermal conduction but could not imagine anything else being relevant.

'I'm sure they'll do all they can for the child,' Seuss said slowly. 'But what do you think, Dr Velbert, who do you think she caught it from?'

'Ah yes, good question. Who could it have been?' The engineer gave him a helpless stare.

'Let's just come out and say it,' Seuss came to his aid. 'From our best assembler. And here I was glad to have him back.'

'Will he need a few days of sick leave?'

'He already took days off.' Seuss looked at his head engineer, focussing intently to smile and maintain a friendly face. 'After his return from India,' Seuss sighed, 'Jupp was the most popular man at the factory. They threw a party for him in the canteen.'

'What's worrying you, Seuss?'

'Don't you understand? We need to be on guard, so they don't shut us down. They can send all of us into quarantine for weeks.'

'But that's impossible! We're starting production of the ROA 15 next week. We have a set plan.'

'Precisely, Dr Velbert. And don't forget the signed contracts. We have obligations.'

'We do. What can we do?' Velbert's face turned icy pale. He seemed to have finally understood the earnestness of the situation.

‘I’ve called our lawyers, and the people in Luxembourg. I’ll be attending a meeting shortly. The district council has formed an emergency committee. Headed by a medic from outside. No idea what a doctor like that has up his sleeve.’

‘Who is the man?’ Dr Velbert asked.

‘A professor from Düsseldorf. Sent by the interior ministry. I’ll be heading out in a bit.’

‘The second stage is known as the eruptive phase.’ Günter Stüttgen steered the old Volkswagen into a petrol station to fill it up again in Düren before they headed into the Hürtgen Forest. They stood side by side in the humid air, which carried the sharp, invigorating scent of fresh petroleum. Nikos glanced at the wolf’s profile on the bonnet, the crest hinting at medieval heraldry but in fact designed in the late 1940s. It wasn’t an industrial product’s logo based on an old model; quite the opposite. In this case, a powerful industrial complex had been granted rights over land and even a city, founding a municipality, a procedure that had only ever taken place in such form in America and the Soviet Union, but not in the German Reich or anywhere else in Europe. The emblem of Volkswagen from the new city of Wolfsburg.
Stüttgen went on talking as the attendant filled the tank. ‘The important thing is that during the eruptive phase, around the fourth day, the temperature initially falls, at which point the real rash occurs. It always starts on the face – reddish nodules that then spread rapidly over the entire body. I’ll be back in a moment.’
The professor entered the brightly-lit booth, where Nikos could see him paying for the fuel on the other side of the glass.
Eruption – the essential specialism of dermatology. It was only ever a matter of time until a rash occurred. The skin sweated, effloresced, erupted, discoloured and deformed. Alongside burns, lesions and tumours of all kinds, eruptions were the dermatologist’s supreme discipline. The theory of efflorescence. Precisely that, however, was also the reason why Nikos was uncertain about really sticking to dermatology and not switching to the other side of the Medical Academy, to Professor Ruska and his magical electronic apparatus.
What made electron microscopy special was that even the ugliest diseases revealed beauty when seen on the cellular level. A mouse carcinoma, finely dissected, possessed an air of abstract art – conjured up from nature’s deepest structures. Images of water bears and dust mites gave Nikos almost childish pleasure. But of course, the main focus of Professor Ruska’s institute was the electron-microscopic identification of viruses and bacteria. These astoundingly compact and so precisely differentiated things fascinated Nikos, perhaps a legacy of his fisherman ancestors, the seeking games of his childhood spent on the beaches of Crete. The dives from the cliffs at Matala; mornings were best because then the sun illuminated the richest diving grounds with its searchlight. There, too, shapes had been key. Not only seashells; corals and the numerous other life forms on the ocean bed had always enchanted Nikos with the wealth of their guises. Diving into the fluid sea – that was what Nikos was reminded of, strangely enough, far from sun and happy cliffs, when he sat at Professor Ruska’s electron microscope and looked around the world of viruses and bacteria. Though so tiny, they were equipped with clear construction plans and unique molecular features. And even with this drastically reduced armamentarium, they were capable of wiping out entire civilisations. Variola, Nikos thought he remembered, was not yet in Professor Ruska’s sample collection. Perhaps he’d be able to bring a few samples back from the Eifel for the great virologist. The few images of variola he’d seen in specialist textbooks were incredible. They reminded Nikos of keyholes that could be peered through. He had read comparisons to the shape of an hourglass, as well.

Long before anyone was capable of making variola pathogens visible, despite them being the largest of all viruses, the first writer to freely admit to having suffered from this scourge of humanity began his description with this image:
'As a family picnic in summer is vexatiously disturbed by a sudden storm, which transforms a very pleasant state of things into the very reverse: so the diseases of childhood fall unexpectedly on the most beautiful season of early life.'
At some point, smallpox had overtaken the plague as the deadliest human infection, leaving it far behind. Since it was so highly contagious and could break out again and again anywhere, children were only counted as part of the family once they had survived smallpox. Infants were too often wiped out by the pox for anyone to feel attached to them before they'd got over it.
'Inoculation was still with us considered very problematical. (…) Speculative Englishmen, therefore, had come to the continent, and inoculated, for a considerable fee, the children of such persons as were opulent, and free from prejudices. Still, the majority were exposed to the old disease: the infection raged through families, killed and disfigured many children.'
What the writer of these lines freely admitted was his pustules – generally the reason behind the popularity of face powder from the Baroque age on. For even if sufferers survived the pox, they often ended up with their faces deformed. Perhaps it took a truly free individual to write the first confession to smallpox in German literature. In Truth and Fiction, Goethe writes: 'The evil now invaded our house, and attacked me with unusual severity. My whole body was sown over with spots, and my face covered; and for several days I lay blind and in great pain.' So it was with smallpox in Goethe's times, and a hundred and thirty years later it was still – or once again – an evil in Germany.

Günter Stüttgen returned and they got into the car. Before he started the engine, he opened a new pack of cigarettes, offered one to Nikos and gave him a light. The Beetle's interior was quickly suffused with blue smoke.
Stüttgen went on describing the second phase's symptoms. He explained how, on the third eruptive day, blisters formed at the tip of the nodules, soon hardening, iridescent like mother of pearl and feeling like hailstones embedded deep in the skin. On one occasion, he said, he had run his hand over a patient's arm in Bombay –taking the maximum safety precautions, naturally. He could feel every single nodule, each of them like a foreign body implanted by an evil genius.
'As soon as these deeply embedded grains appear the other symptoms recede, especially the head and back aches I described. That is the end of the eruptive phase.'

Patient 1. That was the name given by the head of the public health department to the Rither employee considered highly likely to have brought smallpox to the Monschau district from India and infected his daughter, Patient 2. The director of the district council Aügler, a handful of other important gentlemen from the council and Chief Police Inspector Schwey stared at a diagram sketched by the agile Düsseldorf professor, on a blackboard fetched over to the director's office from the Construction Department. At the very top, it said Patient 1. Each of the gentlemen had an ashtray on the table in front of him and was doing his very best to fill it.

The public health officer first gave them a short description of all that had befallen Patient 1 – as far as description was possible at that point. The Düsseldorf professor had shaken his head as he listened, repeatedly whispering comments to his assistant, an athletic young man with curly black hair, the Mediterranean type, and the assistant had noted down the comments.
Before Patient 1 had been given that descriptor, he had been a mere mechanic at the Rither works, who had spent six months assembling industrial furnaces in India. The man had returned home

shortly before Christmas. He had been vaccinated for smallpox a few years previously, for which reason the general practitioner in Lammerath had interpreted the symptoms presenting in early January – fever and severe pain in the limbs – as a common cold, and the subsequent changes to his skin as a harmless case of chickenpox. And that was how it had stayed. The man had been back at work as usual for about two weeks, and had attended the compulsory routine examination at the Institute for Tropical Diseases in Hamburg less than a week ago. There too, the doctors had suspected chickenpox.
'Did they at least get a blood sample?' Professor Stüttgen had asked, already shaking his head in resignation, assuming even his Hamburg colleagues had little idea of variola. The answer, however, was yes. The blood sample had been sent to the Institute of Tropical Medicine in Munich, the only place in Germany where the tests could be run. The results were yet to arrive. Patient 1 was currently in good health. That was not the case for Patient 2, however, his nine-year-old daughter. The cigarette packs crackled; each of the gentlemen lit one up, sensing they were gradually approaching difficult territory.

The child had fallen ill some three weeks after her father displayed the first symptoms. The GP had been consulted anew, once again diagnosing chickenpox, but despite the prescribed bed rest, the previously healthy girl's state had not improved. At which point the family doctor had begun to doubt his diagnosis and turned to the public health officer for advice. They had pored over medical books and eventually decided to have the child taken immediately to the Aachen clinic. That was yesterday.
At this point, the already tense atmosphere grew utterly uncomfortable, partly because Professor Stüttgen began to appear increasingly distraught, as if he had a thorn in his flesh, driven ever deeper by every further description of the fatal circumstances and decisions.

Nikos Spyridakis, whom Stüttgen had asked to record everything relevant on paper and to note anything else he picked up on, kept looking up to study the men's faces around the room. The council director's expression remained stony: no matter what was said, he merely smoked one cigarette after another. He wore an eye-catching amber ring on his left hand, which held his cigarettes and was entirely calm. The colour of his fingertips and nails was also gradually approaching amber. The public health officer went to great lengths to give a correct description of the events, but it was clear that Stüttgen's reaction made an impression on him. The matter would not be a glorious chapter in the history of the medical profession between Aachen and Monschau, that much was clear. The events of the previous evening, concerning the hospital admission of the feverish, at times delirious child, Patient 2, were scarcely conceivable.
Even Nikos – who considered anything possible in theory, coming from a nation that had spent more than two thousand uninterrupted years, since the self-imposed decline of its legendary civilisation due to an extensive and absurd civil war, either ruled by others or in a state of civil war and falling between all cultures and stools, the only solution being a new homeland by the name of Europe – was astounded by his notes as he followed the public health officer's report, occasionally watching Professor Stüttgen's face growing ever darker.

In Aachen, the Red Cross man who drove Monschau's municipal ambulance, a loyal farmer in his late fifties, had been made to wait more than two hours outside the hospital gates, since the child had initially been refused admission. The night nurse had allegedly fetched the duty doctor, who had to call all the way up the list of his absent superiors. In temperatures just above freezing, the driver waited outside, the girl coughing and feverish inside the ambulance. At some point they had all gathered round: consultant, senior ward doctor, hospital director and even the head of the city's public health department. They shone torches through the ambulance windows to assess the pustule-covered child. Hard to decide what might be the more gruesome sight – the poor girl

inside, or the mighty medics in their winter coats and gloves, clutching their flashlights. They stared through the glass like into an aquarium, even asking the driver several times to get into the ambulance and turn the child around to give them a better view. A better view of an impossibility, something that could not, must not be true: a highly contagious German child, in 1962, suffering from Black Pox. Yet fortunately, from Aachen's point of view, that sick child that could not be true was from Monschau. And so she was refused admission and sent back. Despite having an isolation ward and more than a dozen doctors on the staff, all freshly immunised against smallpox, Aachen categorically refused to admit the child from Monschau, on formal grounds. Barely had the ambulance driven off when the Aachen public health department head called the interior ministry. The ministry man shared his view and informed the director of Monschau Hospital, instructing him to undertake all precautionary measures for the admission of a smallpox case, immediately.
'If I'd known, we could have taken the child in Düsseldorf at any time!' Professor Stüttgen exclaimed. 'We had a smallpox case of our own in early January, an engineer infected in Africa. We'd have been fully prepared.'
'Our hospital director asked about that, he told me on the telephone. Asked expressly about admission in Düsseldorf,' the district council director interjected. Nikos saw his amber ring leaping up and down to the rhythm of his words. His cigarette smoke swirled in lively shapes.
'But they were strictly against it. The ministry insisted the girl be treated here in Monschau.'

They'll export German-made machines to India, take a blood sample in Hamburg. Test it in Munich. But when a case comes along, then the patient's from Monschau and she has to stay right there, Stüttgen thought. There was no time to hold the meeting up with laments, though.
Patients 1 and 2 were presumably surrounded by numbers 3 and 4, judging by what he'd heard earlier about the girl's younger brother and mother. Cases were often mild, and the two of them were both vaccinated, which promised they'd get off lightly – but they might still be infectious. So that was the family.
Stüttgen stood up, wiped his lips with his cuff and began sketching out a possible battleplan for the gentlemen.
'We must work like detectives; we must not overlook a single person.'
These words immediately regained the chief inspector's attention, his thoughts having drifted a little as he checked his watch discreetly to see how long it was until a certain television programme started.
Yet what Stüttgen went on to say made not only him dizzy, but also the district council director and his civil servants. The only person who secretly admired Stüttgen's approach was the public health officer, who had taken an obligatory course in epidemiology as part of his degree. He was glad the professor was so tough; it gave him a little more room to manoeuvre. The officer knew what lay ahead: they had to track down anyone who had spent time with a member of the family over the past four weeks, or in fact since the husband's return from India. That meant neighbours and relatives first and foremost, but the school as well, since both children had been in class for a few days after the Christmas holidays.
'But what then? What does it mean for the school?' the council director asked.
'We'll close the school and put all the children from both classes in quarantine, and possibly more; the school itself would be the best place for them,' Stüttgen explained dryly, and then continued. He left no time for anyone to express their indignation. Line by line, link by link, he drew a rough network of possible infection paths: the GP's surgery and the father apparently suffering from a cold or chickenpox, sharing the waiting room with other patients. The doctor's receptionist and nurse. The doctor himself and his family. The ambulance driver. And his family.

With every link, the whole thing reminded the council director more and more of the family tree of an abnormal new ruling dynasty – a devilish anti-carnival prince and his retinue of close and closest relatives. Who were currently in the process of taking over his district.
'This is where we are now,' Stüttgen said, and noted with satisfaction that Nikos had copied his diagram precisely. It would soon grow even larger, but for the moment there was one missing link left, a crossing point for contacts that absolutely had to be included.
'One last thing: Patient 1's workplace. The Rither Works.'

Nikos looked up with interest as the district council director swallowed audibly. The hand with the amber ring and the cigarette adjusted his glasses. The man gazed at his employees.
'I've already informed Director Seuss,' one of them commented. 'He should be here soon.'
'How many people does the company employ? Up in Lammerath, I mean,' Stüttgen asked, lighting a new cigarette.
'Fifteen hundred. The biggest employer in the region, by a long way. But we can't …' the council director broke off and waved vaguely at the family tree of smallpox's rule over his district.
'What can't we do, if I might ask?'
'We can't just close down the Rither Works, can we? We might as well cancel carnival season, it's just not possible.' The man was clearly making an effort to bring a little lightness into the occasion.
'What makes you so sure of that?'
The chief inspector cast an uncertain glance at the council director. Aügler tried to regain control of the matter, taking a slightly tougher tone.
'Please, Professor, stop making jokes. A child is sick, and that's regrettable. Perhaps a few others have been infected. But there are limits to what we can ask of people.'
'With a disease like smallpox, we're facing a force of nature, you must be clear about that. Nature knows no limits. It doesn't care about the pre-Lent carnival, or anything else.'
Following this statement, an incredible thought for both the Rhineland and the Eifel, Stüttgen added in an urgent voice: 'We have a chance to put this genie back in the bottle. But to do so, especially now at the beginning, we require absolute precision. Analysis. And determination to put the consequences into practice. Is that understood?'
Earnest faces all round, silent. The chief of police cleared his throat, guessing that the rest of West Germany would have to catch the murderer without him that evening.

Vera Rither, wearing tight wedge trousers and an elegant but far too thin suede coat as dictated by that winter's fashion on the Seine, her strawberry-blonde hair trimmed into a jaunty bob, watched with a sceptical smile as old Michel Behrends heaved her luggage into the boot of the Mercedes. He uttered a slightly disrespectful grumble – Did Fräulein Vera think there was a brick shortage in the Eifel? The cases were so heavy because Vera had stuffed an absurd number of new books and records into them. She barely had time for music and literature in her hectic Parisian life, and she had vowed to use her two-week stay in Monschau well, aside from all the legal business.
It was none of his beeswax, Behrends commented after insisting on holding the door open for Vera and waiting until she'd sat down, but he couldn't for the life of him say how such a slip of a girl could have such heavy cases.
Behrends' haggard face had wrinkled more and more over the past few years, grown more leathery and tougher but lost none of its agility. As a result of a work accident at the Rither Works foundry as a young man, he was missing two fingers on his left hand, and Vera had always been amazed, as a child, when the remaining three had dived into his pocket with the greatest dexterity to fish out one of the boiled sweets he invariably had with him. To her childish mind, the crippled hand was less a deficit than a special feature that distinguished Michel Behrends more than it hindered him – which may have had something to do with the sweets the three-fingered talon could conjure up so magically.

Now, she watched those familiar fingers holding the Mercedes' heavy steering wheel and steering the car out of the airport parking house into the ever-deeper winter, with muffled sounds and immaculate engine performance.
The old man reported in his croaky voice on all that had been going on at the works. The problems caused by the Luxembourg steel consortium's major order. The three-shift operations introduced more or less overnight by Director Seuss. Everyone had done their bit, but in this year's hard winter, the night shift and the early shift were a real challenge for those coming in from the surrounding villages. Not everyone had a house in Lammerath.
And then something very sad had happened: Bärbel Reue, little blonde Bärbel who Vera had known since she was born, had been taken to hospital yesterday.
'The poor wee pet's got the flu,' the driver said, 'and now she's right poorly.'
Vera wanted to know more. Children didn't usually go to hospital for flu, did they? But Behrends knew no more than that. The news troubled Vera; she knew the girl and her family quite well. Bärbel's mother had helped their housekeeper for a while, done the cleaning on weekday afternoons and brought little Bärbel with her. Her being in hospital was sad for Vera because for her, Bärbel was intimately linked to her own recovery. Vera had suffered a severe case of polio as a child and had to spend decisive phases of her youth in a wheelchair. For a long time, she could neither play, run or ride, which she missed desperately.
Once she had started to feel better, Vera had pushed baby Bärbel around the garden in her pram, venturing into the factory grounds and giving the baby sensational live reports on what went on all around them both. One might say that in actual fact, Vera had found her feet again on these walks, in part thanks to little Bärbel's sunny disposition. The pram had been the perfect walking support, a way to leave behind the crutches she often still needed. And so her recovery was linked to no small extent to young Bärbel – who had probably not noticed much at all.
Back then, in that bitter time of her illness, was when Vera had started to write. She soon developed the ambition to perfect her description of things she couldn't take part in herself, meaning that depiction became more than a replacement – it was her method of experiencing the world, despite it all.
When she described her school friends playing on the grass at break time, trying to catch one another, she found her task almost as appealing as it would have been to run barefoot over the sun-warmed field herself. She kept the diary of her youth as consolation for the handicap imposed upon her by her illness; but once she had finally learned to walk with confidence again after long years of therapy and operations, her writing remained part of her. And it had laid out her path to journalism. She was aware at a very early age of her privilege, and that not every young woman at the time had such opportunities.
Writing had long been a physical practice for her – particularly on the typewriter. She had begun writing her diary in earnest in the early fifties. An encounter with Anne Frank's diary had had a lasting influence on her, including her writing technique. To begin with, she had imitated Frank and written to an imaginary friend, but after a while she realised she could switch her invented audience. She could even write letters to a beautiful black horse she loved dearly and would so love to ride – an absolute impossibility. She used the Rither Works' headed notepaper for her letter, sitting in her father's office after-hours as he brooded over construction plans with his engineers. At the age of twelve, she knew almost all of the countless typewriters in the office and administration rooms, and soon enough she was given her own, an Olivetti Lettera, for her birthday. Unlike with many an expensive gift, typing became no less attractive now that the soon-beloved device was always at her fingertips. She had soon begun to write under a pseudonym for the Monschauer Zeitung, pieces about pigeon fanciers, marksmen's festivals and football matches between village clubs, thanks to a well-meaning editor who reported on anything and everything at the Rither Works and had thus learned of Vera's delightful talent; and his openness to the young writer was certainly not negatively influenced by the economic importance of the company with

her name. Initially, Vera herself had not cared a jot what her articles were about – it was the act of comprehending the world through writing that made her happy. But she had learned even before she started her degree that a nose for the right material was of course an essential ingredient of good journalism.

The drive from Cologne-Wahn Airport to Monschau-Lammerath took them three hours, and old Behrends made it clear that was good going, under the circumstances. They passed the yellow lights of snow-clearing vehicles numerous times, tirelessly keeping the roads passable since the early afternoon.
'Best wait and see what else is coming.'
He was referring to the weather forecast. Two metres of fresh snowfall, like in the Alps.
'Yes, I know. The pilot made an announcement before the plane landed. There were Luxembourgers on board who wanted to take the Fen Railway. There are already delays there, with all the snow.'
Despite the thought that dear little Bärbel was in hospital, at some point she nodded off on the back seat of the cosy warm Mercedes; she hadn't managed to sleep a wink on the plane, astonishingly enough since she was so exhausted. There was a lot to do at university and on the student newspaper where she wrote a weekly column. And then cultural life in Paris! Book launches. The theatres large and small. She hated Sartre, and she loved him. The jazz clubs. She got by on a permanent lack of sleep and today was a Friday, yet still the flight had not cradled her to sleep the moment the plane lifted off, this time. Instead, she had been worried from the very beginning. Then came some hefty turbulence as they passed through a storm somewhere west of the Ardennes, and for whatever reasons, she hadn't been able to get the physics of a collision out of her head and how terrible it would be to crash into ice-cold, rain-soaked rock or plunge into trees …

As she awoke from her heated slumber, the car had just reached the eastern margins of the Hürtgen Forest. They passed the enormous war cemeteries, came to the gigantic lake of the Rur Dam at Schmidt, and headed north high upon the crests above the reservoir, left them again, finally reaching the thickly snow-covered baroque town of Monschau, and at last the Mercedes drove through the slim strip of new construction that was Lammerath, passing the barely recognisable marketplace, which had become a giant car park. Then they drove past the hospital grounds, opened a few years previously, its name allegedly honouring her deceased uncle – Saint Bernhard's. Her father had donated an enormous sum to prevent the council from going into debt. And certainly also out of gratitude for his own family's medical care, or Vera's. Vera hated hospital air, though she owed the restoration of her health to it.
'Did you say Bärbel is in there, Michel? Not in Aachen?'
'Here in Lammerath. Right over there.'
'Could you slow down, please ...'
Behrends did her the favour of slowing the car and coming to a halt with the engine running in the hospital entrance. Vera immediately noticed a whole wing was brightly lit, despite the late hour. In its strict rectangular lines, the building stood like an open secret. It all seemed so obvious that Vera could precisely imagine the hectic goings-on inside: twenty brightly illuminated rooms in a row, on both floors. And all that for a child with the flu? It didn't seem plausible. The unusual sight added in an indeterminate way to the discomfort she'd felt on the flight. And made such an impression, for that very reason. The night I came home.
When they arrived at long last and caught sight of the upheaval in the otherwise strictly run factory yard, she instantly knew it was related to the brightly-lit hospital wing. Was she seeing rightly, were there two police cars up ahead? Several vehicles had Düsseldorf licence plates and looked rather official. But there was also a less impressive model, an old Type-1 VW, known as a Beetle.

Barely anything in human society is closer to the exponential dynamic of a virus outbreak than that ancient phenomenon which, even in the steely modern times of 1962 with all its space rockets, made telephones and telexes look sedate: the rumour. Nikos thought about how rumours telling of far-distant places had arrived at his village. In the tight circle of island life, the stories had happened on the beach, in the sea – a boat accident, a legendary big fish. A shepherd fallen into a crevasse. As soon as news like this arrived in the village, there were reactions. Sometimes they lit the big fire on the square, having heard a goat or a sheep had fallen victim in this or that incident. Sometimes they fetched a stretcher from an attic, those two poles of olivewood with fabric between them once used to carry the soldiers of Minos out of battle.

It was exactly the same on the grounds of the Rither Works in Lammerath. However it might have happened, even before the impressive train of seven vehicles had arrived from the district council in Monschau along the snow-covered roads, the night shift knew all about everything, and Foreman Tillich had the grounds gritted and salted. The chief inspector and several officers were to be there, and God knew who else. Tillich ran across the yard to the construction building, where he found only the chief engineer. So Tillich merely spoke briefly to his secretary, who only ever went home when Dr Velbert locked his office. She too already knew what was going on. The Reue girl in hospital. Suspected smallpox.
The entire workforce present watched the column of cars arriving in expectation – after all, Director Seuss would be returning with them. The man who would get them and the company through this situation.

Nikos felt it even in the car, as they drove into the factory grounds in Stüttgen's Volkswagen. Everyone was awaiting them. Before they got out, Stüttgen gave him one last lesson.
In a few sentences, he took the junior doctor back to the start of their journey together – Stüttgen told young Nikos about India, and the rest of a story he had previously only hinted at.
'During my second study trip to India, news reached the hospital. A smallpox outbreak in a small city. We doctors went ahead by train, followed by a lorryload of equipment. The sight at the station was gruesome. Indescribable. Dead and dying everywhere we looked.'
'Why at the station? Why did the sick go there? To escape the city?'
'Yes. They wanted out, to anywhere they'd get help.'
As if they had all the time in the world, Stüttgen took out his elegant box of Stuyvesants and offered his assistant one. Nikos didn't actually smoke; it didn't help his swimming. And yet smoking was a great pleasure, especially for a person with strong lungs. He was the perfect non-smoker, pleased every time to start smoking anew.
'Just imagine what it means to live in a country where normal hospitals close their doors to the severely ill, and private practices all the more so! Imagine if people got sick here, and then they all dragged themselves along to Düsseldorf's central station in the hope of getting help there. Hoping the railway would rescue them.'
Nikos liked the central station in Düsseldorf. At the start of his stay, nine months ago, he had loaded vegetable crates there for a mark twenty an hour.
'Yes, it's terrible, of course. But the dead and the sick there – at least we know where they are. I'm sorry, but they're not the problem. The real nightmare is the passengers who arrived at the station apparently healthy and might have left it infected, travelling in all directions, is that right?'
'Yes, exactly. The crush in the lower-class carriages on the Indian railways is indescribable.' Stüttgen sighed and tapped the ash from his cigarette. He sketched how they had brought the outbreak under control. A virus safari for the good of humankind, with mass inoculations, isolation and all

the trimmings. In the end, the city was freed from smallpox. The start of the mission, however, had called for a deft approach. Including psychological aspects.
'When we entered a house where no one seemed obviously sick but there were signs or suspicions that one of them might be contagious, we communicated with a secret symbol to prevent people from panicking.'
'What kind of symbol?'
'V for variola,' Stüttgen spread two fingers. 'You might think of Churchill's V for victory. And in the end that was fitting, but of course it was a long way off to start with. We made the variola V, look, very discreetly and horizontally, like a pair of scissors.'
Nikos mimicked the gesture, looking Stüttgen in the eyes with determination, like a man going into battle. Now it was their own secret code.
'V for variola. Alright, Professor. I think ... shall we be getting on?'
'First we'll finish our cigarettes in peace. It's not a bad thing for the others to wait a bit for us.'
They got out of Stüttgen's old Beetle. At that moment, Nikos saw the rear lights of a sturdy Mercedes, heading into a separate, park-like area a hundred metres further on. That was where the Rither family's private residential building was. A place Nikos would soon become acquainted with. First, though, they went to what was called the administration building. Director Seuss' office had plenty of space for them all. Another Düsseldorf medical man had joined them, Professor Schnabel, the head of the county epidemic department and essentially Stüttgen's employer. Stüttgen and Schnabel shook hands, pleased to see each other. Schnabel seemed highly relieved to have his colleague here.
He introduced Stüttgen to Director Seuss. A very obliging gentleman in his early sixties, rather rotund, wearing a traditional Bavarian woollen jacket. Clearly in charge.
Seuss was a man who had seen a great deal in his time. But never someone entering his office with such confidence in himself as this Stüttgen in his white roll-neck sweater. As if he were the new skipper. A fitting metaphor, thought Seuss, though he didn't yet know exactly how big the smallpox boat was, the epidemic yacht currently setting sail.
After a brief welcome from District Council Director Aügler, Stüttgen sketched out the situation to the extent of his knowledge. Then he began defining the problem areas, in dialogue with the director. The others listened in. The director evaded the question of the mechanic's contacts inside the company. The shift plans were in the personnel department, no one there was available at the moment. But only very few staff were off sick, no more than usual for this time of year. Nothing whatsoever was unusual.
Nikos, following the still friendly conversation between Seuss and Stüttgen with great interest, was at the edge of the room by the window, which granted him a surprisingly good view of part of the factory building and the canteen.
In the factory hall, tools were down. The canteen, however, seemed to be crowded. Nikos could make out a television through one window, surrounded by workers from the night shift. It was an image straight out of a tale of Oriental knights. All he saw was the bent necks of the men sitting and standing in a circle, leaning forward and against each other, arms around shoulders, united in suspension in front of the television set. As if gazing at a grail or a magical ring with a mysterious glow. There must have been twenty or thirty people there, tightly packed. Nikos looked at his watch. Presumably the last four or five minutes. Soon the world would learn who the neck-scarf killer was.
What with all Nikos had heard from Stüttgen about variola's potential for infection, the sight of that innocent group of people glued to the television was disturbing – infuriating, in fact. But didn't the same apply to them, gathered here in the office? The director might well have had contact to Patient 1 himself.

The conversation quickly got bogged down in difficulties. Stüttgen demanded the personnel department search through all shift plans to find all the persons in contact with Patient 1 over the past three weeks.
'In the past three weeks?' Seuss asked. 'That could be as good as anyone in the company. Plus, the man was out on assembly with customers all over the Rhineland: Bonn, St Augustin, Cologne. Every single person he met out there – the dear Lord knows who they all were.'
Stüttgen interjected at this point. He was a man of reserve, but the stubbornness of this pear-shaped Bavarian with his rolled Rs, that ridiculous jacket and the winks of the eyes embedded in his fleshy face at every other word, as if they were playing a game of cards here – it was too much for him.
'I don't understand what you mean by every single person. These single persons, every one of them is a specific individual. And some of them could be infected without severe symptoms, and pass on the virus all the more easily.'
'So what do you want to do? Put an announcement in the newspaper: Beware of the Rither Works, or you'll get the plague?'
'The newspapers will get hold of it of their own accord, don't you worry, Director.'
'What, then? Do you want to put my whole company in quarantine?'
'Quarantine is a good point. You see, Director Seuss, we two doctors here, Mr Spyridakis and myself, as medics, we're at the end, or at least near the final act of a centuries-long intensive study of this disease. I don't know for sure for every region, but I suspect the last time the Eifel had a smallpox outbreak was at the time of the Napoleonic Wars. Now, though, it's coming back – through the worldwide economic boom. The world is a very different place now. In the old days, people came from overseas by ship, slowly, and they could be observed for the forty days of quarantine. Often, that time or part of it was spent travelling. Nowadays, you can get on a plane and fly from Delhi to Frankfurt in a matter of hours. And before that you were in the bush somewhere, working on a dam with German turbines built into it – in the middle of the deepest African jungle. That, for example, was the background to the smallpox case we had in Düsseldorf at the beginning of January. These incidents are to do with our modern way of life, and they're almost unavoidable.'
Stüttgen leaned back, took another cigarette and offered one to the director. Nikolaos turned down politely. He was listening intently to the conflict he was witnessing. A clash between two men of similar stringency, yet very different in most other ways. The director was roughly twenty years older than Stüttgen, a man with a noticeable accent and thick black spectacles, above them a semi-bald head with a cropped border of white hair, dressed in a grey traditional suit with staghorn buttons – a man of nimble motions, despite his corpulence, and an energy clearly accustomed to encountering and overcoming resistance.
'When I first came here this was one of the most wretched parts of Germany. Monschau had once had a bit of a textiles industry but all the mills had long since shut up shop. Other than that, a few farmers. Nothing here but barren ground. What we have here now, we built it all up ourselves. 1925! That's how long I've been here. You'll have been nothing but a child when I started working here. And we've never closed down for a single day, not in all that time. Not even at the end of the war, if you want to know.'

If you knew how well I know what this place was like in the war, thought Stüttgen, who never talked about that time in his life, his war years in his mid-twenties, when he was the same age as Spyridakis was now. If you knew ...
'I could imagine less dangerous tasks than grappling with smallpox here in the Eifel, Director Seuss,' he began his next attempt to bring them closer. 'I'm a scientist, I have plenty of plans. But my laboratory, my surroundings, my training, I don't owe them to the Düsseldorf Academy or science itself, I owe it all to my profession – as a doctor. That's what our society encourages – I'm

a doctor first and foremost and anything else comes second. What I'm doing here has nothing to do with my scientific career. And everything.'
'You don't believe that high-falutin' nonsense yourself! And do you know why? Because this story here could have a pretty good effect on your career. You don't think you can come here to Monschau from Düsseldorf and start off by closing down the Rither Works, and there'd be no consequences for you?'
'You really want to threaten me, do you, Director?'
'I'm asking for a tad more realism. That's all I ask. You're not in some Indian village here, you know.'
'I never said I was. All I said was is that Germany is much closer to India than you think – only a few hours by plane.'

After two endless hours of tiresome wrestling, they came to a solution Stüttgen had secretly reckoned with all along. To keep operations running and not send all the staff into quarantine at the same time, the Rither Works would get their own doctor. After Professor Schnabel suggested the model, apparently a feasible compromise for both sides, Stüttgen asked Nikos to step outside. The younger man guessed what awaited him.
'Are you willing to do it?'
'You want me to ... be the works doctor here?'
'You'll be based here and you'll be in charge of every shift's health.'
'I can't even imagine how to get that done.'
'You'll manage. We'll be in close contact all the time. You'll be my Cretan armour, Nikos.'
Nikos was uncomfortable with that formulation, for various reasons. But he was prepared for anything. Why else would he have come along?

The meeting with Director Seuss came to an end. Stüttgen and the other doctors went to the hospital to inspect the little girl, Patient 2, for themselves. Before that, Nikos unloaded his case from the Beetle and asked a secretary the way to the guest apartment in Rither House, where he'd be spending that very night, so as to start putting the plan into practice the next day.
Once everyone had left the works, Director Seuss tidied his desk, locked up, went outside and asked his chauffeur to drive him home. He lived in the centre of Monschau, in a magnificent house. Max was ready and waiting, unsettled.
'What's the matter, Lembke?'
'That professor, boss. That Stüttgen.'
'What about him?'
'I know him. From the war.'
'Really? Where from?'
Lembke stared straight ahead. Not that he was trembling, exactly, but a certain nervous lack of control was obvious. Seuss saw his driver's fingers crook around the knob of his walking stick. Lembke's stare seemed to go far back to a dark time.
'He was the medical captain in command of the first-aid station up in Dreiborn, where I ended up. Never forgotten him. How could I?'
'Well, what a coincidence. Tell me more, Lembke, that sounds very interesting.'
'Of course, sir.'

VERA

Plastickers? Plasticators? Plasticists? It's not quite clear how to translate the latest term from Paris. When the French open up their newspapers these days, the first thing they read is about the 'plastiqueurs'. They're the best men of the OAS, Organisation de l'armée secrète, the Secret Armed Organisation; after a test-run in Algiers, they've now been allowed to apply their creative skills with plastic explosives in Paris. A bomb has even gone off at the home of the French cultural minister, André Malraux.
The next day, 8 February 1962, the whole of Europe, the whole world – at least, those who read newspapers – reads about the wave of terror in Paris: ten attacks in twenty hours. A work of art in an age of fear. What sounds like the plot of an action movie was coordinated by a man named André Canal, the evil genius of the OAS. Fought in the war, then a captain of industry in Algiers. As Algerian independence loomed, he had made his organisational skills available to the OAS and gone underground.

Now, the monster has gone too far. The hit job on Malraux – almost an embodiment of French intellectualism, the reconciliation of power and the mind – costs Canal everything. A nasty coincidence that barely anyone dares point out: when the explosives went off in the culture minister's home, the child of the building's owner lost his left eye; Canal too has only one eye, the other replaced by a glass model, over which he often wears a black monocle.
International politics that morning is in fact a gloomy prospect, loaded with other bad news. Nikos shakes his head in horror that severely malformed children are now being born in Britain, as well. In Germany, Contergan sleeping pills had been prescribed for pregnant women, causing widespread deformities in newborns. In the UK, the drug thalidomide had a different brand name, and since there was no communication between the German health system and the NHS, the catastrophe was now repeating itself there, with a slight time-lapse. Nikos could cry, just thinking about it. What else had to happen for the nations to finally trust each other and work together? A great tragedy, in medical and human terms, yet again.

All the more surprising, then, that the local pages dealing with the smallpox epidemic in the Monschau district reported on an unexpected turn for the better, announced by District Council Director Aügler at a press conference the previous day. The epidemic, he proclaimed, was over; the district council, and thus he himself, had everything under control. The danger had been vanquished.
Professor Stüttgen, however, had prepared Nikos for the epidemic to last for weeks, with a rise in infections and suspected cases to be expected in the next few days. Only one of them could be right, Aügler or Stüttgen, and Nikos was in no great doubt. What was the council director thinking, with his optimistic announcement?

Nikos put the newspaper aside. This was his first morning off since his arrival in the Eifel on 1 February. But as the last few days had taught him, he could be called out at any time.
In arm's reach of the telephone, he was sitting at a desk nursing a cup of hot coffee from the works canteen. He looked out of the window for a moment and watched the snowflakes outside, each one unique, falling thickly fluffed onto the factory yard and destined to melt on a dense layer of salt. Then he lowered his eyes back to his page, jolted himself into action – having spent far too long on the newspaper – and began to write at last. In Greek.

'Αγαπητή μαμά,' he started. 'Dear Mama, please excuse me for replying so late to your last letter – it had to be forwarded to me, as I haven't been in Düsseldorf since last week. The dermatology professor Stüttgen has got me a job as works doctor at a large factory in Monschau. It's a small

town near Aachen full of half-timbered houses, very picturesque even now in winter. It's not far from here to Belgium and Luxembourg.'
He forgave himself his excursion and went back over what he'd written so far. As he read, he sensed – and instantly knew his mother would sense it too at her kitchen table – how he was evading the truth. The most important thing. The truth that he was deployed here in a fight against the worst evil the world had ever seen. Even though it was an evil that – from a historical perspective – had helped Greek civilisation, in alliance with Byzantium, to one last great upswing: the Antonine Plague, as it was also known, the pandemic to which Western Rome succumbed. Black pox. Variola. Fifteen million sick and two million dead, that was the toll it still took every year – and that in the middle of the twentieth century.
He returned to his letter but wrote not a word of how bizarre his days had become, instead merely informing his mother he had been taken on to help the company cope with a wave of flu.
But then his eyes alighted on the newspaper again. To judge by what it said in the Aachener Zeitung, both television and every German newspaper had reported on the 'smallpox in Monschau' since the outbreak and the council director's press conference. All the major magazines had sent reporters. He had already met one of them, an unlikeable fellow by the name of Justus Grünwald who wrote for Munich's Quick. He wore thick black glasses, smoked a pipe and spoke in a lisping Austrian accent to which Nikos took an instant dislike. He had even found lodgings in the town – despite the quarantine imposed in the first few days. No one from out of town was allowed to be in Monschau. This reporter, though, had his ways and means.
'We're making a nice series out of your smallpox,' had been Grünwald's facetious response a few days ago, when Nikos had asked him directly why he was following hot on his heels on his home visits, and even taking photos. Nikos couldn't stand that mixture of blunt honesty and obscure intentions. As important as the press was in the event of an epidemic – to communicate the whole situation, the rules and official regulations – no one wanted to have them on their tail in such a complicated case as the Rither Works.
'Is the WHO taking over?' a number of conservative German newspapers had asked, and many a mutter was soon heard about the quarantine measures. People were especially enraged by carnival being cancelled, with all its events large and small. Nikos, who had studied in Gießen and only come to Düsseldorf last summer, so far only knew about the Rhineland's carnival traditions from the newspaper. For him, they were absolutely alien archaic rituals, and he wondered why German ethnologists went all the way to the South Seas when they could study rites just as strange on their doorstep. Now, he saw with some surprise what storms of emotion the ban caused in the Monschau locals.
And of course, the international press had also reported on the outbreak, after Belgium had followed the WHO's standards and immediately closed its border. His mother was bound to be following the news, especially when it came to the part of Germany where her son was living. If he wrote to her that he was in Monschau, she'd soon put two and two together. Wasn't that the place with the smallpox outbreak? The white lie about flu would soon come out.
Either he wrote her the whole truth, or he didn't write anything. His mother would find out sooner or later, and would take a highly critical view of such a violation of family honesty, committed by her son out of concern for her. His father had been an army officer who had suffered for years from a war wound and spent his final months bedridden, and his widow had learned to live with the truth. The truth, aletheia, was the only thing she saw as beyond argument. 'One thing we can't change, my son, is what we call aletheia.' She said it often. His Cretan grandmother had spoken the same way.
He screwed up the letter, aimed and hit the wastepaper bin – as he often had before, he had a tiny flash of thought that this must have been how basketball was invented. There was no such thing as trying too hard. If you worked for long enough at something, you'd manage it in the end.

'Dear Mama, please excuse me for replying so late to your last letter. I left Düsseldorf a week ago. I have come with my dermatology professor' – again, he paused to find the right formulation – 'to do emergency service in the Eifel. What we are dealing with here' – he sought words that would neither hide anything nor make his mother worry unnecessarily – 'is a genuine crisis.'
Did he really have to launch right into the 'crisis'? Shouldn't he tell his mother about the safety measures first? About his own driver? And the steelworker's outfit refitted as a medical protection suit, which allowed him to enter every house possibly stricken with an outbreak without having to quarantine afterwards? Essentially, it was like wearing a diving suit. He swam deep down into the inhabited reef by the name of Monschauer Land, dived into families and domestic situations and decreed their immediate future, as a judge. He could put a family into quarantine in a matter of minutes – or allow the father to go to work. Work: the Germans' most important commodity. They had no white cliffs here, no afternoons by the sea with endless sunshine. They had artificial sunlamps – and industry. Mechanical engineering. They mined coal. They processed iron, steel, aluminium, plastics and glass. They sold the machines they manufactured in their factories all around the world. And the world came to them to buy them. On ships and planes. He took a sip of coffee, unfortunately now gone cold.

'Dear Mama, I'm pleased to tell you I now have a very well-paid job at an industrial company near Aachen. They have an outbreak of smallpox there, and my dermatology professor from Düsseldorf gave me the opportunity to work here. I might be able to put some money aside for a small car. Let's hope I can drive all the way to Athens for the Easter holidays.'

For Nikos, that thought was inextricably tied up with the idea of a car radio. He'd install a really good one. It almost seemed like the car would be nothing more than a receptacle for the radio. That must be happiness on earth: driving with the windows down, perhaps even with a retractable roof. Along the sunny streets of the Balkans all the way to Greece. Listening to music as loud as he wanted ... music like what he heard here every evening when he took the back stairs of Rither House up to his apartment: bebop and cool jazz. Modern music. Sure, there was classical music. Beethoven and Bach were great – but jazz was the music of the hour. Miles Davis! That was exactly what came through the smoked glass door of the delivery entrance to Rither House. Turned up loud, but sounding so good that Nikos didn't want to think how much the equipment playing it must have cost.
If there was one thing that spoke in favour of a person's character, it was if they listened to really good jazz. Whoever lived in Rither House, they had very inviting musical taste.

'The good thing about the job is that I have an apartment provided rent-free. It's very well appointed with a proper bathroom, and even a cleaner. So I've given up my digs in Düsseldorf to save …'
At that moment, the telephone rang. It was the young woman from the personnel department. A Rither worker from the last night shift had woken up that morning feeling unwell, with a temperature and chills.
'Could you say that again, please? Birkenweg, number 19? Alright. We'll be right there. Horst Palm. We're on our way.' Semi-relieved, Nikos screwed up his third draft of the letter and slam-dunked it into the bin. He'd write to his mother that evening – really, this time.

Vera saw the black Mercedes that had picked her up at the airport only eight days ago leaving the yard, and she knew who was behind the wheel. Old Michel Behrends was driving the only vehicle from her late father's car collection that had an automatic separator between front and back, originally intended for confidential conversations. Behrends had now added an extra seal to the

separating glass, dividing the vehicle very hygienically into two interior sections. In critical situations the driver didn't even leave the car, only the young doctor from Greece, whom Vera had not yet seen in person. His visits were precisely planned. The company's chief engineer had alighted upon an extraordinary idea in a crisis meeting with Seuss and the medical professors. With the aid of his aluminium constructors, he had refunctioned a classic steelworker's suit used for working on the smelting furnace for the new purpose. They replaced the viewing window with plain glass, and various details ensured the doctor wearing the suit could enter an infectious patient's house without risk. After each use, the suit and the rear of the car were disinfected, and not until then did the young doctor emerge from the protective suit.
This, and other things, Vera knew from Behrends.
The junior doctor must have done something right; the chauffeur was a big fan of his. Behrends also hinted at some kind of secret symbol they had agreed, which he wasn't allowed to talk about. Such a clever young man, he was. Without him and his hard work, Director Seuss might as well shut up shop, said Behrends.
'Built like a brick house. This big ...' the three- and five-fingered hands grabbed a measure of air about twice as wide as Behrends himself, who was of course a little old man.

Now, Vera watched the black Mercedes leaving the company grounds. The sky was grey and it was snowing without pause. The factory chimneys were working in the opposite direction, pumping out smoke as if to prop up the low-hanging sky, or perhaps blow it upwards. She stood at the window of her childhood bedroom, a doll called Nomi in her hand. She couldn't quite remember who had given it to her, under what circumstances, but that didn't matter. Nomi wore a forget-me-not-coloured dress and an embroidered apron. The perfect doll for a happy doll family, in which she could be both mother and daughter. And it was Nomi that Bärbel had wished for, her favourite doll over all the years she'd spent visiting Vera's bedroom and playing with everything in there, while Vera sat at her typewriter and tried to write stories.
Bärbel knew the room and all its childhood treasures and secrets almost better than Vera herself, who had long since grown out of them. And at her first hospital visit yesterday, the child had answered Vera's question of what she'd like by asking for Nomi. That was what the nurse had passed on, holding up a piece of paper behind the glass of the isolation ward. It said: doll Nomi, light blue. She'd take it over there right now; and for after that, she had put together boxes and boxes of other toys to take to the children quarantining in the Lammerath primary school. Vera had spent all morning sorting and packing and then loading the boxes into her car, not such an easy task as she'd first assumed. But she didn't want to ask for help; she wanted to lug it all down the stairs herself. The car, an old Opel her housekeeper usually used to get the shopping, was parked in the underground garage her father had built for his car collection, more than twenty vehicles. Collecting cars was pretty much the only thing that had made him happy. He'd never had time to drive around in them.
Now, one last task, she wrapped the doll up in a little blanket, tied a red ribbon around it and wrote Bärbel on a card, which she tucked behind the bow.

Arriving at the hospital not ten minutes later, she saw even before she left the car that something must have happened. Once again, there was a crowd of Germany's top press people outside the district hospital, apparently waiting for something. This time there were an impressive number of photographers – or photo-reporters, as the best of them liked to call themselves – who had even more of an air of hunters about them than the journalists. And they could get just as angry as journalists when they didn't get a shot – that fortuitous click of a button that captured a complex situation in a single image.
Like the picture of the police Volkswagen driving past the sign for Lammerath, where a large notice had announced the shocking truth since the start of the outbreak – 'suspicion of smallpox' –

instructing motorists to drive through without stopping. The photo must have been used a hundred times all over West Germany, making it into many millions of printed newspapers. The man who'd taken it was a photographer from Aachen who liked to stand out, with a bearskin hat so big it looked like it must once have belonged to a wealthy Russian giant.
Vera parked the car, picked up the wrapped-up doll and went over to the group of journalists smoking outside the hospital. She made quite sure not to show any sign of weakness as she walked past her future colleagues, putting one foot in front of the other slowly and carefully, which made her look like a noble lady promenading. She knew her measured steps came across to some people as nothing but snobbery, especially with such a well-dressed young woman whose origins were revealed in every detail. No one could have guessed that her walk was the product of uncertainty, albeit a merely physical uncertainty that she countered with all the more sturdy a mental attitude.
'What's going on here?' she asked the bearskin-hatted photographer, whom she already knew.
'They've closed the hospital temporarily. No one goes in, no one comes out.'
'But you don't know the reason?'
'No, but it won't be a good thing. The professor from Düsseldorf in charge of the whole thing went in an hour ago. Stüttgen. We're waiting for him.'
'If he doesn't take a different exit again,' came an interjection from a colleague with an audible Berlin accent.
'Very crafty, that professor, you're right there,' said a man in his early forties who now joined them uninvited.
'Justus Grünwald. From Quick, Munich. Nice to meet you. Fräulein Vera Rither, am I right? A pleasure.' Grünwald, big black horn-rimmed glasses, unfastened trench coat, elegant suit, red tie and a permanent smile stuck to his face, cast the photographer such an aggressively patronising glance that he cleared off, quick smart.
'How do you know who I am, Mr Grünwald?' Vera asked.
'Got to keep an ear to the ground. And I've heard plenty about you around here! The heiress to the Rither Works! If I may.'
'I'm here to visit a patient, privately.' Vera thought he was terribly pushy. At the same time, though, he gave off the air of an absolutely adept journalist. Who knew what else he had found out? A modern-day wordsmith.
'You're studying journalism in Paris, is that right?' He flashed a broad grin, took a pipe out of his trench coat pocket, filled it routinely with his thumb and lit it.
'It's my first year.' She had been just about to send him packing, but he had a persuasive way of holding a conversation. And he took her ambitions seriously, asked about her journalism plans.
'You can never start writing early enough. The only way to learn journalism is on the job. Believe you me ...' He handed her his card.
'Here you are, young lady.' Then he looked around and lowered his voice, though there was no one in hearing. 'And if there's anything you want to tell me – or write yourself – you just give me a call. I've been interested in Monschau and the Rither Works for a while already, and now there's the smallpox as well. The headlines are really hotting up. An insider story would be terrific, of course. Quick accepts pieces submitted under a pseudonym, by the way, Fräulein Rither. Just in case. I'm staying at the Golden Lion if you want to reach me. You can leave a message for me there – but I don't need to explain that to such a clever young lady, do I? Perhaps you'll get in touch. We can just go for a coffee.'
Vera nodded tersely, but his words had struck a nerve. They said goodbye, Grünwald refilling his pipe and tipping his fingers to his hat in salute.
Now Vera spotted Jörg Siebels, her old editor at the Monschauer Abend.
'Hello, Jörg.'
'Vera! You're looking marvellous, kid. But weren't you supposed to be back in Paris by now?'

'Yes, that was the plan. But I got here a week ago, and now with the bombings, Ludmilla made me promise to stay a bit longer. She's scared for me.'
'It's terrifying, that's true. But maybe the plastic bombs in Paris aren't the only things exploding. It could be we're facing our own bombshell right here.'
'What's the matter?'
'I can't say, Vera. Only that the district council director talked two days ago at a press conference about how well Monschau has managed the epidemic, and how it's over now. Two days ago. And today, today they've shut down the clinic. They seemed to have missed something in all their management. If only we knew what. But we can't get into the hospital. That would be a bombshell story, wouldn't it?'
She gave him her hand to say goodbye, on which he planted a faux kiss – admiring her soft hands, not for the first time – and then she made her way to the gate in her proud, fragile way.
She knew the nun on the gate well.
'Afraid you can't come in today, Fräulein Rither. The hospital's closed.' Her expression gave away a great deal – annoyance, concern and dark clouds above the building. Vera put the doll down, telling her it was for Bärbel Reue on the isolation ward.
'I'll be happy to pass that on, Fräulein Rither, very happy.'
The nurse put the light-blue package on a trolley and added a room number. Behind her, two other nurses hurried along the corridor, both wearing face masks that lent their uniforms a strangely bitter, almost warrior-like determination. Vera thought she recognised one of them from her childhood days.
'Oh,' she said in a confidential tone to the nun behind the desk, 'has Rosel Hörtgen joined your order, sister? We went to school together.'
'No, the girls are here from the Red Cross. Volunteers for the epidemic.'

In the late forties, the Rither Works had paid its blue- and white-collar workers grants towards building homes, and even employed a firm of architects to design a model house, which the proud homebuilders could use or alter slightly to suit their own plans. Three new estates around the centre of town, badly destroyed by the American invasion, had been built on ground provided by the Rither family from their large holdings, with hereditary leases. The typical homes, also known as Rither houses, had a small first floor beneath a steep roof, ideal for a family with two or three children. The owners could plant vegetables in the back gardens, or build a sandpit for the kids. The newest houses had garages – in case the families had a car, which their proud owners would wash on the tarmac drives on Sunday afternoons. There was a small roofed patio at the back with a view of the garden and the hedge dividing it from the neighbours' gardens, which were so similar on either side that strangers would easily get lost, since Birch Road looked exactly like Oak Crescent or Maple Way – though neither birches nor oaks nor maples grew there and the only characteristic green was that of the omnipresent hedges. In a house like this, on a road named after trees that didn't grow there, lived not only the Reue family, with poor little Bärbel whose father had been the start of it all, but also the Palm family, whom the junior doctor Nikolaos Spyridakis was visiting to examine first the man of the house, Horst Palm, and then his wife and two children.

Michel Behrends helped Nikolaos to put on his helmet and lock it in place with the three little levers around the collar. Air came through two especially installed microfilters below his mouth, one on either side.
The sound of his own heartbeat now audible, the breath from Nikos' lungs percolated warm and clammy around the steelworker's suit. A protective coat, designed to work with liquid steel at a smelting furnace but now his armour against one of the most contagious diseases with which humankind had been grappling for thousands of years now. Most of that time in vain, more recently

with clear success thanks to the achievements of modern medicine – but it still existed: variola. The varying pox.
As the protective suit sealed around him, Nikos gave a thumbs-up. Old Behrends, wearing only a protective mask and holding up the thumb of his three-fingered hand in response, stayed outside and watched Nikos walk up to the house with his doctor's bag, the door opening before he had a chance to ring the bell. Mrs Palm, who had taken off her apron and neatened herself up a little for the works doctor, stood pale with worry in the doorway and asked him in. Nikos was a good two heads taller than her and the suit made him even broader; one almost wondered whether he would fit through the door.

The image we see before us resembles a spaceman or a cartoon robot entering an absurdly small-looking house, or a demon slipping into the building the way he might squeeze his gigantic body into a bottle in the form of smoke.
Inside, the usual stress began for Nikos. The wife meant too well. But that was normal, always happened in Monschau-Lammerath: people here turned the heating up when someone had the flu. The radiators were practically scorching hot. Nikos broke out in a gradual sweat, soon realising he might have had one coffee too many that morning.
He tried to concentrate.
And he did concentrate.
He had been into a number of these typical houses on the Rither estates. He quickly found the way to the master bedroom and there was the patient, a man of forty or so, sitting upright in a dressing gown. His eyes looked slightly glazed over to Nikos, but that could have been his fogged-up viewing window.
He raised his hand in greeting; the patient nodded and he opened his bag. First the thermometer. Clearly raised temperature. Plus the glassy eyes. Nikos was already certain. Naturally, a practicing medic's deeper familiarity with physical appearances, knowledge of patient morphology as a whole gained intuitively over time, aided his assessment. The ability to recognise a repetition, perceive a pattern, even if one couldn't always put it into words. The interplay of facial expression, gaze, body language that added up to an inkling. Like a subtle initial sign, but one that was unmistakeable for the trained eye.
'Lie down on your back for a minute, please,' Nikos shouted so the patient could hear him.
'Stretch out your foot …' Nikos pretended to check the elasticity in the man's leg with a gymnastics exercise; what he actually wanted was a glimpse at the soles of his feet. And he found what he was looking for, as with several other patients. It was fairly common for it to start on the soles. Barely visible, unnoticed. The first tiny spots.
He put the foot back down gently and then shouted that everything was fine; the patient should get back into bed. It isn't always necessarily variola, he thought. But in this case, it is.
Outside the bedroom door, the wife was waiting. Nikos now had to explain to her that they were all under immediate quarantine, but her husband would be best off on the isolation ward, right away. The odds that the whole family had caught the illness from the man of the house were very high. There was no getting around quarantine, whatever happened.
'Have we got smallpox?' the woman asked, not just shocked but almost appalled, and at the same time curious.
'We'll see. But there are one or two points we have to pay attention to …'
She interrupted him, asking something in nervous dialect that he couldn't possibly understand.
'One moment, please,' he yelled in as friendly a tone as possible into his suit, then strode to the front door and beckoned Behrends over. For others, it looked simply like a wave of his left hand, but it was actually the variola-V, warning the driver to keep his distance since he was only wearing a face mask. Behrends mustn't come into the house or even close to it.

‘Could you please inform her we have to impose quarantine? Her husband has to be picked up by the ambulance. And let’s hurry, we have to get straight back to Rither. You go to the office and check if there are any more reports.’
‘Will do, Doctor.’

While Behrends explained matters to the woman outside in the fresh air with plenty of distance between them, persuading her it wouldn’t be as bad as it looked, Nikolaos went back to the car in his suit and stowed himself away in his cabin. He turned straight to the patient’s file, noting the suspicion of smallpox, date, time and everything else, entering the man’s temperature and other symptoms. He looked through the glass divider into the driver’s cab to read the travel alarm clock Behrends had been so kind as to set up there. Almost two in the afternoon, already.
A vague feeling, comparable to a fisherman following a school of fish when he has gone a little too far out and now realises he’ll never get back to dry land on time, a lurking sense of unrest flickered inside him. But at the same time, there was also a certain fatigue and the torturous feeling caused by a drip of sweat that had formed slowly, then been discovered by gravity and was now tricking into his ear. He wrestled each thought of removing his helmet to the ground. How pleasant that would be. But that was something he couldn’t even think of doing.
‘Vromiá,’ he cursed in Greek.
Behrends got into the car, confirmed that the woman had understood everything, and then drove the Mercedes back to the works. Nikos was getting tired – the heavy suit, every motion an effort. He had already learned it was not a good idea to fall asleep in the suit. The low oxygen level gave him strange dreams, presumably also prompted by his dramatic house calls; dreams that mushroomed into miniature nightmare sketches, cramped, panicked chases through twisty labyrinths ...
He woke as Behrends returned from the office. Nikos’ head was resting fairly comfortably on the back of the seat. When he opened his eyes he looked through the glass of the protective window, then through the divider to the driver’s cab, and then through the windscreen out into the factory yard. Three layers. Out there in the open air, light snow was falling again. The Eifel was a strange place. A mountain range with no peaks. Actually more of a high plane, sliced by deep valleys.
‘Four calls, Doctor. It’s gonna be tough, I’m sorry.’
‘We can manage. We can do it. But stop somewhere before the next patient, please. I need to relieve myself.’

While Nikos continued his arduous and dangerous daily tasks of diagnosis and observation of suspected cases, visiting one household after another, Professor Stüttgen was attempting to take stock of the infections of the past few days; his assistant could not form an overview since he was in the very midst of it. Like human individuals, every epidemic had its own signature: a specific progression. For two days now, the smallpox epidemic in Monschau had been as playful as a freshly hatched monster, revelling in raising its head and then lowering it again as it gradually grew and grew.
The cases in the district were mounting. Cruelly, there had been a new infection inside the hospital, too. It was the young woman who had watched little Bärbel Reue’s night-time admission. The contagion had happened across a significant distance purely via the outside air, the doctors explained to themselves, shaking their heads, but whatever the case, the woman was now seriously ill. Out of all the patients, she had the worst case to date. And it had reached her on the wind!
Stüttgen had immediately had the hospital closed and examined the patient. He was very concerned. He was also tormented by the thought that the inappropriate admission of the poor coughing child, suffering from a textbook case that would probably drag on with an uncertain outcome, had also affected other parts of the hospital. If standing at an open window one floor up had sufficed to

contract the disease through expelled aerosols on the evening of Bärbel's admission – what effect had the child's laboured breaths had in the corridors and stairwells? Based on the hospital files, Stüttgen had estimated how many patients might be affected, and the number was daunting. Should his suspicion prove true, then a second infection focus had come about here, alongside the Rither works and their canteen, all under the watchful eyes of the medical professionals. He could no longer count the resulting cases of quarantine and possible isolation on his fingers.
And in this crystal-clear dramatic situation, the district council director had held a press conference the previous day, as good as announcing that the smallpox epidemic was over. With thanks to the hard-working doctors and helpers who had succeeded in ...

Stüttgen might have been shocked by the explosion in case numbers, but he was also baffled by the council director. The man was almost a case for another kind of medical specialist. Now they were face to face for the next meeting. All small-talk had come to an end. Nonetheless, Stüttgen poured all his incomprehension and anger into a polite question: 'Well, it's done. Just tell me one thing. Why the press conference? Newspaper men and photographers are running around the place from all over the country and even abroad, not to mention the local press. They're all waiting for sensational events. So why the press conference?'
The district council director would have laughed out loud if he hadn't been so concerned. Did this Stüttgen not understand what they were talking about here? Mayors could be voted in and voted out again. Pastors came, stayed and got called away again, either by the bishop or by the Lord above. The Rither Works, though, would be here for good, God willing. They weren't just the town's largest employer and taxpayer; they shaped the whole area, right down to its inhabitants' homes.
The district council director got up from his seat, lit a cigarette and paced the room, gesticulating with his Marlboro like a teacher pointing a cane around a classroom as he tried to explain all that to Stüttgen. The town and its residents' profound dependency on the company. Now and then he cast desperate dark glances at the professor.
'Rither is more than a company around here, do you understand? The family has deep ties to the people here. The Rithers gave their employees and their families hereditary leases on their land to build houses.'
Ah, you're on thin ice, Aügler, Stüttgen thought to himself, almost pitying the overworked official now. He knew only too well that such weaknesses and well-meaning steps could have deathly, fateful consequences. That type of thing had toppled many a powerful man, not just district council directors. You've ventured onto the ice, far too far, and now you're beginning to realise going back would be even more dangerous than the way ahead, Stüttgen thought.
'Whatever the background to your extraordinary affinities to Rither and their employees – I respect that. But you're also acting negligently and against the company's interests if you announce to all the world that the epidemic is over when that's by no means the case. The ministry is up in arms, as well. How could you?'
'The people in the Monschau district expect a positive signal from me. I've heard stories of people being asked: What's up over in your Monschau? You're an epidemic area. And the clear message has to be: We've got the situation under control – and the Rither Works won't close down.'
'Why didn't you talk to me about it? We could have found a diplomatic way to reassure people, calm them down without pretending it was all over. The smallpox virus is one of the most contagious diseases on the planet. It has a high death rate, including for children. We can't claim to be in control of anything so far. Perhaps in a few weeks' time.'
'I thought you'd vaccinated all the Rither staff?'
'Not only them. We're vaccinating wherever we can. In the villages, in town, everywhere. We've reached 18,000 in Monschau district, in Aachen we're at about 30,000 vaccinations. We have this

one weapon, the vaccine. But far from everyone has had the jab, and some people can't tolerate it. Sometimes it doesn't take effect.'
'I didn't know the details.'
'We can handle it. We'll get a grip on it, but not by playing down the danger. People think they're safe again but that means they stop being careful, and get infected all the more easily. And things will get even worse soon. Thanks to your false reassurances!'
'If I can help Rither, I will. Whatever it is.' The district council director avoided Stüttgen's eyes. Despite his reinforcement, he had clearly started brooding; his mouth twitched nervously.
'But what you did was reckless and negligent.' Stüttgen shook his head. His nerves were shot from this Monschau place. One thing came after another: first the mistakes in Aachen – turning away the sick child was presumably illegal, a violation of the Federal Epidemics Act. Then the girl's inappropriate admission to the district hospital. Now the misleading press conference. Multiple mistakes in multiple places. The whole thing would definitely warrant an investigation, later on. But Stüttgen didn't mention that now. It was far more important at the moment to reel in the district council chairman, apparently now shocked by his own courage in retrospect. The virus was only just picking up speed.
Stüttgen plied the district council director with vivid diagrams and the latest position occupied by Princess Variola's retinue in their affliction of the Monschau district: thirteen severely ill patients. Eleven families under quarantine at home, three large quarantine centres at the primary school, the vocational college and a youth hostel, where only Rither staff were housed. Three doctors' surgeries had had to close. And now it might be the turn of the entire hospital. If it was to be placed under quarantine, they had to be prepared to send sick and injured patients to other districts.
'Let's hope that won't be necessary.' The council director sounded resigned, a genuinely fearful look on his face. The magnitude of his mistake was dawning on him now.
'There are things we know at the moment, and things we're not yet sure of. But there's a third category, a dark one: findings that could come up unexpectedly and overwhelm us. Things we're not even aware we ought to know.'

The Düsseldorf dermatologist had always liked quoting this advice from his teacher and friend Sharif Desai from Bombay, the man to whom he owed his entire practical knowledge of smallpox. The words encapsulated a universal truth applicable to many situations, and now he used them to put the fear into the district council director, as best he could. Stüttgen had often proved his strong nerves and good overview, during the war and later, on Alpine hikes and in sailing regattas; he also had a dry tone and a friendly smile – the ideal basis for the most horrific of messages.
Perhaps there was always a little magic at play, as a medic – the ability to make therapies palatable to patients. That was why children got polio vaccines on a sugar cube. But for obstinate elected functionaries with diffuse loyalty disorders but firm faith in their future retirement plans, he had to make things taste really bitter, hot and sour. Now, Stüttgen described to the council director all that would happen if he continued to act and speak without authorisation instead of discussing matters with him, the medical expert: more and more patients, more closed schools and institutions, overstretched doctors, ending up with an unknown number of deaths. Smallpox could be treated, all right – but it was a complicated therapy that didn't always take effect ... Stüttgen's vision had a hypnotic effect. Aügler softened, made a contrite vow to do better.

Back at his desk with the smallpox crisis team, set up by the public health department in rooms belonging to a vocational college, Stüttgen wrote his daily report to the ministry. Then, shortly after seven, old Behrends appeared in the doorway, his face masked, and handed over the day's patient files while Nikos waited outside in the car. Good grief, what a bundle!

'Thank you, Behrends,' said Stüttgen, cast a glance at the files with a brief frown, and gave a friendly nod at the old man, whose masked face reminded him more of a carnival reveller than a loyal driver.
'How are the two of you getting along? How is Spyridakis?'
'Tough day today, he's gotta get home now. He's a fighter, that 'un. But today was ... a tough one.'
Stüttgen nodded. Satisfied and glad that his Dorian armour was holding up so well. He had always rated the young Cretan. One of the things he liked about him was that he was intelligent and interested in the science side of medicine, but could also stand up to stress. All that together made him – a good man.
A good-looking man as well, it occurred to Stüttgen, himself a man with a classical education and a penchant for art. And that robustly handsome exterior also had a specific advantage: without Spyridakis, they would definitely have had to close the Rither Works. The only responsible way to keep production up and running was through Nikos' precise dives into the patients' homes, signing them off work or sending them into quarantine on the spot at the slightest suspicion. Spyridakis was their most important man in the factory – something neither the district council director nor the Rither boss himself had cottoned onto – perhaps in the whole district, thought Stüttgen.
Despite all his strategic intelligence, the professor was wrong about one thing. Director Seuss had understood precisely how key the new works doctor was. That didn't mean Seuss was grateful or felt obliged to the young man. Quite the reverse, in fact. He hated being dependent – he was already reliant on so many others.

Stüttgen beckoned Behrends closer, then leaned under his desk for the bottle of Rémy Martin he'd bought that morning in Düsseldorf. It was in a paper bag, and Stüttgen added two packs of Stuyvesant. Alcohol and nicotine – that was how to pay respect. He handed the bag to the driver.
'Here, give this to Mr Spyridakis once he's disinfected, with my best regards. I'll be in touch soon about a briefing with our other colleagues, if the quarantine rules don't put a stop to it.'
'I'll tell him. But first we'll drive home and give the doctor a good scrubbing.'

It felt good to get sprayed down and steamed up, using plenty of soap and shampoo. Nikolaos wanted to wash off the day's work, as far as he could. He cleaned his fingernails with hard soap and a scrubbing brush, like a machine operator trying to get oil off his hands.
After his shower, he shaved the shadow darkening his chin since that morning's ablutions and put on a shirt, subtly starched and fresh-scented, courtesy of Rither. He didn't bother with a tie, just slipped into the jacket hanging all day in the dressing room reserved for him. After his hours in the protective suit, his good tweed rarely worn in Düsseldorf – too good to waste in labs and on the institute's cloakroom hooks – felt as light as a second skin. Here among the Rither Works engineers, it was just right. The protective suit, its burden now familiar, had its own advantages, as Nikos soon realised. Wearing it put a strain on all parts of his body; it was almost like swimming. It was terribly exhausting, but Nikolaos actually rather liked that. It felt as if he'd spent all day doing physical labour in the open air. Apart from the open air, that was pretty accurate.
What troubled him was his experiences with the patients and their families, and their reactions, which varied a great deal but were always to do with his role – he was the man behind the mask, the doctor from the Rither Works who judged whether the tidings were good or bad, and announced them. He was the man who could turn a whole family's life upside down in a matter of minutes. Who imposed quarantine, even isolation. Who had to tell the children their daddy might be badly ill.
Even if Nikos didn't quite get everything, thanks to his suit and the unfamiliar dialect, it was that responsibility he wished he could scrub off. The responsibility and the experience, the image he left people with – he knew it all too well because there had been doctors bearing bad tidings in his

life too, in his family. His task, the decisions he had to make, people's looks, expectations and fears were more – he was beginning to realise – than just strenuous, physically exhausting like his protective armour. They asked everything of him.
He had done five house visits today, attended the quarantine stations at the Berghaus and in Kalterherberg and worked on the files as his boss wanted. Professor Stüttgen did it all in the Indian style he had learned in Bombay. He kept an overview of everything. And he understood personnel management: alcohol and cigarettes! Nikos gave one of the two packs of Stuyvesant to a grateful Behrends, who also lived on the company grounds, in one of the workers' flats on the eastern side. Behrends could have gone straight home but he always waited until Nikolaos was dressed again.
'Help yourself, Michel,' said Nikos, opening the crackling cellophane of the fashionable cigarette brand, tapping the pack against his left hand and offering it to Behrends, who helped himself. He gave Nikos a light, then lit his own. Nikos leaned his head right back, stretched his arms behind him and inhaled as deeply as possible into his well-kept lungs. Then he exhaled the smoke through his nose and gave a satisfied smack of his lips. The number of cigarettes he'd smoked in Monschau usually lasted him six months.
'Tell me, Behrends. In my digs, in the Rithers' guest apartment: I hear this amazing music when I get home at night. Coming through the glass door. Just my taste. Who is it that lives there?'
'There? That's Fräulein Rither, Little Vera. She shoulda stayed in Paris, eh? Now we've got our epidemic going round, eh!?'
'Paris, did you say?'
'Studying newspaper writing, sommat like that. Literature or sommat. Used to be a sweet little girl. Now she's a fine young Fräulein.'
'I see, thank you,' Nikos gazed kindly at old Behrends smoking his cigarette down to the filter. 'Right then, let's call it a day, Michel. See you in the morning.'
They shook hands, colleagues, and then the old man was off. Nikos extinguished the light in the office, locked up and went out to the factory yard. The foundry was brightly lit, emanating metallic breath. The snowfall had thinned and turned into fine rain. Nikos hesitated, but shook himself and then pulled on his raincoat and savoured the fresh air on his walk to Rither House. The light was still on in the kitchen; good to know, if he needed anything from the housekeeper.
The stately windows at the front were almost dark, and yet a light shimmered through one of the rooms from further inside the building. Then he briefly caught sight of a slim silhouette, apparently holding a telephone receiver in one hand and pacing back and forth while having a lively conversation, gesticulating with the other hand. It could only be Fräulein Vera. The heiress to the company. Nikos, who until a few minutes ago had known only her love of good American jazz, suddenly understood old Behrends' concern for her, with his almost family ties to Vera. He himself was glad she was here, nonetheless.
A shiver ran down his back as he noticed her approaching the window, receiver in hand, looking out and thus watching him, Nikos, striding towards his temporary home. He wondered whether to wave, but then the young woman turned away from the window and disappeared.
He circled the mansion, took out the keys given to him by the housekeeper Mrs Drachsky with the expression of a keeper of the Grail, and unlocked the back entrance. It was a solid oak door equipped with the latest locksmith technology. The neo-Gothic staircase from the late 1920s was as high as a nave and round as a castle tower, with walls of stone blocks and a red runner up the white granite stairs. The building's original owner had intended to write history here.

When Vera saw Nikos coming home, she curtailed her conversation with her father's lawyer and friend in the Belgian capital.
'Do excuse me, Eric, I have to hang up now.'
Here comes my source and I want to grill him about this smallpox story, she thought.

'Bien sûr,' said Eric. 'But please take another look at sections 8 and 9 and my comments on them. We don't have to do it this way, certainly not under German law. But it's what I'd recommend. As safe as houses.'
Vera promised to look over the relevant sections of the waiver agreement. Then she slammed the receiver down, ran to her record player, grabbed the latest Miles Davis album off the pile and put it on. The needle descended onto the almost dust-free shiny disc. Then came the bandleader's quiet but determined finger-clicking; the drummer played the intro on the dampened cymbal together with bass and piano, a shy staccato, the brush joined in, Wynton Kelly on the piano literally played with the harmonies, then the quintet found itself and Miles presented the sweetest of themes on his trumpet, as clear as glass; not like a nursery rhyme but like a soaring romantic thought.
Vera turned up the volume, went to the door to the rear staircase, opened it a crack as if it had been left ajar accidentally, and then hurried to her Olympia and began to type. She didn't want to write any old nonsense, so she picked up the first copy-edited page of her manuscript and started typing up a clean copy, working in the handwritten corrections. As Nikos entered the stairwell she had found her pace, perfectly matched to the music's rhythm.
The open door made the returning doctor feel welcomed by the music and the sound of typing, in a surprising but alluring way. He strode up the stairs and now he was standing outside the door and looking into the wide hall for the first time, at the cloakroom panelled in dark wood and Vera's far too thin suede coat with its fur collar. It was the first item of Vera's clothing he saw, a delicate second skin; it was deerskin leather. He took the remembered silhouette and put it into the coat, forming a faint impression of her.
He bent his head slightly into the open doorway, perceiving a very unique, classy scent. Cigarettes, lecture theatres, theatre foyers and bars. There was perfume in there too. A world unfamiliar to him. He liked that. And he liked the way the rattle of the typewriter sounded, nestling perfectly into the music.
Right then, the Miles Davis recording reached the part where John Coltrane, who had actually stopped working with Davis, came into the Columbia Studio in New York to play one last set. It had happened a year ago. While the quintet went on playing, legend has it the thrilled Davis jotted down the harmonies for him, and then Coltrane played one of the most gorgeous saxophone solos ever recorded. Not knowing all that, Nikos listened to the solo captured on vinyl. It was constructed out of that mixture of tenderness and energy only Coltrane could have come up with. Perhaps he recognised himself in it, a little. An abstract tenderness and love of knowledge, tied in with the strength to grasp the nettle – familiar characteristics. He had always loved books about fish and sea creatures, knew the Latin and Greek names of many of the countless species – but he was just as happy beating their most sensitive spots with his grandfather's old olive-wood club, killing them, scaling, gutting and grilling them, and reducing their unique qualities more or less to their taste.

sometimes the hunter hits the migratory birds,
sometimes he doesn't hit them,

Seferis had written. And yes! That was just how it was. He and his grandfather had shot at the birds he now knew as spring songbirds. Back in Greece, they had been nothing but flying meat, a firm fixture of Cretan housewives' meal plans, which also included snails in springtime.
Nikos loved jazz precisely because it was the music that made him feel at home, secure. Dynamics and melancholy. Precision and improvisation. Energy! That was his feeling in life, and that was what he wanted in the music around him. Like Beethoven, but contemporary. That was jazz. And looking at such a delightful suede jacket with a fur collar ...
There was no name on the brass doorbell plate. Just an incredibly solid-looking pushbutton.

Vera had stopped typing and was wondering whether she'd simply missed the works doctor's footsteps as he disappeared up the stairs, or he had actually stopped outside the open door. She pushed the swivel chair back from her desk, stood up and tiptoed into the hallway, hoping to catch a glimpse of the doctor in the tall cloakroom mirror once used by the housekeeper to look out for delivery boys – all of him, not the usual figure swathed in coats and protective gear.
Of course, his appearance, already praised by Michel Behrends, was only one thing. More than that, Vera wanted to meet Nikos, the Düsseldorf professor's highly acclaimed lieutenant, to talk about smallpox in general and in particular the outbreak and how it was being combated here at the Rither Works and in the Monschau district. How was the vaccination campaign going in the villages? How soon did the vaccine provide protection, what had to be considered? How fast could a person be infected? What did it feel like inside the strange protective suit, a sight she had seen from an early age at the foundry, and visiting the workers' estates in it as a doctor? And finally, the question she was most invested in, but which she hadn't yet even asked herself.
She tucked her hair behind her ear and took a step forward. But all she saw was Nikos heading up the spiral staircase to the next floor where the guest apartment was, while Coltrane ended his saxophone solo and the band returned – concentrated again, vivid and gentle – to the main melody.

All of a sudden, Nikos had felt incredibly rude standing around outside the open door, and when the typing sound stopped and he caught Vera's movements it grew downright creepy. He had dashed up the red runner quick-sharp. He unlocked the door and hung up his coat. Before the door fell closed, he had one last listen at the now dampened music. Miles Davis was playing that enchanting melody that seemed so familiar.
In the kitchen, as every evening, he found saucepans full of large portions of lunch from the works canteen. Roast meat, dumplings, red cabbage. Nikos rejected cabbage on principle. He was very hungry for meat and dumplings, gravy, bread, and while he devoured everything but the veg, the tune he'd just heard played in his head; he hummed, whistled it quietly through his teeth and tried to think of the words.
He drank rosehip tea from his thermos flask.
He was sure it was a song from an American musical. The beginning was a waltz, a dancing couple twirling around, but then the silhouette grew thinner – it wasn't a couple. The moon rose. It was just a dream. A girl dreaming.
Alone. A fairy-tale musical – but what was it?

Mrs Drachsky had told him there was no need to wash the dishes; the factory kitchen would take care of that. But Nikos despised the smell of stale food that inevitably came with dirty plates, especially now that his nose was recalling the scent of cigarettes and perfume. And he enjoyed washing up. That was the reason why Professor Stüttgen had noticed him in the first place – cleaning up the lab wasn't a chore for him, and he hardly ever broke a test tube.
Once he'd finished the dishes, he opened the large kitchen window and the opposite one in the living room to get a through draught. He smoked a cigarette at the open window and looked out on the Rithers' private forest, which went from the house to the Belgian border and even a little further west.
Three-fingered Behrends had told him one of the privileges the company granted certain employees was temporary hunting rights. Shooting usually took place from a number of deer stands around the forest. Occasionally there were mounted hunts, which the director arranged in coordination with the forester, when hosting business partners from abroad, for instance. The Monschau Eifel before the Fens was a unique hunting ground. Russians and Americans were particularly impressed.

Once Nikos had smoked the professor's cigarette, he sat back down at the kitchen table and took out pen and paper to write to his mother, at last. He alternated between sipping rosehip tea and gnawing on his black Bakelite fountain pen, a present from her in his last year at school, and tried to concentrate on the letter.
He inspected the freshly washed crockery on the draining board in detail. Water dripped from the boiler tap into the sink. Fast, pale drips that reminded him of that great jazz song. The drummer on the cymbal, one hand to dampen it, right at the start. Now he hummed the tune again, seeking the words as he looked at the blank page waiting for him to write, and looked at the unopened bottle of cognac he'd put on the side table by the three-piece suite. He rarely drank, and never the hard stuff. He felt hot under the collar.
Shouldn't he just knock back a cognac and forget the whole thing, the attraction, the scent of Paris, the allurement behind that door one floor below in the strange, medieval-styled stairwell? She was the heiress to the company, the daughter of the house. An absurd idea. He was little more than a visiting student, from southern Europe to boot; he had nothing in common with this wealthy Fräulein. On the other hand, why not just pop downstairs and ring the bell? She was a student in Paris – surely she wasn't a sheltered wallflower? Of course, it could turn out to be hideously embarrassing. But wasn't that negative prospect countered by his basic conviction that a girl with her taste in music simply had to be terrific? It was all very easy – he'd ask her about the music: Excuse me, I can't get it out of my head, I know it from somewhere ...

Vera had closed the door to the stairwell and sat back down at her typewriter. But just as the Cretan couldn't work out the name of the musical hit interpreted by the Miles Davis Quintet and could think of nothing other than going downstairs, ringing the bell and finally seeing the slim, jazz-loving outlines of Vera Rither in full Technicolor, Vera too could not free her mind of the stubbornly shy young doctor she so wanted to speak to.
If he didn't come soon, she would simply ring his doorbell in the morning before he left for work, and invite him down for a coffee.
She turned back to the declaration, with which she planned to relinquish her inheritance and establish a separation between the company and family matters, her not inconsiderable private assets. According to the provisions drawn up by the founder, her Uncle Bernhard, if there were no family heir the entire company would pass over to a foundation, to belong to the Aachen Technical College. What he hadn't considered, long ago, was that an heiress might turn down her inheritance and turn her back on the company. In legal terms, though, it would inevitably lead to the same consequence. The college would use the profits to finance a new professorship in thermal engineering, and a board of trustees would decide everything else.
Vera read the clauses she had discussed on the telephone with Eric. He really had written a lot of comments. That it wasn't possible to relinquish an inheritance and maintain control of it at the same time. She might perhaps chair the board of trustees for a while, but there had to be a formal provision independent of her. He had tried to formulate this provision in two clauses, he wrote. The clearer and simpler, the better. And so Vera now studied the passages again, written in almost melodious legalese, and compared the changes.
Vera thought it was all fine; in fact, better than that: she felt it suited her.
For a moment she envisaged the company beginning to spread its wings thanks to this statute, Pegasus-like. Uncle Bernhard's company would soar to great heights in this new form, and that was precisely what the family genius had always wanted. In conjunction with the technical college, new professorships and the most talented engineers, the future was bright, thanks to the countless patents and innovations to be expected. And it would be liberated from the dead wood of certain gentlemen obsessed with rapid success in these economically miraculous years, no matter how they ran their companies, their vision rarely extending beyond the next three calendar years.

At the very moment when a thrill of anticipation ran through her as she dared to imagine getting rid of the company millstone around her neck for good, being free and also having acted in the family's interests, her doorbell rang.

But it wasn't Nikos who had pressed the button. Nikos had taken a little longer to get ready upstairs. He put on a tie, slipped into his coat – he couldn't turn up at a young lady's door in just a jacket – and took his hat from its hook. He had the cigarettes in his trouser pocket, complete with matches. He had never possessed a lighter, since he only rarely smoked.
As he reached for his keys he felt his heart thud slightly – but then he told himself he was only really on the way out for his usual evening stroll.
He opened the door, light-hearted now, but froze to the spot when he saw a portly figure in a green loden coat and hunter's hat one floor down, right outside the auspicious door he was heading for himself. The man raised his hand and pressed the doorbell. It rang out loudly. Understandable, since it had previously been the delivery entrance. A few seconds passed, the inhabitant opened up, and now, as if standing in the wings, Nikos saw Vera. He saw that she had a determined smile on her shiny, freshly made-up lips, which then turned to an almost stony mask as she spotted the man in the green coat. A statuesque expression that gave way to astonishment – or was it shock? Both seemed very interesting to Nikos, as indeed he liked the look of her pale face with its garland of strawberry blonde, almost reddish hair, whatever emotion it was. It was a face like a beautiful storm front. Shocked or incensed, perhaps dangerous. So this was Vera.
He stepped outside and let the door to his flat slam shut, not for a second taking his eyes off Vera as she started talking to her visitor. Vera looked up, now seeing Nikos for the first time. He came down the spiral stairs. She saw his cropped black curls and his dark skin with those brown eyes, plus his straight nose, which actually looked Greek to her, as she was almost amused to establish. He held his hat in his hand. As he approached slowly she was reminded of the perseverance of a seafarer, his progress not fast but unwavering. Whatever the case, now was the opportunity to finally make his acquaintance.
'Oh, Richard,' she said to Director Seuss, 'won't you please introduce us?'
Seuss turned reluctantly and saw the works doctor, whom he'd personally accommodated in the guest apartment.
'Aha,' he said, disconcerted. 'Well, this is Mr Spyri ... er, Spyridos ...'
'Spyridakis, Nikolaos,' Nikos corrected him, his tone friendly.
'Pleased to meet you. I'm Vera Rither. Welcome to Monschau!'
'Oh yes, thank you, miss.'
Vera then ushered Director Seuss inside – he had reluctantly followed their exchange – but remained in the doorway herself. While Seuss peeled off his heavy coat, Vera gave Nikos an open smile, as if that were the most natural thing in the world, and nodded at him again.
'Perhaps I'll see you later?' she whispered.
Then she went inside and Nikos caught the sound of her polite comments to Seuss, what a surprise it was to see him and so on.
A cheerful Nikos put on his hat and looked forward to every step of his evening walk, as it would soon unavoidably lead him back past Vera's door. And perhaps inside it. A real swell girl, his classmates would have said.
As he left the house he was bombarded by hard sleet. The wind whistled. He gripped his collar with one hand and his hat with the other. A wonderful start.

9

Director Seuss was sitting at the table in the large kitchen, where previous ladies of the house had never spent much time, while Vera made him a camomile tea to settle his stomach. He thought of that Spyridakis, suddenly no longer happy with the young man's presence in the house. Certainly,

Vera and the young man were worlds apart; no need to worry there. What would Vera – a girl with access to the most interesting marriage prospects (once she'd got her writing nonsense out of her system, but she would) – want with a man like that? A Greek, graciously permitted to study in Germany so as to take the blessings of German medicine back to his island? Seuss tried to calm his suspicious mind, but the situation still made him slightly uneasy.
Perhaps it was just the irritating jazz music coming out of the drawing room; he had never seen the point of it. That guest worker, doctor or not, was his employee, or at least working for him on contract. Paid by the company, but apparently not understanding the crux of the matter. The man had signed off one of his best foundrymen that day and put half the night shift into quarantine, although none of them had the slightest thing wrong with them. The day before, two very good assembly mechanics. He had instructed his office to make enquiries of all those signed off sick. Several of the men didn't even have a temperature, but they'd be twiddling their thumbs at home for the next fortnight. It was the doctor's job to prevent just that! There had to be other methods, faster ones, to stop the spread. Seuss felt like going off like a rocket, like the cartoon man in the HB cigarettes advertisement. And then the thing with the Palm family today. That had really turned his stomach. At every wrong move, acid flooded up his oesophagus and sent a foul-tasting greeting to his mouth.
'Here's your tea.'
Vera put the tray on the kitchen table – teapot, cup and a few leftover Christmas biscuits – and sat down across from him. Seuss was wearing one of his Bavarian suits and a subtly patterned tie. Over the years, he had grown fatter and fatter, and he got his tailor to make the exact same suit for him every time. He wore the same black horn-rimmed glasses as in photos from the 1920s showing him with Bernhard Rither.
How odd that this man, almost part of the family, had always remained a stranger to Vera. Had he not been her 'Uncle' Richard since she could remember, she would never have called him by his first name. As the years passed, it felt increasingly inappropriate to her. But of course, she did know him. And she could see he was not doing well.
Seuss's once-rosy cheeks looked sunken, in unhealthy contrast to his otherwise increasing girth. He no longer enjoyed his food. But that didn't mean he was fasting.
He watched Vera pour him a cup of camomile tea. Seuss sipped at it; he would never come to like the taste. The hot liquid provoked a muted response from his unhappy stomach. He presumed there would later be no alternative to calming it with the strong pharmaceutical product his doctor had prescribed. He was already getting through Roha-Salt tablets by the tube.
'So now you've met our Greek whizz-kid.'
'I hear he's doing sterling work on the smallpox.'
'The smallpox, yes.' He gave a deep sigh. In his mind's eye, he saw not only all the blessed sicknotes, letters and invoices from the public health department, but also a contact at the district council who was far less reliable than he'd thought.
'Why are you interested in our doctor?' he asked Vera.
'Well, he's looking after the staff. I just wanted to thank him personally. Does that seem odd to you?'
Nothing was to reveal to Seuss that she was actually rather more interested in smallpox than the doctor himself; if he knew that, she'd have to tell him she wanted to write a story. In which, inevitably, the Rither Works would also come up.
Richard Seuss was a man obsessed with control, a man who had devoted his entire life, shaped by ambition and resistance, influence and construction, to a company that didn't belong to him. He had been her uncle's right-hand man and then a great support to her father Hans, a man far less suited to running a company, after Bernhard's death. For over a year, up to her twenty-first birthday in December just gone, he had been Vera's legal guardian, admittedly a mild custodian willing to tolerate all her escapades. There had been a time, a few years previously, when he had tried to inch closer to the Rithers, as if their two families were two loose ends of rope to be spliced together.

There was a nephew he had taken care of since his illegitimate birth, as his sister was not in a position to do so. The offspring of an unknown father, Jürgen had more than a little of his mother's instability, and yet he was a witty young man who spent his junior years as a boarder on Lake Constance, at a school with the name of a popular cigarette brand. He would often visit his uncle in the Eifel during the holidays. Vera, sixteen at the time, had let him take her out to a milk bar in Aachen a few times. They spent Sunday afternoons together, Jürgen full of disdain for his uncle, that dry fellow with nothing to hand down to him because nothing belonged to him, neither the house he lived in nor the car he was chauffeured around in. The uncle so proud of his hunting skills, who only stalked deer in forests owned by other people. 'And now he wants to marry you off to me. He thinks we could be a couple,' Jürgen had told her straight out, one evening. Which, as he admitted after some verbal pussy-footing, was a pointless undertaking since he had only platonic feelings towards the females of the species. Jürgen and Vera had made a pact then and there to pretend they were the best of friends – giving them occasional opportunities to go on excursions together.

They had the privilege of Jürgen's uncle lending them his chauffeur: Max Lembke, Monschau's legendary master marksman. Like so many men of his generation, Max, once a star athlete, now walked with a limp after a war injury. But when he steered a well-kept Mercedes along the streets of Düsseldorf – the city rebuilt with car-drivers in mind – or sailed along the mountain roads of the Eifel, it was a sight to behold. The three of them became a good team. And Lembke kept an eye on the youngsters in loco parentis. That was important for Vera's father, who otherwise expressed no opinion on their possible future together.

Jürgen would be dropped off at a café in Düsseldorf, and then Lembke drove Vera to a hairdressing salon, where Jürgen would pick her up later. If it was a Friday, they'd often attend an exhibition-opening party at one of the new galleries. Düsseldorf had become more and more of an art hub during the late 1950s, the renowned art academy regaining its old reputation and inspiring the city's inhabitants. Günter Grass's novel The Tin Drum had celebrated Düsseldorf and its artists' bars, making them famous all over Germany. In the old town centre, people did their darndest to recreate the anarchic orgiastic mood summoned up by the former art student Grass. A new gallery opened up almost every month, adding to the bohemian image.

Vera and Jürgen had made the most of this pantomime engagement for some time; news of their alleged romance had even reached the Rither staff. But Jürgen was also a difficult young man, complicated and sometimes almost devious, like a character from a Johannes Mario Simmel novel. Vera was more than glad to move to Paris straight out of school and forget their strange cover story. That kind of thing was no longer necessary in Paris. Living in the Maison d'Allemagne on the city's newly built student campus, she had all the freedom she desired and could navigate the city as she pleased, as far as the occasionally annoyingly charming French men allowed. At the school of journalism, like at other elite universities, it was perfectly normal for a professor to invite a new student home ... And many of the young women were happy to go along with it. Not Vera, though.

When the feigned romance finished and it was clear the two of them had only been in it for their otherwise impermissible city trips, Jürgen's uncle had been flabbergasted. Up to that point, he'd thought he'd arranged a marriage of convenience, and it's well known that they're the best kind. Since then, they'd both known that the time when Vera and Seuss had been closest was built on an illusion and, more than that, a deliberate deception.

'How's Jürgen doing?' Vera asked with a smile.

'Aside from the traces he leaves in my bank account every month, I've not seen hide nor hair of him. He hasn't been in touch for a long time. Not with you, either, I assume,' Seuss replied, and a slight stab of nerves whipped up the acid in his stomach.

He knew Vera Rither considered him obtuse in certain ways, 'emotionally blind' or whatever she called it. But the girl had no idea. No idea of his inner life. And she had no idea what situation the company was in either, with its back to the Luxembourgian wall. He bit his lips together. If there'd ever been a time, he thought, when he had enjoyed running the Monschau Rither Works, that time was now. That idiot younger Rither brother was gone at last; dead, unfortunately, but never mind. The heiress had no interest in the company. Business, however – business was on the brink of booming. If the West German economy was doing well, which was certainly the case, then Rither was doing brilliantly. As shiny as a polished coat of armour. As a golden shield. As a rocket plane about to take off. And he saw himself in the cockpit, him, Richard Seuss from Garmisch, the poor farmer's boy who had toiled away for forty years and done everything necessary to get this far. To achieve this position. To keep on until all their dreams from the 1940s had come true. But apparently, the odds were against him. The blasted smallpox! But at the front of the queue, her: the girl. Vera was upsetting everything. Once again.

'Excuse me if I get straight to the point. I don't want to keep you too long this evening. I assume you know what this is about?'
'You got a letter from my lawyer.'
'A letter? It's a declaration of war. You want to part with the company?'
'There are a few links between my uncle's estate and my parents' that I'd like to untangle, yes. And I don't want to part with the company, I just want to carry out my uncle's will.'
'Bernhard's will? By turning down your inheritance?'
He hadn't intended to, but now he picked up the bowl of not-exactly-fresh Christmas biscuits. By the look and smell of them, they'd been baked by Ludmilla Drachsky. Belligerently, he wolfed down six or seven powdery-dry vanilla half-moons, then a few stone-like diamonds of Monschau gingerbread and sticky macaroons. All the while going on speaking, more or less.
'It's fine that you can't run the company, of course, agreed. How should you, with no clue about technology? It's not easy anyway, these days. The tiniest thing and everything starts to topple. As you can see with this terrible smallpox trouble. We did everything, really, Vera, believe me, much more than the law demands.'
'What do you mean, more than the law demands?'
'We've got a longstanding contract with the Tropical Institute in Hamburg. Every man who's been abroad, anywhere in Africa, Asia or Latin America, goes straight to Hamburg on his return to be examined. Not just for smallpox; for all sorts of other things as well. But ...' At this point he took the last half-moon, his favourite sort, and ground it up between his false teeth while he went on speaking, his words slightly dampened. 'But Jupp came back at a bad time.'
'A bad time? At the end of December, you mean?'
'Yes. Otherwise he couldn't have spent Christmas with his family. And no one wants to do that to a good worker.'
'I see. They postponed the standard examination – until after the holidays. And that's why Mr Reue was out and about for so long, in the pubs, at the works, working and celebrating?'
'We'd never put it quite like that, of course. I'm only telling you this: Going by the standards at Rither, it was our own fault.'
Our fault, thought Vera. You think you can share everything out, share and share alike as you see fit. You're the boss. But it's our fault. You run the place but it's to stay my company because that's what suits you. It's incredible the way you want to use your own failure to keep control. And now you come creeping along with some new plan – but I can see you coming.
'And looking at what it means for a small company like ours to trade on the international market, it's clear you could never run Rither, not even with the best engineers by your side.'
'Really, and why not?'
'You're a woman.'

'On ne naît pas femme, on le devient,' she hurled at him, sparkling and raring for a fight.
'Not born a woman, but made one? What's that supposed to mean? That's nonsense, Vera.'
'It's a quote from Simone de Beauvoir and it's not nonsense at all. And it means, in this case, that my decision has nothing to do with me being a woman.'
'That's as may be. But even if the company is formally your property, or could be – you can't just give it all away just because you're scared of responsibility.'
'Uncle Bernhard decided it that way. We're going to turn it into a foundation.'
'A foundation. That was just a workaround clause in Bernhard's will. That wasn't what he wanted. You've only just come of age and you want to donate your fortune? Girls like you used to join a convent, you know.'
Funnily enough, that made Vera laugh. She giggled and swallowed down her anger, gathering her strength. Let him go on like that. She wouldn't let him get under her skin.
Seuss sensed he had been too brash. His stomach acid, encouraged by all the sugar, splashed toxic drips up to his oesophagus. He had to clear his throat, and he folded his hands into an imaginary peak, touching his fingertips together and then demolishing the problem mountain with subtle arguments: how complicated the company structure was now, including across the border. Free trade. Entrepreneurial initiative. How much it all depended, the ups and downs of the many staff here in Monschau, Vera's home too after all, on stable leadership – a continuity that would be severely threatened by such a change! Who knew what some committee in Aachen would have planned for the works? Professors – what did they understand about running a company? You could tell by that Stüttgen fellow, even one egghead was enough to upset the applecart ...
As he went on, Vera was reminded again of splicing: weaving two frayed ends of rope together. What Seuss wanted was an intertwining, he thought in terms of intertwining. And, that much was clear too, he was going for growth. But ultimately, he was only concerned about himself. About his position as head of the company, which he might not own but made good money out of, and in which he – most importantly – had all the power, all the say. That power would soon vanish if the firm wasn't owned by a weak man like her father or a young woman like herself, but had a well-versed advisory board watching over things – no matter how he distorted the idea.
'With all our international connections, Vera, I can't possibly imagine the works belonging to the technical college for all time. The company has to keep its development options open.'
'But it will. All the Rither Works have to do is go on making the best industrial furnaces around, and the order books will always be full.'
'I didn't know you were such a fan of Ludwig Erhard.'
'What's it got to do with the economics minister?'
'That's his theory of capital products. That's what we live on, people in India or Belgium taking a hundred thousand dollars and spending it on a top-quality industrial furnace for their company. It's a lot of money – anyone who wants to play the game needs good connections to the banks. We do too. How do we know which little paper factory somewhere in Asia we can trust?'

She got up and went to the ledge of the kitchen stove, tiled with blue Belgian ceramics. She kept a family photo there, the only one showing all four of them: Uncle Bernhard, her father and mother and her. She knew from a trusty (three-fingered) source that Michel Behrends had taken the photo. Vera looked at her dear mother and her father. He had been rather absent-minded and often a little cold.
Nonetheless, his last words to her had been: Go wherever you like, my child.
Why was she even arguing with Richard Seuss? He was unarmed. He had no ammunition. She could turn down her uncle's inheritance if she liked; she didn't need to ask Seuss for permission. It was all arranged. The only thing left was her signature.
'Excuse me a moment, please.'

In the bathroom, she washed her hands and face, checked the mirror and freshened up her make-up. Then she looked herself in the eye, smiled and found the way back to her determination.
When I come back to the kitchen, Richard Seuss, you'll take another sip of your tea and you still won't like it, you'll say your little piece again, and then you'll leave. That was the mantra she came up with. She nodded at her reflection and passed the stereo system on her way back, turning the Miles Davis record over and the volume up slightly. She knew Seuss couldn't stand jazz.

The weather was appalling, contradicting the idea of a walk so firmly that Nikos had shuddered as he stepped outside. Soon, though, he enjoyed the adverse conditions, seeing as they were only the local seasonal forms of wind and water, elements he'd grown up with in Greece. They were just a little different here in the north. No bare cliffs glowing with the sun's heat and balmy air, but rain-sodden gusts that hit him in the face as he trudged through thawing snow, his shoes soaked like cardboard in a matter of minutes.
One day, he thought in a brief, euphoric flight of fancy into a happy future, he would tell their grandchildren the story of how he'd marched across the company grounds to the side exit. Strode to the forest gate, for which he had a key, and then strolled a little way into the forest, the path illuminated from the works for a short stretch. A strange feeling came over him, now. The staff worked day and night in the factory, the production hall lit up, and hot steam rose from the foundry chimney. But after only a few yards in the forest, that unceasing activity vanished. The trees swallowed every mechanical sound, and it suddenly seemed to Nikos as if the woods were the real owners of the factory, as if they'd given rise to it.
That was a strange thought and yet perfectly fitting, for the Rither Works had indeed arisen from these very woods. The Rithers had once been charcoal burners. At some point, once the original beech forest had been burned up, they rose to the ranks of fir foresters in the service of the Prussian crown, then became timber merchants who made good money out of deals with the Dutch. Bernhard Rither, the family's first engineer, had cleared part of the giant woods planted by their forester forefathers. He had used the proceeds and part of the land to set up the first factory. His manufacture was based on ground-breaking new heat-induction processes, which he'd developed at Aachen Technical College. One might seek a mythical source for his ideas in his ancestors' lonely work as charcoal burners, in the knowledge of harnessing fire, learned in the forest over many generations.

That evening, Nikos thought, the night I finally met your grandmother after hearing so much of her, or her music, I went deep into the dark factory woods. There was a snowstorm raging and I had to remind myself how normal that was here, in Monschau in the Eifel, this rugged region with its lonely forests. And yet, I understood ... Gosh, what was that? Nikos's ironic inner monologue, quivering with excitement and anticipation, was interrupted; a beam of light on the tree trunks captured his attention. He turned around and saw approaching headlamps, a car working its way up the forest road from the direction of the factory.
The car slowed. A converted VW military vehicle, the Wehrmacht's standard means of transport, which he'd often seen in Crete. Nikos recognised it immediately from the angle of the headlamps. A memory of his grandfather flashed through his mind. Easter, presumably 1943, and Nikos had been on his way home with the highly respected old man. All at once, his grandfather had yanked the boy off the road, as he would have done with a lamb about to tumble off a stony precipice, a feast for the vultures. It hasn't shocked Nikos; he was used to his grandfather's sudden outbreaks and movements. He often pulled the boy or someone else aside, out fishing on the boat or in the vineyards, to prevent a blow or a fall. Suddenly, then, they were in a ditch – and a convoy of German vehicles roared past them. Nikos saw his grandfather counting the cars to report to his liaison man in the village, later on.

Nikos had stepped aside, deeper into the snow, to let the vehicle pass. But the car pulled up beside him. Behind the wheel was the director's chauffeur, a rifle protruding from below the passenger seat. A young bloodhound was squatting in the back, eyeing Nikos with interest.
'Doctor Spyridakis, sir,' Max Lembke greeted him, overdoing the politeness. 'Is everything alright? Would you like me to drive you home?'
'No, no, thank you,' said Nikos, who couldn't recall the man's name. 'I'm taking a walk in the forest.' In Greece and presumably everywhere else in the world, this explanation would have sounded insane in such terrible weather; in Germany, it was perfectly plausible. The Germans would take a walk in the forest in any weather, at any time of the day or night and in any month of the year.
'I see, a walk.'
'And you? Off on a hunt?'
'Yes, once a month, I have permission.'
'Might not be bad with this waxing moon. If only the weather was better.'
'I always enjoy hunting. Here in the Eifel we have to live with the weather; there's no such thing as good or bad.'
Nikos gave a knowing laugh, and his eyes alighted on the chauffeur's rifle. A precision instrument. He could see the proud sheen of a well-kept weapon.
'Are the telescopic sights good for night hunts?'
'Yes, of course. The latest Walther. I can shoot the left eye off a fly at two thousand yards with this beauty.'
'Ah, you're a passionate hunter?'
'I love the hunt, yes. But I love the hits more ... I'll be getting along to my raised hide now. If you walk for a while longer, please stick to the paths, sir. There are other hunters out tonight as well.'
'I think I'll turn back now. Good night.'
'Good night, Doctor Spyridakis, sir. But ... one thing – your name. Is it from Crete? It's the ending, you see.'
Nikos had reckoned with anything, but not with that. Lembke had hit the nail on the head; the ending of his surname revealed his Cretan origins.
'That's correct. How do you know that? Do you know Greece well?'
'We all got around.' Lembke laughed. 'Good night.'
He rolled up the window and drove on. Nikos watched his rear lights for a while. No other automobile had been as familiar to as many people in as many countries as the Wehrmacht light utility vehicle VW Type 82, the follow-up to the Strength through Joy car. Porsche's original beetle. For many, it will have been the first car they ever saw. That was the case for Nikos, too.
As the rear lights of the all-terrain vehicle vanished between the trees, Nikos became aware for the first time since he'd lived in Germany – and that was going on five years now – of a rather strange circumstance. He came from Crete. The Greeks had been on the side of the victorious Allies.
There was barely a Greek family unaffected by the war; almost everyone had lost someone. In the Spyridakis family's case, it had been Nikos's father, a professional army officer. He had been a member of the Cretan troops fighting the encroaching Italians on the Albanian border in October 1940. A tough winter war that the Greeks had won, initially. Nikos's father had been severely wounded, though, with bad frostbite on his legs, ending up in an Athens military hospital in the spring of 1941. Four-year-old Nikos's mother had left her son with her parents in Crete and gone to take care of her husband in Athens.
Then, though, the Germans came to the Italians' aid, and the swastika was soon flying above the Acropolis.
Crete did not go unscathed for long. The aerial invasion began in May: Operation Merkur, an extremely expensive undertaking for the Wehrmacht. A remarkable mix of defenders awaited them: New Zealanders, Australians, Greeks and Cretan partisans. Seven out of ten German parachutists died.

There was a song on the island, one the peasants had sung against Ottoman rule. A song about uprisings: 'Pote tha kani Xasteria'.

When will February be here,
When will all the skies be clear,
So I can fetch my rifle,
Go down to make mothers without sons.

Every child in Crete knew the song. A celebratory anthem. Easy to sing, with a simple tune, but one that grew ever more powerful, the more throats it resounded from. Now that the time had come again to take the paths down to the coast, the farmers sang their march, ready to kill the enemies setting foot on their land.

Hey, on the road to Mousouroi,
To make mothers without sons,
Wives without husbands,
Children without mothers.

When the Germans occupied Crete, they were to witness a bloodthirsty miracle. Not only through the heavy losses on landing, but later, too. No German soldier could be sure he'd survive the island. The revenge massacres the Germans held time and again didn't break the Cretans' resistance in the slightest. Perhaps it's true that the German defeat had begun in Greece, and possibly on the ancient island of the mythical labyrinth and its man-bull monster with his demand for human sacrifices.
As Nikos walked back through the now stormier night, he thought about the fact that a man like Max Lembke, whom he guessed was in his late thirties, had presumably learned to shoot in the Wehrmacht, and that there must be plenty of former soldiers in a place like the Rither Works, with their more than a thousand employees. Old fighters. Some of whom presumably valued the generous granting of hunting rights for that very reason. Where else could former soldiers have continued to aim at moving targets in the so-called wild?
Director Richard Seuss enjoyed hunting too, though he had not been a soldier himself. He had made his contribution to the war by maintaining and increasing the German Reich's economic power. Seuss took secret pride in having been one of the few hundred indispensable Wehrwirtschaftsführer, as the Third Reich had called its most important industrial managers, among names as illustrious as Bosch, Porsche and Quandt.
Nikos had reached the company grounds and saw the bulky man leaving the villa in his loden coat and hat. His chauffeur had the night off, as Nikos now happened to know.
Seuss had said his goodbyes to Vera and wanted to get back to his office to study the order books, in preparation for the upcoming semi-annual meetings with the Rither reps in Brazil, Columbia and Venezuela, praised by Ludwig Erhard as the 'land of the future'. Seuss had a private room behind his office suite and sometimes spent the night there when he was trapped at his desk until late at night, which he anticipated. South America fascinated him – and not just for business reasons.

11

Nikos was gripped by painful hesitation as he stood outside the front door, soaked to the skin with his keys in his hand. On his walk, a far-off happy life with the mysterious Vera had seemed perfectly feasible. Now, it felt more like a pipe dream. At the same time, he was annoyed with himself, by the way he found it so hard to do the obvious. He held his key and didn't dare to put it in the lock, take the stairs, ring the bell halfway up and finally let the story begin.

Then, though, he heard the jazz song again, very quiet on the other side of the door. There were the drums, the piano, and a moment later he heard the melody in the unique trumpet part, giving him courage, calling to him, and everything was clear, and his hesitation, his fear, his doubts in his appearance, his insecurity and ignorance, that feeling of being a stranger in a strange land – none of it could hold him back. He unlocked the door, dashed up the stairs – leaving drips of rainwater on the runner – and, his heart thudding but no more contemplation, pressed the doorbell – which felt like leaping off a cliff that seems too high the instant after the dive, summoning a sense of stomach-churning anxiety but too late, flying unstoppably through mid-air – or standing outside a smoked-glass door, behind which the inhabitant's shadow appears and which now opens, the music immediately louder, like foaming water, and there she stands before him with a smile on her face. Vera.

'Ah, did you have a pleasant walk? I'm glad you still have time, Mr Spyri ...' She gave up, smiling, and shrugged her slim shoulders.

'Call me Nikos,' he said. He couldn't remember ever holding such a velvety hand. It lay warm in his own hand, now stiff with cold, and he did his best not to squeeze it tightly, as he tended to do with men. She sensed that, and smiled. He sensed that she'd sensed it, and smiled as well, and so they smiled at each other for a moment too long.

'Would you care to come in?' Vera asked.

'Yes, thank you.' Nikos removed his dripping coat, Vera directed him to the coat hooks, and as he hung up the wet fabric his hand gently brushed against the suede coat with the fur collar.

'Do excuse me – my shoes are dirty. Would you mind if I took them off?'

'Not at all,' she said, slightly surprised.

'I don't want you to think I'm a Muslim,' Nikos apologised. 'I went for a walk in the forest!'

On stockinged feet, thankfully with neither holes nor darns on show, he followed her towards the music.

'It's marvellous music! May I take a look at the disc?' he asked as they entered the ballroom-like salon.

Vera pointed at the record cover, showing a smiling Black woman.

'Ah, I knew it: Miles Davis! Wonderful.'

'He is, isn't he? It's his latest record. Will you have tea?'

'Yes, please.'

Vera headed for her kitchen, and Nikos picked up the record cover. The sight of Frances Davis, the master's delightful wife and the first Black woman ever to appear as a model on a record cover, jogged his memory at last as to where he'd heard the song he couldn't get out of his mind. It was in the cartoon that told the story of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, and it was called 'Someday My Prince Will Come'. He breathed a loud sigh.

Which inadvertently shocked him; he turned around to see whether Vera had noticed his impulse, but she was busy in the kitchen. Then he put the cover back upside down, perplexed and amused in equal parts, since it really was – thinking of his grandchildren – a ludicrously romantic musical occurrence. He blushed a joyful shade of red, his ears burning, but then he pulled himself together and looked through the other records, which he soon gathered Vera had brought with her from Paris. Did she have any Thelonious Monk, perhaps?

Vera came back. Here he was with her. Feeling happy. But he had no idea what to say to this German girl, who was so rich on top of everything else. So he was glad she asked him a question, and continued the conversation right away.

'You like jazz?'

'Oh yes, Miss Rither, very much so. Jazz is the perfect music for my life, and for our times.'

'Even in such a dark and gloomy place as Monschau?'

'Yes, er ...'

'I'm just kidding. Here's your tea, doctor.'

'Thank you. But less of the doctor – I don't have my PhD yet. I'm just a doctor in training.'

‘Really? Everyone who tells me about you always talks about the Greek doctor.’
‘Yes, that’s what people say. Back in Greece, a doctor’s a doctor. But in Germany you need a PhD first to use the title, and I don’t have one yet.’
‘Is there any particular reason for that?’
‘I haven’t decided yet what I want to do.’
He held his hands out in front of him, as if balancing a ball in each one and weighing up which he liked better.
‘What do you mean?’
‘Well, I could take two different directions. Electron microscopy is one. I’ve been interested in it for a long time. I first used a microscope at sixteen. That’s why I came to Düsseldorf last year. My teacher, Professor Ruska, is a genius in the field. He was the first man to see viruses. I mean, he made them visible under a microscope. He’s bound to get the Nobel Prize one day. It would be very interesting to keep working with him.’
‘And the other direction?’
‘Dermatology. It’s been making great leaps; it’ll soon be a very modern science. It’s a dermatologist I came here with. Professor Stüttgen.’
‘I wasn’t aware that dermatology covers smallpox.’
‘The pox is contracted via the mucous membranes. But it leads its visible life, so to speak, under and on the skin. Its appearance there is used to diagnose it, and that can take many forms. That’s why the Latin name for smallpox is variola: varied.’
‘Gosh, that’s creepy. But it affects all of us here. Or I hope it doesn’t. Anyway – tell me more about it.’
12

The Miles Davis Sextet had reached ‘Pfrancing’ – the last piece on side one, a lively number with an inspired piano intro – as Vera asked Nikos about the progression, nature and treatment of variola. A scourge of humanity; an unusual subject for an earnest conversation between two young people. Nikos talked with growing enthusiasm, reining himself in at regular intervals so as not to pass on too many gruesome details. Now Vera began to take notes.
‘You don’t mind, do you? It’s become a bit of a habit since I started studying in Paris. I write things down all day long. I fill up a notebook like this in a month.’
‘Paris – there must be all sorts of wonderful things to see and note down, there.’
‘Yes, there are. At the moment, though, the city’s in a state of turmoil. Bombs and terrorism. The whole country is up in arms.’
‘How do you spend your time there? How does a journalism degree work? That’s what you’re studying, isn’t it?’
She laughed. ‘How do you know?’
‘Herr Michel told me!’ he said, holding up three fingers of his right hand.
‘Michel Behrends – he’s such a cornerstone of the company, he’s always been here. He told me about some kind of secret symbol the two of you agreed on. Oh – please don’t tell him I mentioned it to you, Nikos, but …’
‘What do you mean? V for variola?’
‘Is that your ... secret code?’
‘Yes. Or it used to be.’
‘Why?’
‘Well, it’s not a secret any more, is it?’ He laughed.
‘Don’t worry,’ Vera said, with an earnest nod. ‘I won’t tell anybody.’
At most, I’ll write a feature about it for Quick or even better, Paris Match, she thought, and had to stop herself from laughing. Aren’t you ashamed of yourself, Vera, for using the doctor like this?
‘Where were we?’

Nikos, who would have liked to hear more about Parisian student life, set in what seemed to him like an unreal, fairytale city in comparison to Düsseldorf, sipped his tea, amused by Vera's solemn interest. Why did she want to know all this? Did she want to write a novel about it? He didn't read novels himself, not enough time, but he did read poems, and he felt a certain respect for writers and novelists. He made a great effort to describe everything to her as vividly as possible; the mild sound of his words might even have disguised the fact that he was reporting on a deadly disease.
'Alright,' said Vera, lifting her pen from the paper, 'I've got that. Next comes the third phase.'
'Right. The third stage is called the suppuration stage. Suppuration, from the Latin for festering.'
'Oh.'
'Yes, it's not very nice. But smallpox isn't. The suppuration sets in after about a week. The blisters on the skin darken, fill with pus. The patient's temperature rises again. If the eyelids are affected, they swell up. The lips swell and bulge. And the face swells up and becomes unrecognisable.'
'Oh God!' Vera exclaimed, lowering her pen. Nikos saw a shocked expression on her face.
'What's the matter, Vera?'
'The girl in the isolation ward here in the district hospital ... I feel so bad for her.'
'Patient 2?'
'Yes, Bärbel Reue.'
'I hear she has quite a bad case, but I haven't seen her yet. Do you know her well?'
'Yes, from when she was little. She'd often play with me when her mother helped here in the house. Such a lovely little girl.'
'Are you sure you want to know all the precise details?'
'Yes.'
He recited what he'd memorised from the textbook he kept consulting up in his apartment: how the spots filled up more and more with pus and the patient's skin grew tight, a particularly nasty feeling as if about to burst, combined with horrific itching. Patients felt the need to scratch but they shouldn't, otherwise the wounds often got infected by bacteria (which later led to the infamous pockmarks). The pus was highly infectious and also protected the virus, the pathogens kept alive in the sticky fluid. Bed linen, clothing – anything that touched it was contaminated.
'Temper tantrums. Screaming fits. Frenzied rage. Heavy moods. Back when there weren't many nursing options, patients sometimes used to jump out of the window because they couldn't stand it any longer. The itching.'
'Oh gosh, it sounds terrible.'
'I didn't mean it to. It's 1962, the age of Sputnik! And we're in Germany. If there's anywhere in the world that can cope with an outbreak of smallpox, it's here. Believe me, I know it first-hand. Professor Stüttgen has told me a great deal. And Bärbel is being looked after around the clock. She's in the very best hands.'
And I'm sitting here doing nothing, Vera thought. He puts his steelworker equipment on every day and goes out to the families. Takes risks while I'm sitting here in my big house, thinking deep thoughts and listening to jazz. That's got to change.
She lowered her head so it wasn't quite as obvious that she was watching him. Couldn't help but watch him. All along, his body had been moving barely noticeably to the music. He'd been so attentive, listened carefully, answered every question, and all along he'd been almost dancing, seemed to really enjoy the music. He was well built, slim, a few years older than her but still had youthful dimples ... It was about time she brought up something controversial.
'Thank you. I'm so grateful for your hard work, honestly. You know, the company and my family,' she hesitated a moment, 'they go together. That's why I'm really impressed by what you're doing. But tell me, how do you see the role of the WHO? One hears all sorts of different things.'
'Do you mean in the newspapers?'
'Is it true that the WHO might soon be declaring the Monschau district an international risk area?'

'Will it? I haven't heard anything about it.' Nikos put his cup down on his saucer. He wouldn't mind listening to another record now. He angled his head towards the record player in an enquiring gesture.
'Oh, go ahead and pick something, please do. There are a couple I haven't even listened to yet.'
Nikos got up and went through the record sleeves, which testified to excellent taste paired with an outstanding range of choice in Paris's record shops. To his joy, there wasn't a single Elvis Presley disc among them; Nikos couldn't stand the man. He eventually decided on a live recording of Jacques Brel from the previous year. The needle lowered. 'Les prénoms de Paris' was the first track, the forenames of Paris. Live atmosphere. Applause from thousands of clapping hands. An accordion, Brel instantly leaping in. The forenames were the usual suspects: kisses, embraces, love. Nikos blushed again. He might not speak French but he'd picked up enough to understand the song. He hovered over the record player, put his hand to the needle and lifted it off again. Brel's directness and emotion was too much for the evening. That French ease with sexual matters always confused Nikos.
'It's impossible to talk when he's singing. Do you mind if I choose something else?'
'Of course not. Take your time. I'll make more tea. Or would you rather have a beer?'
'Oh, thank you. But I have to get up early tomorrow ... Tea would be fine.'
Flicking through the records, he suddenly came across a red-and-white album by an American jazzman he knew only by name: Ornette Coleman. They called him a trendsetter for the new American avantgarde. Collective music. Free jazz! The Shape of Jazz to Come, the record was called. What did that mean – the future of jazz? One man, Miles Davis, summoned up a coming prince, and the other the music to come. How bizarre! He'd love to listen to it.
Best of all with Vera, who had brought all these smoking-hot discs with her. But perhaps not tonight; who knew what emotions were pressed into the vinyl? His saviour was a brand-new recording of Beethoven's fourth piano concerto by Glenn Gould and Leonard Bernstein with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. What uplifting music, thankfully purely instrumental. And classical – not quite as arousing. And what a sound system!

'Do you go to many concerts in Paris, Miss Rither? To real Parisian clubs? There are some in Düsseldorf, too, and a proper jazz cellar as well. With Hungarian food. Lots of students from the art academy go there. I rarely have time, though, I'm afraid.'
Not to mention money. He subsisted on bread and sausages, spaghetti with tomato sauce, and when his pay packet permitted, he'd treat himself to half a spit-roast chicken on a Sunday.
'Oh, Paris,' she said. 'I'm in the same boat as you. My studies take so much out of me that I barely get out at all.'
Uttered by Vera Rither, the words barely get out at all meant that she rarely spent an evening in her room and was always out and about, including dinner in expensive restaurants, where her entrecote steak with pommes frites often went cold because she'd met someone at the bar with whom she absolutely had to have a glass of champagne and a cigarette. But now she was home and she really could concentrate on one thing. A cigarette was still a good idea, though. She lit one up, at last.
'Can I offer you one?'
'No, thank you,' said Nikos. 'I've had too many today.'
As the Gauloise burned, she inhaled the smoke deeply, breathed out and looked over at him. 'Back to business, Doc: What role does the WHO play in all this?'
'Professor Stüttgen could tell you much more about that. He was in India with a WHO programme. That's why he has experience in dealing with smallpox epidemics. In the WHO, all the governments work together. The Americans started in 1950, but a few years before that it was the Soviet Union that suggested tackling eradication.'
'Eradication. Meaning what, exactly?'

'Wiping out smallpox for good.'
Nikos continued, leaning forward and bouncing back – that alone a clear sign of his enthusiasm for the medical profession. His large hands kept shaping a kind of globe in mid-air. The smallpox programme, he explained to Vera, was humanity's first ever global project. It was possible because they had the vaccine.
'No matter if it's India, Crete or here in the Eifel – the virus has to be overpowered wherever it breaks out. The patients have to be found and isolated and everyone has to be vaccinated.'
'Like here in the villages around Monschau?'
'Exactly. They've vaccinated several thousand in Aachen as well now. If the WHO really does declare the Monschau district an international risk area, all that means for me, from a medical point of view, is that a certain rate has been reached. And then it's a useful warning measure.'
'It all sounds suspiciously complicated, my lecturers would say. What would it mean for the people living here? Are they nothing but a certain rate? They're all being labelled a risk. And you think that's a good thing?'
Nikos was surprised. She was rather snappish. Her stubbornness must be to do with her journalism. The art of the interview; not unlike a medical examination, perhaps.
She smiled at him to give her question an ironic touch, though the intent behind it was no such thing. 'So what does this international risk area declaration mean? Why international? It's not as if many people find their way here, certainly not in winter.'
'Well, the Belgian border is very close. But I don't know much about it at all; Professor Stüttgen does.'
'Yes, but Nikos, it's like this: whole villages are being made quarantine zones, and schoolchildren and Rither workers are being sent home in their dozens. Thousands of people have been vaccinated already. And still there's no end in sight – quite the opposite, in fact, things are being tightened up again.'
'I assume there've been a few cases in locations that can't be explained.'
'Why not?'
'Because we can't find out the precise infection routes in every case.'
'You mean the epidemic is getting out of control? Are we experiencing what you called the second phase of the eruption?'
'No, no, far from it. The virus is just settling in, or trying to, at least. But it won't get that far. We're keeping an eye on it! We'll get it ... sorted out.'
With those last words, Nikos raised his eyebrows and gave her a broad smile. Her skin shimmered rosy and matte, with occasional freckles despite the winter. He imagined how her finely-shaped face would fill up with whole swathes of freckles under Greece's sun, and what fun it would be to count them from day to day as her skin gradually bronzed ... When suddenly the thought flashed through his mind of how the smallpox virus would look on her skin.
Vera saw the concerned shadow passing over Nikos's features. Whatever's the matter with him? she wondered. Then his face smoothed over. I'll never let anything happen to you, don't worry, his eyes seemed to say.

Far away from the two young people, as an involuntary magnetism unfolded between them, unnoticed by the rest of the world, Max Lembke perched on his hidden deer stand, the nest he and two helpers had built in the crown of a tall beech tree, without telling the forester. The raised hide was not far from Dreiborn, the place where Lembke's fate had once taken a bitter turn, or so he told himself. Betrayal. Defeat. Downfall.
Walking had been hard for Lembke since the incident; actually he could do nothing more than limp, for which he compensated with his perfect mastery of all types of vehicles. He got up to his deer stand by splaying his painful, half-numb legs one by one onto the planks nailed to the tree trunk, his rifle strapped to his back, and pulling himself up with an iron will and his arms, stronger

now than ever. The sleet didn't bother him. His crow's nest awaited him, trusty as always. Up there, the air was different. Now he sat, hunched down like in the old days, one of the most dangerous marksmen on the Hürtgen Forest front; but his brand-new telescope, finely metallised to rob the glass of the slightest annoying night reflection, was now guided by something other than his military duty to eliminate the enemy. Down through the woods slid the marksman's eye, carried by the latest optical technology, to Rither House and into the room where Vera and Nikos had been sitting for two hours by that point, listening to music, talking. Lembke's sights hovered over their faces, across the salon, caught the record cover with Frances Davis leaning against the Swedish wall unit and the disc rotating on the record player – the things a man saw when looking down the scope of a precision rifle.
13

From that evening on, Nikos's view of the world and his everyday life was turned on its head. Like an optical illusion to amuse schoolchildren, or like spotting a rabbit or a face by turns in the moon, his life was upside down. He still got up every morning, ate breakfast at his desk, climbed into the steelworker suit and dived into the Monschau day. He visited patients from the Rither Works, painstakingly noting the smallest of changes and keeping his files updated. The rise in the numbers of suspected and then confirmed cases was unmissable. Likewise, quarantines rose from day to day. The virus was bedding in.
And what Vera had heard as a rumour from a journalist really had happened: The WHO in Geneva had declared Monschau an 'international risk area'. New cases every day. Nurses falling sick, their relatives too. Two of the carpenters who had set up the provisional double-door system to the isolation ward at the beginning, when Patient 2 had been hurriedly admitted, had come down with it, as had two of the men's children, and all of them had to pass through those doors they'd built into the hospital. Since they came from small villages outside Monschau with tight-knit communities, new quarantine centres had sprung up there too.
It was spreading. Stüttgen and his helpers were trying to stem the tide. Alongside the young Greek, the team included a large number of hospital workers, volunteer Red Cross nurses and all the general practitioners in Monschau, provided they hadn't contracted smallpox themselves or been quarantined due to a first-degree contact. Routine would be the wrong word for what was setting in for them, since the matter was too serious; they already had severe cases to deal with. And yet something like an everyday pattern did come about. Even the children in the primary school, refashioned into a quarantine ward, had settled in a little. And some of them cheered at the news that they'd be playing with their friends all day long, instead of school.

For Nikos, though, the evenings brought the moment he longed for, when Behrends gradually let his ship drift into port, the factory gates closed and he was finally in the steam room at the Rither Works, where the steelworker's outfit was disinfected ready for him to take it off and become human again, only to shower, put on fresh clothes, eat something in his apartment, gather his wits for a moment – and then do what he thought about all day long: see Vera.
The door was ajar. The radio on low in the kitchen, a news programme. In the few days since Vera and Nikos first met, the world had not only gained a number of smallpox cases in the Eifel, and thus possibly hundreds of millions of individual variola viruses now floating on the West German breeze. Plenty of other things had happened too. In Paris and Algiers, the Plastiqueurs were still performing the art of terrorism, while at the same time France's best physicists were working day and night, interpreting measurements from experiments in the Algerian Sahara so as to take the next step along the path to the French atom bomb. In Zürich, final rehearsals were underway for the premiere of Friedrich Dürrenmatt's strangely apt stage play, The Physicists. Sparks were flying on the rehearsal stage, but the entire ensemble was in a fever of excitement over a play that truly portrayed the present day – everyone a spy and all of them betrayed.

In Berlin, half of the city the capital of a state not recognised by the West, the Wall had been standing for a year, a construction that cost the German Democratic Republic millions for building and maintenance, making it the most expensive infrastructure project – yes, the term fits – in the socialist state's short history. For the first time since the Wall was built, the superpowers used it to exchange agents. Berlin, the world's espionage capital, had a new and imposing backdrop for stealth and spying.
Vera and Nikos made no secret of their regular evening rendezvous, but nor did they want the frequency of their meetings to become fodder for local gossip. At the Rither Works, talk spread even faster than smallpox. It was enough for Mrs Drachsky to know about it. She wouldn't have been in the house for so many years if she hadn't known how to keep family matters quiet. And despite Ludmilla Drachsky's strict approach to running the progressively shrinking Rither household over those years, she had made sure the young people got a decent dinner; three times now, Nikos had left his canteen portions untouched upstairs. Vera watched in amusement as Nikos put away mountains of food. After that, they listened to records and chatted. And that was enough for both of them.

On their third evening together, Nikos had knocked quietly as usual and entered the hall, where Vera met him with a smile and said simply: 'Good evening. Enough of this hand-shaking nonsense – I want a proper French hello!' And with that, she held her cheek to his, freshly freed from its blue shadow of beard, and made a low kissing sound. Nikos reached for her lower arms, clothed in a cardigan certainly not bought in Monschau, and held on for slightly longer than necessary. Holding her by the arms felt safe, as if he could rest there. Even though he was holding her, even though she felt so light and fragile. Even though her gait was unsure, as he had soon noticed. Despite all that, she gave him a sense of security. A feeling that gave him strength. Then they had managed the three French bises.
'Vera, let me show you something. If you want to know who has the best kissing tradition – here comes the Greek version.'
He let go of her arms and carefully cradled her head in both hands, as if lifting a rose out of water to admire it. He gazed into her hazel eyes, which were now looking slightly amazed, and then gave her three Greek kisses on the cheek, the opposite corners of their mouths touching, like the cut of sharp, well-directed knives.
Once they were at the dining table and Nikos had helped himself to a decent portion, she said: 'Alright, you big kisser. Now you have to tell me where you learned German.'
'Is my German that bad?'
'It's that good! You know – I admire it. In Paris, everyone despises you if you don't speak perfect French, and you never can, as a foreigner. Especially us Germans. I've taken so many courses, private tutoring, everything. But you – your High German is better than some Monschauers' dialect!'
'Well, I wouldn't say that. I learned German in Crete. During the occupation.'
'Gosh, they were quick with their Germanising. Did they teach you German at school?'
'That too. We had to take German. But school came later.' He gave a sardonic smile. 'I learned my first German from Major von Dost.'
14

Nikos told her the story of that considerate yet rather crazy occupier. The officer had billeted himself into his grandparents' home, occupying their bedroom.
'His first orders were about slaughtering our hens, which my grandfather used to do without much fuss. He'd grab one and lop off its head on the chopping block. Dost didn't approve: that kind of slaughter was inhumane, he said, and he wouldn't tolerate it. Officers and their men lived in people's homes all over the island. Do you know what was strange?'
'No.'

'They genuinely thought they were welcome.'
Nikos fell silent for a moment. Greece had produced the first European civilisation, extending as far as India under Alexander the Great in the Hellenistic period, but then weakening over the course of countless civil wars, until it had to put up with one occupier after another for many centuries. Occupation became the great constant of later Greek history. It linked the most recent past of Wehrmacht-occupied Crete with the rule of the Romans, the Saracens, the Venetian Republic and the Turks.
'Always remember,' his grandfather had told Nikos, 'it's only states that wage wars against each other. Not people – they're forced to fight. But people can always choose how to act. So never judge someone in advance. Look carefully and be on your guard.'
Major von Dost had been impressed by many of Nikos's grandfather's wisdoms, cultivated in the soil of centuries of oppression and resistance, and he had noted them down in his journal, along with other observations from his everyday life as an administrative officer in the German occupying army.
He was proud of that. Of being part of it.
Part of what?
Of the Achaeans from the north finally reaching the shores of Hellas, the proto-destination of classic German self-discovery.
'Once, the major explained to me that Crete was like the rock on which the German Reich had to rest its elbow to best defeat the evil Russia, the communists, in an arm-wrestling contest. He showed me a big map of the world; he'd even marked it with arrows. He said all Cretans ought to be grateful to Germany, and help the German Reich. And that was why our partisans – hiding in the mountains and attacking the poor German soldiers, sabotaging buildings, provisions, roads and bridges – were bad people. Which was the only reason why the Wehrmacht ruled Crete with such a hard hand, as he put it. The German army did terrible things. They wiped out entire villages. They murdered women and children when the men were in the mountains. They built a concentration camp on a small island. But they also tried to introduce a cooperative banking system. And that was Major von Dost's job. He was a cooperative banker working for the Wehrmacht. He was a complex man ... he liked to wax lyrical about blond Achaeans and he'd say the battles for Crete had been even more heroic than those for Troy. He even wrote poems about the beautiful regimental bodies bathing in the ocean: Sparkling in the light of dawn, this throng of conquerors splashed in the foreign sea, and it seemed they had always been there. I learned that line by heart. Even a deadly virus couldn't be more brazen.'
'How do you know all that? Did he read aloud to you, give you German lessons?'
'He kept a journal. When things went downhill for the Germans he shot himself in my grandparents' barn. He left all his books and belongings, including the journal. My grandparents kept most of it to begin with, in case his family got in touch. Which never happened. I took the journal. It was useful for learning German – he had very legible handwriting. That's probably important when you work for a bank.'
Vera veered between laughter and horror at Nikos' descriptions. She'd been very young during the last few years of the war, though there were things she could remember, and then her mother had taken her to her native Switzerland to escape the frontline inching ever closer from the West in the summer of 1944. After that, Vera's polio infection had made for very different problems. When she'd started high school, Anne Frank's diary had shaken her to the core, and of course she'd followed Adolf Eichmann's trial in Israel, which had just finished. Nonetheless, Nikos's stories were the first time someone had told her the details of their own personal experiences with German occupiers. Someone who had first experienced the Germans during the Second World War, as a foreign power. But there were some things Vera knew – without having seen them – that surprised Nikos in turn.
'No one talks about it officially, but there was a forced labour camp here. For the Rither Works, I mean. Russians, Ukrainians and Poles were held here and used as free labour at the works. A couple

of the buildings are still standing. Michel Behrends could tell us more about it. But if you ask the director all you get is icy silence. I want that to change. I want us to tackle our own history, as a country and a company.'
'A company that faces up to its own history. I've never heard of that before.'
'In France, everything's focused on the past, the country's inheritance. There, it's Algeria, and all the other colonies. Have you ever heard of Djamila Boupacha?'
'No, who's that?'
'A young woman from the Algerian independence movement. She was arrested, tortured and raped – by the French military. Simone de Beauvoir wrote about her. Her article in Le Monde caused a real sensation. Everyone got upset about it, but de Beauvoir helped to move society along. De Gaulle may be an arch-conservative, but he granted Algeria its independence. He bowed his head in the end. Admitted the country's guilt. And the OAS hates him for it.'
'And you think now it's you Germans' turn to confess your guilt?'
'Yes. That's exactly what the Eichmann trial showed. It wasn't just a few criminal types or just Hitler, it was a whole bureaucracy, a well-organised administration.
'And it was no different in industry – everyone got something out of it. Made money out of forcing people to work for nothing, like slaves. And now we all have to do our bit so that the truth is told, not swept under the carpet. A few companies are already paying compensation. That's why I want us to look at our foreign workers. Whether Seuss wants to or not. We're going to do it, as long as I'm still ...'
Vera stopped short. She had talked herself into a fury but now she was going too far, had almost broken her golden rule never to reveal anything important. To keep secrets and work quietly towards her goals. It had always worked for her. That was how she'd managed to study in Paris, a plan that would surely have been foiled if she hadn't thought it all through in advance and got the ball rolling. And once her father died there had been no one left who really listened to her, anyway. But now here was Nikos, the Greek smallpox doctor with whom she'd begun spending her evenings, purely out of interest in the epidemic, of course. And not only did he listen to her, really hearing what she was saying; he also looked at her, and all of a sudden, she sensed he was interested in what she had to say. But it wasn't just that – he was interested in more, in her as a person. She knew she mustn't look his way now, or his ears would presumably start glowing red again. So she cast her eyes downwards. She'd have liked to go on talking – but she didn't want to give away her secret plans to him right away. Silence fell.
'Would you mind if I asked you a personal question?' he asked her, after a short while.
'Not at all.'
'What kind of relationship is it, between you and the director, Herr Seuss?'
'Uncle Richard? Actually I only call him Richard now, he's not my uncle, but that's what I used to say. Where shall I start?'
'Wherever you like.'
'Alright, but I'll need a beer first. Shall I get one for you?'
15

They drank beer from the icebox in the kitchen. Vera drank faster, smoking one cigarette after another. Nikos listened, concentrating. He followed the story of the rise and, if not exactly fall, then at least the chequered fate of the Rither family. It was a tale of complicated inheritances, obligations, engineering ideas, sicknesses and deaths. And that tale also included Richard Seuss, who had become an almost all-powerful managing director after her uncle's death, because he was simply, well, better at the job than Vera's father.
She and her father had never been close. After her mother's early death, the greatest shock for little Vera, his passing a year ago had left her strangely untouched. Hans Rither had always been distant from his daughter, always at work, even though he'd never really blossomed in his role as company owner. Perhaps that was why. Her father probably always felt out of place. He owned the works,

but it was Seuss who ruled them. And that too had been part of Vera's decision to get rid of it all. She knew she would never get her way against Seuss either. As flimsy as the tie between father and daughter had been, it kindled a dull, irrational rage in her that Seuss had gone and survived the much younger man; though of course he couldn't help her father's death. In some part, her decision to get rid of the works was also a tiny revenge against Seuss, for her father. And perhaps that was what linked her most closely to Hans Rither.
'There's a saying in these parts: When God builds a church, the devil puts a chapel next door. That's us, that's how it's always been. The Rithers. And Seuss. Not that I think he's evil. That's not what I mean.'
'And what are your plans – for the company, I mean?'
And there they were, arrived at the subject almost naturally. She kept it short.
'I just won't accept my uncle's inheritance. It can all be arranged. Richard Seuss doesn't want that. I think he's afraid of losing control. Losing the power he has now. But I can't let that hold me back.'
'So you'll soon be – no longer the heir to the company?'
'Exactly. I'll be free as a bird.'

Did Vera have any idea that this story and her forward-looking decision had now melted Nikos Spyridakis' heart once and for all, just as the genius induction furnace born of her uncle's engineering office melted metal? Did he transform at that moment to a copper-coloured Greek knight, faithfully devoted to Vera, because he believed he had looked into her soul? And because he thought he understood everything, understood her? He was familiar with the pain of a young child losing a parent, in his case his father. He too had gone abroad, and thus set the start for a life truly his own. He too was looking for the new era, which had already begun, in his opinion. It was a new beginning. Previously, one could almost have called European history a civil war, consisting as it did of uninterrupted rivalry between neighbours. A war that had given rise to several colonial empires, spanning almost the entire world. No, Vera and he, people like them, the generation that had played marbles during the horrors of the Second World War, slept in air-raid shelters as children – and some of them had lived through the hell of the camps of all kinds – they wanted a new Europe. And they wanted good American jazz.
Nikos and Vera had had all that in common before that evening. But the element that had made Vera a dreamlike vision for the poor grant-holder and southern sea-water-swimmer, a woman he'd found interesting and attractive and funny but absolutely untouchable – that impassable hurdle seemed suddenly removed from his path, or at least soon would be: the fact that she was to inherit a company he was currently working for. It was so big that Nikos couldn't find words for it. And the delicious cold beer on top of it all. Wow! Every inch of him vibrated. What a woman!

He asked her if he could put on one last record. Of course. Vera sat down at her desk for a moment and made a note of something. Then she went over to the high windows. The row of trees planted along the small assembly line bent in a furious storm. The snow-laden rain whipped against the panes as if the world out there were about to come to an end.
And then the Cannonball Adderley Quintet started in: At the Lighthouse. The audience applauded; Adderley, nicknamed for his generous body shape, welcomed them and announced a tune: 'Sack O' Woe!' turned out to be a very straight number led by him and his alto saxophone. Not quite as polished as Miles Davis' latest record, but with incredible energy.
Nikos stood bent over the rotating record for the first few bars, the cover in his hands showing the master and his musicians at dusk, somewhere in California. There was a busy beach in the background; someone was holding a huge old-fashioned sunshade over Adderley. A great photo, perhaps taken before the gig. He bopped along. Just his taste – Vera's record collection, or actually more like Vera's latest raid on the new releases section at FNAC. After his tedious, lonely working

days with no outside stimulus or entertainment, for Nikos all this was as if he'd hiked up the south side of a mountain and suddenly been offered ladles of fresh cool water.
Once he'd sat back down they looked each other firmly in the eye and both nodded. But before either of them could say anything, there was a terrible crash out in the grounds. The two of them leapt up, ran to the window and saw that the storm had knocked over the old spruce tree planted by Uncle Bernhard in a large brick circle in front of the newly constructed Rither House.
'Good heavens, that must have been quite some turbulence,' Nikos said. He felt Vera coming closer. They had both had a simultaneous moment of uncertain shock – as if the tree had been felled by a demon or a woodland ghost who might now go on chopping wood with his storm axe in the Rither Forests.
What a shame I didn't see that great big tree getting knocked down; it must have been a sight to behold, Nikos thought straight away, however. That kind of luck was rare with such fast-moving events, though.
Vera felt differently. Always outspoken and never one to hold back when it came to alcoholic drinks, cigarettes, hard arguments or loud music, she was afraid of certain facts and aspects of the physical world. Not only did she have a deep dislike of rugs that might trip her up, she also hated edges where she might lose her footing, steps where she might stumble, and she had a fear of heights that often made her involuntarily imagine abstract falls from high levels. Uncle Bernhard's spruce – always there since before she was born – falling with such a sudden racket had shocked her, rather like a plastic bomb exploding, although of course the tumbling tree was a more romantic version.
She stood almost intimately close to his tweed jacket, grabbed his arm in both hands for a moment, and both of them – one shocked to the core by the event, the other roused and full of joy – noticed that instant a clear flow of energy, caused by real aerosol transmission. A warm electric current ran between them. They stood still that way, staring at the huge toppled trunk, only the wind-whipped branches now moving.
Then they sat back down. Vera, who had enjoyed standing next to Nikos, looked at him for a moment like something from a dream. Was he really there? Was it him?
She found her way back to their conversation, and asked him straight out why he had come to Germany after his experiences in Crete – why the country of the former occupiers?
'That's a justified question,' Nikos replied, 'and it's easy to answer. I got into a grammar school in Athens and took German lessons at the Goethe-Institut. My teacher there had very good Greek but he also showed us the great clarity and expressiveness of the German language; he was an excellent speaker. While Greece was occupied, he'd had to hide from his fellow Germans; according to the Nazis laws, he was Jewish. But he encouraged us to go to Germany, got us really excited about seeing the other side of the country. The criminals who had taken over Germany and such large parts of Europe and laid waste to them would win in the end, he said, if the rest of the world wanted to forget Germany's great cultural traditions along with them. Humanism, the Enlightenment, the German classics. Art, music and literature. Goethe. He was thrilled when I told him I could imagine coming here. He got me a grant from the swimming association, supported by the Goethe-Institut. I originally went to Giessen. That was how I managed to come to Germany in the first place; my mother couldn't have paid for it, otherwise.'
'I see – you came here to swim. Your medical studies and the smallpox epidemic are just a distraction.'
Nikos laughed long and loud, and shot her a happy smile. Outside, the storm howled, and although it had already caused great damage in the Rither forests, not to mention to the company founder's own tree, it seemed to be getting even stronger.
They were starting to feel cosy together. More and more often as the evening grew later and later, pauses came up in their conversation that seemed incomprehensible.
Then Vera, suddenly feeling the tension in the room and so exhausted by it that she almost yawned, asked him: 'Where did you learn to swim? In the sea?'

'Yes, with my mother's parents, where I spent most of my time. On the south coast of Crete. My grandfather was a fisherman, until he decided one day to sell his boat and buy a little farm in a beautiful spot a little further inland. The village on the coast is called Matala. Legend has it, it's the place where Zeus set foot on land as a bull with the stolen princess, Europa. It's a pretty sleepy place but the beach is a dream. In the summer, my friends and I must have spent more time in the water than on land. It's very good for diving. And fishing, of course.'
The record player had long since fallen silent. Cannonball Adderley and his band were enjoying a well-earned dinner. The storm over the Eifel rattled at the shutters and the rain pattered against the windows. It was so unpleasant out there that they couldn't help thinking of the animals in the woods, cowering in their dens and pressed against each other between tree roots.
Vera and Nikos were in the hall. She watched Nikos slowly putting on his tweed jacket.
'Good night, then.'
He knew he had to turn around and leave now. But he couldn't do it.
'Good night.'
She stood just as still. Neither of them moved from the spot or did anything to open the door to the stairwell, that night.
They both knew they were going to embrace. They had stood so close, not long before. It hadn't happened then, couldn't. Now, it had to. As they moved closer, they were both surprised at the way their bodies seemed to dissolve into fibre tracts of loose, pulsing nerves, how something instantly spliced open wherever they touched. She had her head on his shoulder and thought she might grow into him, while Nikos wrapped his arms all the way round her and was overcome by the feeling of her lifting him up, making him lighter, making him float. He thought of playing octopi, their tentacles intertwining. They were entirely immersed in clinging and closeness and weightlessness. Then, slowly, very slowly, they extracted themselves from the embrace.
Both sighed.
Had to take a breath. Needed a moment.
'How did Europa hold onto the bull, do you know?' she whispered.
'By the horns, I assume.'
'So should I grab you by the horns as well?'
'Do you want to get on my back?'
'Could you carry me, if I did?'
'Wherever you like. To the sea, perhaps ...'
'That would be too good. Maybe one day ... But I can't swim.'
She'd been a polio child. She was ashamed. Nikos had pieced all that together days before, read her gait. I know all about you.
He took her in his arms again. They understood each other without words.
'I'll show you how to swim, when we're there. Sea water makes you much lighter, it's easy.'
'Good.'
She squeezed a little tighter to his cheek and breathed his smell of aftershave and warm skin and traces of disinfectant and then –
That's enough now.
She pushed him back, friendly but clear. She gave him a playful punch.
'And now you'd better go!'
'I'm as good as gone. Will I see you ...'
'Tomorrow? I'm afraid not ... no. I have to go away for the weekend.'
'I see. Of course.'
She sensed his disappointment, put a hand on his cheek.
'Nikos, come to dinner on Monday, alright? Not too late. At seven?'
'I'd love to.'

VENETIA

1

In the meteorologists' alphabetical system for naming storms, used in Germany since 1954, it was the turn of the letter V, and someone with a definite sense of originality decided to name the hurricane whipping across the North Atlantic from Iceland that night Vincinette, from 'victorious'. The preceding storms had brought huge amounts of rain, including to the Monschau region. Vincinette herself, however, descended with unprecedented force and pushed such masses of water into the German Bight beneath the now almost full moon that historical high-water levels were swiftly exceeded everywhere on the coast, starting with Cuxhaven. The local authorities did all they could to warn their residents. In the largest city in West Germany, Hamburg with its nearly two million inhabitants, people didn't pick up on it immediately, though. Bad weather was the norm there.

The mayor was away in Bad Gastein, taking the waters for his liver problem. The construction senator, whose remit included the dams, locks and flood-prevention structures, was actually in town but saw no reason that night to change out of his pyjamas and head to the city hall just because a few basements were flooding out on the coast. He wished the duty officer all the best on the telephone, and went to bed. Unfortunately, the interior senator was out of town as well, at a conference in Berlin.

The city's mid-level civil servants might not have had a good overview, but the reports coming in soon persuaded them a disaster was looming. They tried to reach the broadcast editor at the television channel to interrupt the programming and issue a warning to the people of Hamburg.

'Impossible,' the man on duty in Frankfurt responded. 'The Hesselbach Family is on. People will lynch us if we interrupt it.' The editor gave a grating laugh. 'We'll put it in the news later, alright?' he said and hung up, putting an immediate end to the TV option.

So they called the radio. North German Radio duly issued the warning, but it was sandwiched between two parts of a symphony concert. Very few people in Hamburg listened to classical music on the radio, certainly in the Wilhelmsburg district. Ironically enough, on that night of Vincinette's destruction, they were playing Joseph Haydn's oratorio The Creation.

If there was one thing there'd been plenty of in post-war Hamburg, it was rubble. They had used it to repair the badly damaged dams and make the city halfway inhabitable again. A patchwork of sticks and stones. Hundreds of thousands had fled to Hamburg from the old eastern territories, the Baltic, East Prussia. Eighteen years after the end of the war, there were still thousands of people living in sheds, tin huts, garden houses and other makeshift buildings. Wilhelmsburg, an island in the River Elbe, was a conglomerate of normal streets with basic workers' tenements and strange allotment gardens scattered with cobbled-together wooden sheds, home to old biddies from Pomerania and their three-toothed Kashubian husbands, arrived from what was now Poland in 1945. Typically, bustling Hamburg had simply forgotten about them; everything had gone fine since the war, and the times were turbulent and fast-moving. These tentatively housed Easterners were the first to feel cruel Vincinette's force, when the tides flooded the island from the west via Reiherstieg Dyke and the northwest via Ernst August Lock. Then the dyke broke above the bascule bridge at Neuhöfer Strasse, followed at around three in the morning by the one at the Spree basin. In the west of Wilhelmsburg, the water trickled placidly into the houses, slowly filling the basements and encroaching into homes. From the north, however, the flood wave hit hard between the dwellings and whisked away improvised huts and shacks. Survivors crouched until morning on wreckage swaying in the waves, calling for help and flashing signals. Many inhabitants of low-lying buildings were flushed into their own cellars while trying to escape outside, and drowned. The raging water tore metre-deep craters into streets and front gardens. Shed walls, TV sets, fridges, cobblestones, rubbish bins and cars were washed along the tide. People clung for dear life to roofs

and chimneys. Three men climbed a tree at Vogelhütte Dyke and then drowned in its branches. Power stations were flooded, electricity and telephone cables ripped from their pylons – the city had no light or power, no telephones, no plan or coordination.
Then, though, the interior senator returned from Berlin. He slapped shut the gaping mouths of the politicians, officials and police officers now gathered in city hall with the words 'True character comes out in a crisis' – and took command. He violated the constitution to activate the army, and put in an emphatic and effective request for NATO troops. He untangled the chaos of contradictory directives and measures, chain-smoking all the while. Without him, the Vincinette disaster would presumably have been even more disastrous.
Helmut Schmidt, known for his gift of the gab and feared for his ridicule, was only able to prove his organisational talent thanks to his former Wehrmacht superiors' tactic of moving First Lieutenant Schmidt so frequently to new posts that he'd managed to evade the military courts time and time again, thus escaping a death sentence for defeatism, undermining military morale and insulting the top Nazis. Had it not been for that, he could never have gone on to become West Germany's fifth chancellor.

2

Surviving a death sentence in the Third Reich was surprisingly common, to tell the truth. The ambitious Düsseldorf dermatologist Günter Stüttgen, for instance, less than a month younger than Hamburg's Senator Schmidt, had been granted a proper trial back in the spring of 1945 – fortunately in absentia, since the sentence passed against the then medical captain had been death by hanging.
Director Richard Seuss, essential to the war effort in his managerial role during the forties – certain details of that role as Wehrwirtschaftsführer well-hidden ever since – had just received a photocopy of the thin file from Stüttgen's military court trial. The copy was extremely good quality. He scanned the sparse but nonetheless clear wording of the indictment, written by a military prosecutor by the name of Dr Scherzel. Interesting reading matter.
Seuss was sitting comfortably at his desk in his private rooms. Not in his private property, however. As managing director of the Rither Works, he was granted the use of a house in Monschau, an extremely spacious baroque palace with a red façade that had made the building famous far beyond the old trading town, generations ago. The house had been built by one of Monschau's most important clothmakers.
The town's cloth owed its high quality to the water of the Rur, a river as if made of liquid silver. The furnaces were fired by peat, but it was the lime-free purity of the Rur water filtered through the High Fens moor that made the products of the local weaving mill particularly precious. Those who could afford to dress in Monschau quality appreciated the town's fabrics, be it the Romanovs in St Petersburg, Karl von Habsburg or even Goethe himself. That's how the little town on the Rur had grown rich and famous, first the owners of the palatial red building, and soon their neighbours. Monschau was a German Bruges – yet its slow decline set in nonetheless. Then as now, few of the world's markets were as profitable, but also as changeable and cruel, as the textiles market. The last Monschau cloth factory closed down a few years before the Great War. A few years after that, the Rither Works started up in nearby Lammerath, and their founder Bernhard Rither, confident and abundantly moneyed, bought the run-down baroque palace on the river, initially as his own residence. The decision to erect Rither House on the factory grounds for himself and his family freed up the townhouse and it was granted rent-free to the director, as a suitably magnificent home. The exquisite palazzo was just right for Seuss, the miner's son from Garmisch, since it indulged his Bavarian taste for sumptuous baroque. It was an almost princely residence, maintained by a host of invisible servants. Seuss enjoyed leaving his bedroom in the morning, descending the large curving staircase, breakfasting in the salon and then, feeling entirely like the

sole heir to the Monschau legacy, stepping out onto the cobbled street in his traditional Bavarian suit and being chauffeured to the factory. There were times, over these past years so sad for the Rither family, during which he alone had determined the company's fate, when the director had forgotten he was a mere employee. Likewise, he lost sight occasionally of the fact that he would one day have to surrender the key to the clothmaker palazzo and move out of the heart of picturesque Monschau.

So here was the director in his private study under the light of a parchment lampshade, examining the death sentence issued back then for twenty-six-year-old Stüttgen, regiment 1056, 89th division. Seuss had got his hands on it in the first place through a contact at the Federal Justice Ministry, an old friend who had been quick to exchange his own Nazi Party membership booklet, so practical for twelve years, to become a card-carrying player in the right-wing big-tent party that called itself the 'Liberal Democrats'. The FDP had proved astoundingly open to integrating old Nazi Party members, provided they were capable and usable for new tasks. Out of all the smaller right-leaning political parties that had tried to mop up veteran Nazis and the mass of former hangers-on in the early fifties, the FDP had emerged victorious. There had been the German Reich Party, the Radical Social Freedom Party, the Assembly of Deed, the Association of Heimat-less and Disenfranchised, the Economic Reconstruction Union …
Director Seuss had been close to the latter for a while – albeit without ever becoming a member, since he had sworn never to join another party. That particular union had disappeared again, anyway, like all the others, but the FDP – that was still around, and how! After the national elections the previous year, when the Christian Democratic Union had lost its absolute hold over parliament, the hitherto grubby liberal democrats had been required to shore up the government's majority. The CDU chancellor had stated the government's position on the matter: they couldn't afford to tip away dirty dregs as long as they had no clean water. And so it had transpired that Richard Seuss now had a good contact at the Federal Justice Ministry in Bonn, led by an FDP man.

Medical Captain Stüttgen's file showed no signs of having been started in the midst of the Reich's collapse, in February 1945. A fast-tracked military trial with all the trappings of apparently regular justice – reference number, stamp and signature of the military judge – had passed a 'field verdict in the name of the German people'. Stüttgen was charged with weakening the fighting strength of the National Socialist army in a criminal manner and playing into the hands of Germany's enemies, by violating all military honour and surrendering the military dressing station under his command at Dreiborn to the American forces on 2 February, with all Wehrmacht members recovering there. Due to this treason, Stüttgen was firstly demoted and expelled from the Wehrmacht, by revoking both his 'combat-worthiness' and his Iron Cross medal. Secondly, the thus unranked and undecorated civilian Stüttgen was sentenced to death by hanging.
What a swine, thought Seuss, with no deeper emotion. Will you look at that, and now he's ruining our company. Alright, on behalf of the government. But he was still a swine. A dirty traitor.
He put the copy of this verdict in the name of the German people, a document once intended to rob the teacher's son Günter Stüttgen of earthly light and life, in the safe with all the other more or less important papers he wanted close at hand just in case, rather than in a deposit box at the bank, and then he closed the steel cabinet's door, disguised as book spines. It was perfectly concealed by the German Romantics E. T. A. Hoffmann and Wilhelm Hauff, whom Seuss had never read, never having been interested in literature. The bookbinders' work made an adequate hiding place, at least.
He extinguished the light and plodded down the stairs. Lembke had carried everything out to the car, little by little. The only thing left on the table in the spacious vestibule was the piece of luggage Seuss called his 'counterstrike case', containing the stock of powders, liquids and pills that helped a German captain of industry to maintain a steady overview in all situations, emergency and

otherwise. He'd need something for his headache before he got into the car. Whenever his stomach played ball, his head would start hurting. His various organs, body parts and regions seemed to him like partisans and saboteurs, in need of a regular punch in the gob, as Seuss thought in high Bavarian style. The Yanks called that a counterstrike, hence the nickname for the case. He opened it and his gaze roamed benignly across the phials of perphenazine, codeine, nitroglycerine and the equally effective quinidine. Then there was Optalidon, which knocked the rifles out of the headache partisans' hands, though it would irritate his stomach later. He washed it down with a mouthful of water and went outside, where Lembke was waiting for him with the engine running. Perfectly calm.
The street outside the palazzo was brightly lit by the almost full moon. The cobblestones gave off a flawless sheen, as if glowing. All the rain and storms of the past few days had washed Monschau clean, causing no damage as usual. The fortress town was built on rock and well protected from the elements. Seuss loved the place. His residence. Like a piece of silver, carved and polished.

'Good evening, Director Seuss.'
'Hello, my dear Lembke. Do we know where we're headed?'
'Bad Mondorf, Luxembourg, Director Seuss. I had them type up the route for us. It's on the seat back there.'
'Thank you. When do you think we'll get there?'
'Roads are a bit wet, still a drop of rain here and there but it gets better as you head south, says the Aachen weather station. Five hours.'
'Excellent, Lembke.'
At seven, he asked him to switch on the radio.
The news report started with the flood in Hamburg and a mining accident in the Saarland. Next came a slot introducing the German entry for the Eurovision Song Contest: 'Zwei kleine Italiener' was the name of the song about to be played.
'That's all we need,' Seuss grumbled in amusement. 'Those Eye-Ties lost us the war. Turn it off again, please, Lembke.'
At the Belgian border, Lembke handed over their passports and vaccination documents. The latter were brand new. Formally perfect and flawless in every way. They were let through.
The heavy BMW sailed along the small Belgian roads towards Liège, where they would join the motorway.
'Lembke, a while ago you told me you knew that Professor Stüttgen from the war.'
'That's right, Director Seuss.'
'Do me a favour and tell me the details.'
'Very well, Director Seuss.'

Max Lembke's story was the tale of an elite unit member who had fought on what the Americans called the Hürtgen Forest Front as a tree marksman and scout from October 1944, part of the last German offensive after two successful defensive battles. The Battle of the Bulge. Codename 'Watch on the Rhine'.
In the end he found himself with a leg ragged with shrapnel, combined with fractures and interior bleeding, at the dressing station right behind the collapsing German front, which had been pushed back again after the failed offensive. The fighting had been particularly fierce at Dreiborn, several kilometres east of Monschau.
Lembke lay in the field hospital and would have much rather helped his comrades, leapt to the defence of those still standing somewhere, still half-capable of fighting. But then he lost consciousness. And at some point, after apparently never-ending thrusts and voltes of erupting violence, it was over. The fight, the battle, everything was over. And Max Lembke came to in an

American POW camp in Belgium. He'd rather have died. Captain Stüttgen had betrayed him and all of them, as he later learned, which made it all even worse, looking back.
Max Lembke from Monschau-Höfen, once the radiant carnival prince of 1941 and champion marksman, found himself in 1945 in Stüttgen's field hospital, only a few hundred metres from the small farm where he'd grown up. Now he was a crippled prisoner. A young man, twenty-three years of age. Steeped in propaganda since his earliest youth, a fanatic through and through. But also a young man with talents. Until he was drafted he'd been training at the Rither Works, in the optical and glass department. Rither furnaces were known for their sensitive controls, housed in special cabinets.
To that day, Lembke was grateful to Seuss for giving him a decently paid job as his chauffeur after he was released from the POW camp and the sanatorium. Seuss knew very well that the young man had been systematically taught before the war to feel good about being insignificant and giving his all for Führer and Volk. Sacrificing himself. The Nazis' almost scientific communication psychology, learned from the American advertising industry, had melded with their racist ideology and fallen on fertile ground, prepared for generations. The result was fanatical young men trained for industrialised mobile warfare and extermination. That generation was now in their mid-thirties, those who'd survived. Still reliable, albeit also racked with pain and desperation, their bodies or minds often infirm. You just had to know how to deal with these lads, Seuss often thought, good lads like Max Lembke, who was driving him to see the Old Lady in Luxembourg. Because Luxembourg had called and wanted to see him.
For him, the Old Lady was about the same as he was for Lembke, he often thought. Luxembourg was the golem created by him and his kind through their actions. And there was more than one such golem, there were several of them, but thankfully Seuss had nothing to do with the others.
Director Seuss thought of the file on the demoted and condemned Captain Stüttgen. The Third Reich had kept painstaking records. Among colleagues of his rank and problem situations (with which each had to deal alone), the exact accounting under the Swastika was omnipresent. It was still useful, helpful, dangerous or deadly, depending on the context. The files that proved what certain individuals had done, said, written or perhaps donated. Who knew that better than him, Dr Richard Seuss, all-powerful director of the Monschau Rither Works. For he was on his way to Bad Mondorf – the headquarters of the bank.

3

It was the Monday after the storm, the day after the weekend when Vera and her advisor Eric had discussed the charity deeds in Brussels. Tax issues and equally prickly matters. Now and then, Vera had been overwhelmed by fear, confronting the company's financial value for the first time. Figures that entailed enormous responsibility. The clearer she saw things, the more she looked forward to the moment she'd be rid of it all for good.
She was grateful to have survived the working weekend in chaotic Brussels, city of many villages that many said was like Paris had once been, in the good old days. Back at home, a letter from the Red Cross awaited her, the answer to her application. She had already mentally prepared all the things she'd need, and what gifts to take along for little Bärbel. Vera was packing her case for the hospital, once again.
She had breakfast in the kitchen with Mrs Drachsky, but it was only coffee and a cigarette. The two of them went over the meal she planned to make for Nikos and herself that evening, not quite on her own; the housekeeper had made the soup. She'd brought a good baguette back from Brussels. The bread had attracted the interest of a fifty-something manager in her train compartment. He'd gone so far as to invite her to dinner.
'You can't live on bread alone, girl,' he'd had the temerity to say. Don't even think about it, Vera's brief glance over the top of her sunglasses had flashed at him.

'Is there anywhere I can get salmon?' Vera asked Mrs Drachsky now.
'At Pick's Delicatessen. That's where I get the vanilla ice cream as well. But Vera, are you sure the young man wouldn't rather have meat? How about a nice cutlet?'
'True, he does like meat. But he grew up in Crete. He might be pleased to have fish for once.'
'Smoked salmon's not exactly Greek, is it? I'll get you a couple of cutlets and put them in the icebox. Salt, pepper and a sprinkling of paprika. Nice and quick.'

Vera stood at the study window and watched capable Mrs Drachsky drive off in Hans Rither's elegant Skoda Octavia. Then she looked out at the cold but wonderfully sunny day, a delight after all the bad weather. She opened the window and heard melted snow gurgling down the guttering. For the first time in weeks, there was a breath of spring on the air.
She waited. The postman drove into the grounds in an ancient yellow Borgward at half past nine, lugged the crate of business letters to the administration building and then rang the bell at Rither House.
'Morning, Frau Rither!' The postman, an old Monschau social democrat who'd seen the inside of a concentration camp, was pretty much the only man in the Monschau district who didn't call her Fräulein, which would have been the legally correct form of address.
'Thank you.'
Vera took the pile of letters, looked through them on the stairs, and yes indeed, underneath the newspaper – the Hamburg floods were the main headline – the urgently awaited letter nestled amid catalogues and bills. The Red Cross stamp was unmistakeable. She opened it and wondered why she was so excited, unfolded the typed page and then read with increasing incredulity: that they were very grateful for her application as a volunteer on the district hospital's isolation ward and especially for the care of the patient Bärbel Reue, and thankful for Fräulein Rither's interest in overcoming the smallpox epidemic in the Monschau district. However, they were unable to offer any such volunteering work at the moment, since all positions were filled. Should the situation change, they would contact her immediately. The letter was signed by the head of the Red Cross office.
Stunned, Vera read the rejection again, studying every sentence in case she had overlooked a grammatical clause that might alter its meaning – but the letter was clear. All it said was that they didn't want Vera. And that meant Vera wouldn't get what she wanted: access behind the epidemic's closed doors.
She put the letter on her desk next to the Olympia, gazed at the telephone dial and considered calling St Bernhard's on the spot, the hospital named after her uncle, and talking to the senior consultant, who had clearly indicated on the telephone that she could expect to be taken. Vera was very angry, but she let the urge to call him pass. Angry conversations were a bad idea, either in person or by phone. And angry letters were just as bad, even if that was just when the right sharp-tongued formulations came to mind. Rage was good with words – but often enough, one came to regret the hot, cutting quality of formulations guided by anger. It was better for her to work on her manuscript: the rough draft of her literary report on 'Smallpox in Monschau'.
She smoked a cigarette as she skimmed a history PhD thesis someone had written about the plague in a Lower Saxon town. The findings were remarkable, bringing to life the course of that other horrific infection as vividly as a doll's house. The historian had established when and where plague cases had occurred in the town. He found out that the disease did not break out near blacksmiths' premises, but was common near bakeries and mills. He also used the calendar to work out that new cases became more frequent a week after every full moon. The solutions to these puzzles were as follows: the rats bearing the infectious fleas, the true envoys of the plague, didn't like the noise of the forges, but they were very keen on flour and other leftovers in the mills and bakeries. Aside from that, rats particularly like to mate on bright nights, at full moon, thereby transferring fleas

from one to another, a fact which then made itself noticeable a week later, in outbreaks where the rats had returned to sufferers' houses.
Vera conjured up infatuated rats in her mind, cartoon-like silhouettes. They played, chased and embraced before the moon's honey-yellow disc. The fleas leapt from rat to rat – and a week later, a new plague wave hit the local people.
There was a full moon tonight. She had read in a French classic that each of us only consciously perceives the full moon around thirty-six or forty times in our lives. The other times, we see it but let the image fade and pass by without paying attention. For that reason, whenever we catch sight of the full moon, we ought to remind ourselves that this sight, in relation to our long but nonetheless finite lives, is something special. Le Clair de Lune, the light of the moon, was especially bright that night.
Vera thought she remembered the quote being by Stendhal. She took a drag from her cigarette, then she sat down and wrote the courses for that evening in her best handwriting on a sheet of white artist's card, using ink and one of the large quills she had inherited from her mother, like so many other pretty little things: her watercolour box, a letter-opener, a few pieces of jewellery and, the most valuable, her watch. A slim Patek Philippe Rectangulaire, which had belonged to her Swiss grandmother before her. She never wore it. Far too precious, especially when she considered the circumstances that had brought it to her.

As she and Mrs Drachsky were chopping the vegetables around five that afternoon, Vera could no longer keep it to herself. She told her about her plan to help at the hospital, and that they hadn't taken her – no, that they didn't want her. What other explanation could there be for the rejection, just when they needed every helping hand they could get?
Oh, sweetie, thought Mrs Drachsky as she washed her reddened fingers and turned to Vera with a gentle look. For such a clever girl, you're so naïve.
And she held Vera's arm tight. But then she gave her a stern smile.
'You had polio so you're not vaccinated for smallpox, and you own the biggest company for miles around. And people might have heard you're studying journalism in Paris. What do you think they'll do if you want to work on the isolation ward? The ward with the most intensive cases? Smallpox is shutting the whole district down, and your whole company as well.'
'I don't mind if the company goes into quarantine. But I want to write about it.'
'You'll find another way to get your story.'
Vera took a deep breath and then an even deeper drag on her cigarette. Then she filled a coffee filter.
'Do you want one too?'
'No, thank you. I'd like to get some sleep tonight.' Ludmilla raised her neatly plucked eyebrows, as if she'd perfectly understood Vera's intentions with regard to the evening's menu and the course it might take.
'Right – the soup's made, it's in the pantry. The veg is prepped. The fish is in the fridge. I've brought a bottle of white wine up from the cellar. It's open for you.'
'Good night, then, Ludmilla. I'm going to get started.'

Menu Clair de Lune à la Vera Rither
19 February 1962
Consommé
Salmon pasta with cognac
Arme Ritter

Nikos turned up at the tradesmen's entrance on the dot, in jacket and tie, and rang the bell. Then he handed her a box of Belgian chocolate sea shells.

'I don't know if they're any good,' he said, embarrassed. 'I'd rather have brought you flowers but Michel Behrends said we'd have to go to Monschau for them, and we didn't have time today.'
'Tant pis,' said Vera, taking the pralines (she could tell by the smell of the box that they came from the village shop in Lammerath) and looking her guest up and down. Nikos looked weary. He hadn't had the weekend off – smallpox didn't care what day it was.
Four new suspected cases had come up on the Rither staff, and Nikos had visited them. One of the patients had come out of his fever but he was showing suspicious skin symptoms and had been put into the isolation ward. What really worried Nikos and the other doctors was changes to the skin of two in-patients at the hospital. Stüttgen had examined them. He wasn't yet sure it was definitely variola, but they expected it would be. There was no explanation as to how the two men had been infected; it ought to be impossible inside the hospital.
'And another thing,' Nikos said, noticing how good it did to talk about it, 'the WHO commission from Geneva has arrived in Monschau. That might interest you.'
He told her the district council director had showed around high-ranking American diplomats from the commission: the US government's epidemiology consultant for Europe, a certain Dr Ravenholt, and the public health attaché from the consulate general in Frankfurt.
'Oh, really – and what did they inspect? The hospital?'
'Yes,' said Nikos, 'but just imagine: they only looked at the kitchen and the staff room.'
'They didn't go to the quarantine ward?'
'No, they didn't set foot in there.'
'It was the WHO, definitely?'
'Yes, absolutely.'
'Interesting that the Americans have such a say in the World Health Organisation.'
'I was surprised too. I don't know how it is in Soviet Germany, but it seems to be clear in the West. It's the Americans who make the rules and check up on how we deal with an epidemic here.'
Vera wondered whether the superpowers really did divide up their influence over the WHO by country, or had some other arrangement. And what was the French standpoint on the matter?
'But if they didn't go upstairs, that means – what? They're afraid of being infected!'
'Dr Stüttgen's put together a whole catalogue of regulations for the hospital. But perhaps that's still not enough. We stumbled in right in the middle, when a few things had already happened here.'
He heaved a sigh. The last time they'd talked, his esteemed teacher had expressed his concern that the epidemic might spread 'right before our eyes' across the district, or even as far as Aachen. Nikos had the deepest respect for Stüttgen driving back to Düsseldorf after every day's work in Monschau, eating supper with his family and then heading to the lab, where he pushed on with his research. The man was utterly overworked, of course.

Vera and Nikos sat down at the table. It was laid very simply in the salon. For a moment, Vera had considered telling him about being rejected by the Red Cross and asking him if he could help her. But then she wasn't sure how he'd react to her volunteering plan, and she forgot the whole thing for the next few hours. Pushing things to the back of her mind was a special skill of hers, when necessary.
'The soup's very good.'
'Mrs Drachsky made it. A classic consommé.'
'Do you cook a lot in Paris?'
'As good as never. There's a kitchen on every floor at Deutsches Haus on campus, and some students do cook there. I don't though. I don't have the time so I usually eat out in town somewhere. That's usual in Paris. The Cité Universitaire is a little way outside the centre as well, pretty far south.'
'So you often get home late?'

'Yes, most days. I do get tired but there's so much I want to see and do. And you, do you cook? It's a must for the modern man, if you go by the magazines Mrs Drachsky reads.'
'Oh – I used to have a Primus stove at my digs for boiling potatoes. But nothing more than that. The two old ladies I lived with didn't want us to cook in our rooms.'
'You lodged with them?'
'Yes. It's a huge apartment that belongs to two sisters. They let four rooms out to students. One loo for all of us. The sisters are always busy keeping watch on us.'
'Why do they guard you?' She laughed.
'Well, we're not allowed to bring anyone back or anything …'
'Oh, I see. They're afraid they'll be arrested for procuration.'
'Procuration, right, that was the word. Thank you. Is it the same in Paris?'
'Everything's much freer in Paris. But I don't want you to think I lead a disreputable lifestyle,' she said, looking especially reputable. 'Only a tiny bit, at most.'
They both laughed.
Nikos offered to take the plates to the kitchen but she asked him to stay put, so he just watched her clearing the table. Her slim wrists were a delightful contrast to her tight black polo neck. He liked the way she abandoned her usual elegance to pile the plates with gusto. A wink and a flick of her strawberry-blonde bob, and she headed to the kitchen.
'I'll be a few minutes, Nikos. I have to make dessert.'

He watched her go, once again noticing the slight hesitancy in her gait, which gave him an almost familiar sense of sympathy and at the same time made him think how much he'd like to take her in his arms, as delicate as she was, and feel her velvet skin. He'd carry her, if it came down to it. On his back, in his arms, it didn't matter. Realising to his amazement that someone was cooking for him for the first time since he'd come to Germany, he listened to the sounds from the kitchen. At Nikos sat there, he was suddenly overcome with a feeling of comfort, so intense that he wished Vera would go on clattering around forever, the sounds carrying across the quiet house to him. Knowing she was busy making something for the two of them was delightful; as was awaiting her, knowing she'd come back any moment now.

And a soul
Kai psychä¨

He remembered a Seferis poem,

And a soul
if it is to know itself
must look into a soul

'If I understand it rightly,' Vera said, picking up on the day's news as she put down the plates of dessert, a dish Nikos didn't know, 'then Wilhelmsburg is an island in the River Elbe, but the dams all around it broke and filled it up like a bathtub. Built to protect it, and now they've turned deadly.'
'By the dear Lord,' Nikos exclaimed, shuddering and crossing himself three times like a good Orthodox Christian. Death in the sea's tides had been an inexhaustible topic for the old folks of Matala, partly to warn the younger generations. The ocean was rich in fish and nutrition but deadly, they wanted to island's children to understand. That was how Nikos had always seen it. How lucky they were to be sitting here, eating together.
'And what's this delicious treat?' Nikos asked.
'It's French toast. Stale white bread dipped in egg, with sugar and cinnamon. But we call it Arme Ritter – poor knights.'

'Like your surname?'
'It's spelt differently but it's the same, yes. My mum used to make it a lot for me. We'd always laugh about the name. The smell reminds me of the old days. When my mother was still alive.'
Nikos cut off a piece, dipped it in plum sauce and ate. He liked it a lot. But something else was even more delicious.
'You make me very happy, Vera, showing me all these things ...'
Nikos had always been proud of his German, but now he was a little ashamed, thinking his language was clumsy. If only he had more poetic talent!
Vera saw how honestly Nikos meant what he said. She preferred to keep certain things to herself. She was embarrassed at having plans for this full-moon night that went far beyond French toast.
'Nikos,' she raised her glass. 'I've got a surprise for you!'

4

They climbed the semi-circular staircase to a landing that Nikos always passed, never wondering what might be behind the rather functional-looking door set into the wall. Then came a short corridor, at the end of which was a lift.
'This was the first private lift for miles around when my uncle built the house. Uncle Bernhard was passionate about engineering, I've told you that. But that wasn't his only passion. Come, you'll like this.'
The lattice closed behind them. Vera squeezed into one corner, hands behind her back, and grinned at the floor in anticipation. Nikos, captivated by the swing of her bob at that moment and perceiving her French perfume even more strongly now, felt pleasantly warm in the confines of the cabin, gliding almost silently on oiled steel ropes to the highest point of the Rithers' property, a glazed dome at the top of the house, known to all as the astronomy tower.

When they got to the top, Vera stepped forward and pushed the gate aside like a nimble liftboy. The cabin opened directly into the spacious glass dome's interior. Alongside a few leather-upholstered benches and knee-high shelves of books, there was nothing in the space but a large telescope with a stool and a lectern.
'A Unitron refractor!' Nikos exclaimed, heading for the top-class device. He couldn't have been more enthusiastic if he'd been facing a Mercedes Benz convertible. Amazed, he lovingly stroked the white-enamelled telescope. Vera had certainly managed to surprise him.
'It's basically like a microscope, just the opposite ...' Nikos removed the lens cap and sat down at the eyepiece. He admired the hardwood mount on which the optical wonderwork was installed, turned the crank and found that the telescope could be adjusted down to a tenth of a millimetre. A man who knew his way around microscopes could easily work out how to use this device.
'I thought you might like it. I haven't been up here for a long time,' said Vera. 'My father showed me the night sky a couple of times when I was younger. It wasn't often he spent time with me. I thought we could take a look at the full moon, tonight.'
'Good idea. I loved looking at the moon as a child. We'd spend whole evenings on the beach, staring up at the sky.'

As if anticipating Vera's plan, the full moon had risen early that afternoon and was almost at its zenith. From where they were, it looked like it was in the sky for them alone. What a dome! The glass was made up of various sizes of octahedrons contained in an impressive steel construction. It felt like being in a planetarium.
Nikos had taken a look at the American-made telescope, tried a thing or two and then adjusted the focus to the moon. Now he looked through it. The view of the satellite's surface was incredible, an immersion into the gleaming backdrop of the moon theatre. Valleys, cliffs, crags. The sun was

in a good position, the shadow-play of the mountains making the moon look utterly three-dimensional, as if you could run your fingertips over its peaks and gentle summits, like skiing.
'Megalo!' he sighed in Greek. 'What a view. You'd think you could reach out your hand and scrabble in the moon dust. What an astounding device.'
He rotated the telescope slightly; a millimetre sufficed to send his eyes racing over the moon's surface at mind-boggling speed.
'It's not that easy. But hold on, what shall we look at? Wait ... what do I know ... here. I remember this one. Plato!' He savoured the feeling of turning the focuser the last tenth of a millimetre.
For a short while, he indulged himself in viewing the moon crater, and then Vera sat down at the telescope. Named after the Greek philosopher, the circle stood out dark against the surface. A volcano on a gigantic scale. Nikos moved the telescope slightly for Vera.
'You can see the tips of its mountains and even the shadows they cast. It's miraculous.'
'The moon's gleaming like a crag of limestone rock in the Aegean sun.'
'The craters are the bays where you could moor. In a moon sailing boat.'
'Let me look for something,' Vera said. She moved the focus to the far east of the moon, where she recalled the Mare Crisium being, the sea of crises. Once she'd looked at it a while, Nikos took her place, his eyes shifting slowly across it.
'Why is it called the sea of crises?' he asked. 'It looks like a big calm surface, not dangerous at all. There are big hills, cliffs, ledges; alright. But where are the crises?'
'People used to see the sky more as a mirror of our world down here. A map of our own lives, human emotions and stories.'
'So someone was going through crises when he named the area?'
'Perhaps. But next to it is the Mare Tranquillitatis, the sea of tranquillity. Perhaps it's more that the astronomers wanted to depict all earthly emotions on the surface of the moon. Of course, it would be even better if the man in the moon really existed. Or lots and lots of moon-men. Would they see the earth the same way as we see the moon? As a mirror of their selves?'
'Perhaps. Seen from space, the earth is coloured blue and green, very different to the other planets. The oceans and seas. The jungles. There's not a trace to be seen of mankind. In that sense, it's a black mirror.'
'Perhaps mankind will be wiped out soon, anyway. What with all the problems we have. Just think of the atom bombs. If it kicks off down here because Mr Kennedy and Comrade Khrushchev want to test their strength, the moon-men might think it's a pretty fireworks display. And France is building its own bomb now, too.'
'I don't even think about that, Vera. They won't be that stupid.'
'Are you sure? Why is the government building a big nuclear bunker, then?'
'They're old men, they're scared. But we normal people won't get far, being scared. That's something you Germans can learn from us Greeks. You always need optimism.'
'That's all very well, Nikos. But still, sometimes I think all I want is to get away. Away from the atom bombs, away from war and terrible things like variola. Like in the Nancy Wilson song: "Fly Me to the Moon".'
'They play that on the American station now and then. But who knows what we'd find in the moon dust if we looked at it with an even better telescope, with a tele-electron-microscope? Not to mention landing up there, which might be possible one day.'
'You mean there might be viruses in the moon dust? Is that what you mean?'
'Haldane, an Englishman, came up with a theory in the twenties. He thinks that life began with viruses, not the other way around.'
'Adam and his rib – a virus?'
'There's no hard evidence, but plenty of circumstantial indicators. We're only just starting the research. But what we know is that man is composed out of virus genes, at least partly.'
'I've never heard that!'

'Yes, that's why those beasts can dock onto our cells and interweave themselves. Because they're related to us.'
'So mankind is nothing but an epidemic? That would make a good novel. I wonder why Sartre hasn't come up with it yet. A counterpart to Camus's Plague. The disease – is mankind. We're the parasites! To hell with humanism!'
They laughed, and then Vera hummed 'Fly Me to the Moon' and put an arm around Nikos's neck as if they were dancing, and he put his arm around her hip, pressed her to him slightly and for a moment enjoyed being so close to her hair, with its scent of her; perfume and cigarettes. She was delicate and yet somehow strong. She had survived something; he could feel an incredible drive for life and an alert mind. What a creature!
Then he set about changing the eyepiece, wanting to show Vera a few constellations. That was his speciality. The boys on the beach at Matala had made a sport out of it: who knows the most? And who knows the erotic stories behind them? There was a whole lot of sex life depicted up in the night sky.
'What's your star sign?'
'Sagittarius,' Vera said, with a hint of ridicule. Like all those who don't think much of astrology, she tolerated the idea of her own star sign and was secretly convinced there might be something to the positive Sagittarian qualities after all.
Sagittarius – one moment, it's very low in the south,' he murmured. Sitting on the revolving stool, one knee resting on the hardwood stand, Nikos manoeuvred the telescope into position. It didn't take him long to get the bright constellation into focus, and then he stood and drew Vera gently onto the stool, his eye still on the telescope. Cheek to cheek, they rested there.
'Think of a clock face. You'll find a very bright star at around six o'clock. Epsilon Sagittarius. You see, and then further up, on either side of it. The two brightest stars.'
'Yes, I think I can see them.'
'Yes. There's a black hole pretty much in the middle of it.'
'What's a black hole?'
'No one knows, exactly. Einstein predicted them, but no one would believe him until they found examples, through better and better telescopes. They seem to be so heavy they even swallow up light.'
'And what's your star sign?'
'Leo,' Nikos said. 'But my favourite constellation is a different one. My father showed it to me once, right at the end, on my last visit to the hospital. The thirteenth star sign.'
'The thirteenth sign?'
'It's to do with all sorts of calendar reforms and church schisms. There are actually thirteen star signs. And the lost one – or the suppressed one, depending on how you see it – would be at the point in the calendar where Aquarius is now.'
He'd turned Vera and the telescope a little further.
'It should be around here. Voilà – may I present: the serpent-bearer.'
As he spoke, a chill ran down Vera's spine. She'd never heard the name. It sounded dark and mysterious. She couldn't spot the constellation, at first. Then, however, one star after another took shape. Nikos told the story of the serpent-bearer.
'His name was Asclepius and he was a son of Apollo. His mother Coronis died when he was born, but Hermes managed to save the boy. Hermes took Asclepius to the centaur Chiron, the wisest of all teachers, who had the body of a horse and a man's torso. Partly to protect him from his mother's killer, Artemis the huntress. Some say your star sign, Sagittarius, is Chiron.'
'So my Zodiac sign is the horse-man – and I can't even ride.'
'Chiron taught Asclepius the art of medicine. That makes Asclepius our god, the god of healing. The serpent,' Nikos switched to an ancient-Greek stage whisper, 'the serpent was sacred to him.

After his death, Asclepius's father Apollo changed him into the constellation of the serpent-bearer. Ophiuchus.'
The word sounded very unfamiliar from him, not at all like other Greek terms that have made it into everyday use. Vera laughed.
'Yes, I know. Greek's hard to pronounce ... a terrible language. Ophiuchus.'
'It's a beautiful language. I like it when you speak Greek.'

5

Vera watched Nikos clean the telescope with the special cloth, put away the eyepieces they'd used, replace the cap and wipe over it again.
'How do you know how to do all this?'
'I worked as a lab assistant for Professor Ruska and looked after the electron microscope. It's the same in Dr Stüttgen's lab as well. Cleanliness is essential.'
'What does a dermatologist do in a lab? Do you ... grow artificial skin?'
'It'd be terrific if we could. But we're far off from that still. Dr Stüttgen is investigating certain substances, histamines. He's found out that the skin absorbs these substances and reacts to them. He's interested in Vitamin A as well. It's called dermo-kinetics – a brand new field. Right, all done. It's very special up here, thank you. I never knew your uncle was so into astronomy!'
Vera gave a meaningful smile. She was in a daring, joyful mood that was only just picking up speed.
'Shall I tell you a secret?'
'If you like.'
'It's not just the stars you can see from up here – in the other direction, looking downwards, you can see the housing estates built around the factory.'
'Aha.'
'Most people's lights are out now, but look, there. You can see a few streetlamps.'
'Yes. But what do you mean?'
'Well, rumour has it my uncle didn't use his astronomy tower much for astronomical observations.' She winked at him.
'Not to spy on …?'
'That's what they say. Apparently, even the construction plans were designed to …'
'No, I don't believe it. Was he crazy or something?'

They were back in the lift, in the meantime. Vera was amused to see him so bewildered. She turned back and cast a glance at the telescope.
'They're only rumours, all the telescope stories. But he was definitely a womaniser. He fathered a few children around the district. They were all discreetly paid off by lawyers, so they'd have no claim to any inheritance. That was very important to him. That's why he set up a foundation so early on – to safeguard his beloved company.'
'Now I understand it better,' Nikos said. 'He didn't want his carnal desires to put the business at risk, if someone made a claim.'
Vera closed the bars and pressed the button that sent the lift to the mezzanine floor.
'There's another room in the cellar, by the way. A sort of counterpart to the astronomy tower. The lift goes there too.'
'A counterpart? What is it?'
'A chapel. Uncle Bernhard went there every day for his morning prayers.'
'His own little church in the house?' The lift stopped and they got out.
'Yes, down in the cellar. It's consecrated and there's always a candle burning. Ludmilla, Mrs Drachsky, takes care of it. She gets an extra fifty marks a month for it from my uncle's private foundation. An allowance for being his verger.'

'Verger?'
'A church assistant.'
'In Greece, we're very close to our church too. It's mostly monasteries in the countryside. They own a lot of land. They're very rich – and influential.'
'It used to be the same in the Eifel. But then Napoleon came along, made Monschau part of France, and all the monasteries and convents were closed down. Right to the very last monk! But people here still stayed devout Catholics. My uncle was a prime example of a Catholic through and through.'
'What do you mean?'
'Catholics love to sin. Well, almost everyone else does too. But we can go to confession afterwards. That's why our carnival is such fun. Everything's forgiven and forgotten on Ash Wednesday. By the time Easter comes you're a new person.'
'I've read about it. The carnival in Rhineland – Goethe wrote about it. He said Princess Venetia comes with her retinue to take a look at Prince Carnival, who she wants to marry. Goethe says the Rhinelanders have made an art out of carnival.'
Vera was surprised. Venetia, of course, that was the name of the carnival troupe in Düsseldorf – but what Nikos was talking about was completely new to her. And that Goethe had been interested in carnival. Was there anything the man hadn't written about?
'That doesn't matter now, the world ends anyway on the 30th of May.' She gave a slightly mad laugh.
'Are you joking?'
'It's a carnival song. Anyway, let's get to the point: I need someone to come to carnival with me.'
'A Mardi Gras ball? Now, during the epidemic? But when?'
'Tonight. It's already started.'

Nikos had anticipated all sorts of things, but not that the short trip in the mysterious Bernhard Rither's Catholic lift would take this abrupt turn – planned all along by Vera.
Michel Behrends was already waiting outside – they'd be there in just over half an hour, Vera said. Nikos absolutely had to see it. And she needed to go, for her article; the carefree ball would make the perfect counterweight to the serious situation.
Nikos considered for a moment – but what should he answer? Vera had got it into her head, and she wanted to write about it.
'All the carnival events in the Monschau district have been cancelled, by the council director himself. The police will turn up as soon as anyone puts on a clown's nose. It's a disaster for the Monschauers, of course. They'll never forgive smallpox for it. But the next district over is a different story. I've heard a lot of locals want to go to Düren's carnival night tonight, it's a giant event. It'll be a kind of Düren smallpox carnival, fascinating. The Monschauers aren't exactly popular right now. Then again, they won't turn away paying guests. And the police must be on the alert tonight as well, with all the people driving back to Monschau. There's always plenty of drinking at carnival.'
'But Vera ... That sounds really dangerous. We definitely shouldn't go.'
'But I want to, Nikos. I definitely do.'

They looked at each other, a first test of strength. It soon passed. A line went through Vera's mind that she didn't have to say out loud ... otherwise I'll just go on my own!
Nikos sensed her determination and gave in before push came to shove. He couldn't let her go alone. He didn't want to let her go at all. He wanted to embrace her forever, not accompany her to an extremely risky party, where presumably dozens of people would be going from Monschau, declared an international smallpox infection area by the WHO only days ago. And he was combatting it as a medic! It was a risk. It was out of the question, really. But he had no means to

resist, no counter-argument. She'd do what she wanted to do, with or without him. He couldn't change her plans for this spirited full-moon night in any way. She had obliged him to go. He had to go. At least then he'd get to dance with her tonight! He consented.
They freshened up in their apartments; Nikos changed his shirt, Vera replaced her lipstick. Five minutes later, they met downstairs.
Three-fingers Behrends seemed rested, wearing comfortable dark clothing and an impressive hat that made him look like a character from a French gangster movie. He was standing next to the luxurious English car that had been Vera's father's last purchase. Collecting cars was his only hobby, after all. One thing the collection was good for: always having the right vehicle for the occasion. No one in Düren had ever seen this Vauxhall with Swiss plates; not even the police.

6

'The thought of marking Princess Venetia's engagement to King Carnival had taken possession of all minds, the princess's travel route had become an important newspaper article, and in the end, one indeed began to believe in the magical lady.'
Good old Goethe wrote about Cologne's carnival with great enthusiasm. In the years after the French Revolution, the poet was astounded and fascinated by the phenomena of collective imagination and social auto-suggestion, which no one can evade. Anyone who has ever been to Cologne or Düsseldorf – where carnival is now organized by art academy members – will not be surprised that he experienced the Rhineland carnival as a civil, well-planned short-term reversal of social relations, in contrast to the violent revolution, and that he also admired the artistry of the costumes and the artistic note to the events. Those who have attended Düren's slightly more modest festivities might also understand.

The carnival ball seemed so absolutely insane and that insanity seemed such a permanent state that in a matter of minutes, Nikos actually thought he had washed up with Vera Venetia on a mysterious unknown island. He had never experienced anything like it.
A herd of motorcycles and mopeds was parked outside the building, a sparkling pack of black-varnished steel horses. Occasional lights from arriving and departing cars flashed across them. It was almost ten o'clock but streams of people were still coming, mainly on foot – in the strangest of costumes. There were cowboy hats and fringed waistcoats, feather boas and knights' helmets. Piebald clown suits, their wearers red-nosed. They all presented a brutally cheerful sense of humour, which had taken hold of the mainly young women and men alike.
Vera and Nikos reached the entrance to the inn where the saturnalia was being held. A life-sized straw doll dangled from ropes beneath the pub sign, as if someone had hung up a scarecrow as a joke.
'What's that?' Nikos asked.
'That's Mr Nubbel,' Vera explained. 'All the wrongdoings and sins – oh, all the dirty deeds that happen during carnival, we pin the blame for them on Mr Nubbel later. At the very end of carnival, on Tuesday night, they cut him loose and carry him to the open fields in a big procession, and burn him at midnight.'
'Are there always so many ... dirty deeds at carnival?'
'Oh, Nikos. Don't worry, we'll survive. Here, take this, please.'
She handed him a black mask to tie around his face.
'Are you serious?' The mask briefly reminded Nikos of his ancestors' drama, of Dionysus, of an inspired actor's cultish raptures. No, he didn't want to disguise himself, or be seized by any kind of frenzied ecstasies. He was a modern Greek, he liked the human face. Why should he cover it up, him of all people? Wasn't he covered up enough, all week long, in his protective suit?
No. It wasn't enough. Not at carnival.

‘Please, Nikos,’ Vera tapped the black mask in his hand. ‘Please put it on, or there’s no point in us going in. You have to have some indication of a costume, or they’ll slap us in the face.’
In the end, then, a grown man and a petite woman with a red-blonde bob approached the ticket desk wearing only the Venetian-style masks alongside their usual clothing, a grey tweed jacket and a black polo neck and black ski pants, which looked rather chic among all the odd costumes.
‘Alaaf. Wo sedd err zwe Hübschen da herr?’ the ticket seller enquired, his desk the barrier to the raging party. He was genuinely interested in where the conspicuous couple came from, certain he’d never seen them in Düren. The man was dressed as the hunchback of Notre Dame.
‘Düsseldorf,’ answered Vera, who then paid for both their tickets, smiled at the hunchback and pulled Nikos in after her.
‘Why did you say that?’ Nikos whispered; he’d noticed burly men with big biceps standing behind the ticket seller, keeping an eye on the already rambunctious crowd in the high-ceilinged room but not joining in the fun. The fact that the men were dressed in giant-sized school uniforms, complete with short trousers and school caps, made them look all the more threatening. They must be the stewards who cleaned up for the landlord, later when the fights kicked off. It was always the same in dives like this place.
‘Why not?’ Vera responded, untroubled. ‘You’re from Düsseldorf, aren’t you?’
‘Yes, but ...’ Nikos began, but they were welcomed by a full wooden tray of kölsch glasses, from which Vera took two beers. The waiter was about to ask her to pay, but Vera just gave him a rolled-up twenty-mark note and told him to let her know when it was all spent. He understood immediately: the girl with the good figure wanted a tab. No problem. He’d take care of her in person; all she had to do was tell the other waiters she’d be paying Jupp. That was how Vera Rither liked it.
The drank the slim glasses of kölsch in one. Nikos, not a practised drinker, was surprised at how easily the beer went down. The empty glasses vanished, new ones came along, and soon the two of them were swallowed up by the crowd of young and not-quite-so-young party people. For Nikos, combatting the deadly smallpox epidemic for the past weeks and only ever seeing people – apart from Behrends and recently Vera as well – from the lonely interior of his protective suit, with no touching or shaking hands, no real conversation, who spent his says isolated in the suit, accompanied only by the sound of his own breathing and heartbeat, stepping onto the dance floor came as a shock. All the drinking, smoking, sweating people melded into a dense mass that washed over him like an ocean wave, like a surge of panting, spluttering, joyfully shouting dancers, drinkers, laughers; they stood and bobbed up and down and talked back to back, pushed past and rubbed against each other, elbows at the ready. Sizeable splashes of kölsch foamed above the crowd at irregular intervals, not seeming to bother anyone much. Vera and Nikos were soon right in the middle, surrounded by the smell of tobacco smoke, inexpensive perfume and hairspray; it came as a welcome respite for Nikos when Vera took his hands and nestled up to him. Her scent was his refuge.
Vera thought Nikos smelled good too. As if to welcome the two of them, the band changed tack, from a booming carnival pop number to Louis Armstrong’s ‘Cabin in the Sky’.
‘How can this be?’ Nikos asked, all at once delighted and reconciled with the circumstances, now that he could hold her in his arms at last and dance with her – to a tune as if from Vera’s collection, a classic that the band played at a swinging tempo. But there was something else: ‘Cabin in the Sky’ was what they’d played in Greece when the war had ended. Heavenly music!
‘What do you mean?’ Vera whispered in his ear, her tone signalling she’d be happy with any answer.
‘Oh, nothing,’ said Nikos, beginning to feel at home in the oceanic carnival tumult, assailed by such wonderful feelings.
‘I just wanted to say: I really like it here!’
‘It’s fantastic, isn’t it?’ Vera grabbed him by the collar in the midst of the crowd of revellers.

They danced to all the next few songs; the band soon segued into rock 'n' roll, 'Go Johnny Go'. Then came the 'Peppermint Twist' – and the medieval maidens, Red Indians and all the other dancing couples let go of their partners and started rotating their hips at each other. Nikos, who had attended only a couple of dance classes in Athens on his mother's insistence, had never seen such frivolous moves. Vera gave him a quick lesson. In Paris, the OAS wasn't the only thing running rampant; twist fever had also spilled over from New York a few months ago. A dance where the partners stood on the spot, moved only their arms and backsides, and danced at each other with their eyes. Nikos soon loosened up; to begin with, his movements made Vera laugh, but they grew less and less wooden by the minute. He beamed at Vera. The outline of her Venetian mask lent her an almost feline look.
The band changed styles again, switching to an extremely popular carnival song that caused an instant biochemical reaction. Everyone started singing:

'Schnapps, the last word he did say,
then the angels carried him away.'

And at the same time, the crowd surged to the bar or tried to grab one of the fast-moving waiters to put the lyrics into action; as if by magic, the staff were handing out tiny bottles of hard alcohol, something Nikos only knew from the rougher parts of Düsseldorf. But this was carnival in Düren, and it had just started moving to the next level of inhibition.

Düren was a unique place. It held a sad record – the town with the worst war damage in Germany. Düren had been the operative centre of an air raid on 16 November 1944, 'Operation Queen'. Shortly after losing their second battle in the Hürtgen Forest on All Saints' Day, the US military wanted to make a show of determination with heavy tactical bombings of wealthy Düren, a centre of the paper and mechanical engineering industries. As an outcome, the post-war city council had more than eighty-nine percent of the town's area at its disposal for rebuilding. Young people in their twenties who had grown up in Düren had developed a robust sense of humour, coupled with a grim lust for life. Nikos was amazed to see how many couples were kissing and embracing around the edges of the room, their passion revealing the particular greed of young men and women who have only just met.
While the round of hard alcohol was still going on, Vera had pulled Nikos along with her, noticing three nurses leaning on the long bar: men in white uniforms, pale-blue blouses and caps with the Red Cross symbol, their costumes even updated with the face masks now obligatory for Monschau's doctors and medical staff, although they wore them dangling around their necks or on their foreheads – they could hardly drink wearing masks, and drinking was what they'd come for.
'Come on, Nikos, let's have a chat with those funny nurses over there,' she called to her date, who was electrified by the sight of them, immediately churned up. He hadn't expected everyday life to catch up on him so soon. They worked their way through the crowd. Nikos wasn't sure how to interpret Vera's offensive friendship policy. On top of that, he hadn't yet got used to the idea of men wearing nun's habits or nurse's uniforms, apparently a perfectly normal sight at carnival. He'd never thought himself prudish – dermatology also covered sexually transmitted diseases, after all – but these and other plainly erotic and provocative aspects of carnival rather unsettled him.
'Alaaf, sisters,' Vera greeted the three of them, who returned the traditional hello. Then, turning to Nikos and putting her hand on his shoulder to banish all speculation as to whether she was alone: 'Shall we get a round in, Doctor?'
Why did she say that? Nikos wondered. But he soon realised there was no need to worry. The three men were so drunk they took the 'Doctor' for a hilarious joke. A round of miniatures later, it turned out the three of them really did come from the Monschau district – and were thus circumventing their carnival ban with aplomb. And they were much closer to the situation than Vera would have

thought: they'd dressed up as nurses because they were missing their girlfriends, who were all volunteering on the quarantine ward, meaning they couldn't be in contact. They couldn't even talk on the telephone. But still, you can't miss carnival! In other words, their costumes were a sign of both their worries and their joyful pragmatism. Contradictory and absolutely ridiculous. That was carnival. A humorous labyrinth of crystal-clear mirrors. Nikos was utterly confused, not understanding much they'd said aside from a few snatches of the Monschau dialect.
He wasn't the only one; a few other people around them heard it too. One word led to another and despite her exuberant mood, Vera struggled to keep her cool as it became clearer and clearer: there were numerous Monschauers among the guests, despite their unpopularity here in Düren these days, and they were mocking the situation. One young woman had chosen a particularly provocative look, dressed up in a tiny costume as an Indian harem girl, with a big black smallpox pustule stuck to her forehead.
With her cleverly launched research plan of schnapps for the nurses, Vera herself had made the discovery that now spread around the room. After a discreet start to the night, Monschau's smallpox refugees had given up concealing their origins as the evening went on and the alcohol flowed. They spotted their own kind and exposed each other in loud voices. Behind the masks of clowns, Red Riding Hoods and Red Indians, pirates and circus ringmasters, they made it clear they were Monschauers, and some of them recognised their neighbours or acquaintances. They were people from the villages, from the Fens and the town of Monschau itself, und they were all delighted to have outwitted the district council director and the whole anti-carnival smallpox regime.
Now Vera pinched the Red Cross cap from one of the sloshed nurses, put it on her head and turned to a French musketeer, who used Nikos' trip to the gents to ask the Venetian Florence Nightingale to dance – a request she couldn't and wouldn't resist, since the band was launching into the true anthem of their times, a badly kept secret that got the very last clay-footed drinkers onto the dance floor. And they all joined in, wailing with abandon that life was only bearable in this crazy world because they could raise a glass whenever they liked, which they should definitely do, because:

'The world ends anyway on the thirtieth of May,
we won't live for long,
we won't live for long.'

Nikos, back in the hall, couldn't see Vera anywhere. She wasn't with the nurses, who were singing along; he turned to and fro to spot her, landing in the soft arms of a chubby squaw, which she put around his hips as she pressed her fringed bosom against him, causing him great confusion. She emanated a saccharine scent of the makeup she'd used to paint her pale skin a reddish shade. Her black hair was plaited into two amusingly flapping braids, decorated with feathers.
She grabbed Nikos with gusto and shoved him into the crush on the dance floor, succeeding partly because Nikos wanted to look for the vanished Vera there. In the end he saw the nurse's cap, bobbing far off in the dancing crowd like a ship on the waves. He abandoned the disappointed squaw and inched towards his date, front-crawling through the orgiastic sea.
The song continued, sounding at times like a German march. The chorus was barely comprehendible for all the shouting. Nikos was amazed at how cheerful the carnival crowd was about its end being nigh. And the smallpox made it all even more bizarre and grotesque, but perhaps for that reason a little bit magical. Plus, Nikos noted, the song wasn't ultimately all that different from Cretan peasants' marches, though the rhythm was nothing like them – still, both had an inherent determination to look one's own unavoidable death in the eye and take grim joy in the sight.

The hit of the Eifel smallpox carnival was chanted verse after verse, everyone yelled along to the rescuing 'maybe we've got years to pass, so let's all raise a glass!' only to establish, after a deep drink, that it was all in vain, seeing as 'on the thirtieth of May …'
In the midst of the apocalypse-toasting young crowd, the two Venetians managed to find each other. The musketeer backed away from Nikos' humourless stance, and Vera was only too pleased to have her actual date back in her arms. Surrounded by the crush of carnival celebrators, they were so close, flying and floating together and locked into such a wonderful sense of intimacy, that it had to happen. They looked each other in the eye just as the carnival anthem to the end of the world ended, the band took a break, the constantly mobile waiters squeezed their way through with full trays of kölsch, and the beer flowed in Dionysian quantities. In the midst of the general enthusiasm and tumult came this delicious moment in which they found themselves in a bubble, floating for a while, just the two of them, as if all alone in the world. They had both imagined for so long, each of them separately, what it would be like to kiss the other. And now it was even better. And they both knew the other felt exactly the same way, and knowing that bound them even closer, making them simultaneously explorers and indigenous, navigating the increasingly dense jungle of their affections.

7

Yet the pleasant harmony the two of them were feeling was changing all around them, without them noticing at first. The cheerful chaos had reached a critical stage. Now that they'd so thoroughly serenaded the end of the world and drunk to it even more thoroughly, something happened that can happen at any time in carnival season, and perhaps has to happen. The people started going jeck. Translating jeck as crazy wouldn't be enough. Going jeck meant abandoning all the harmless fun and distancing knowledge of being in disguise, and granting the mask power over their true selves. As if a dream figure were working its way out of their nocturnal minds, to step out into the real world and take action – in a completely crazy way.
It began with the half-happy, half-sad Monschau nurses getting embroiled in an unexpected conversation with five young men costumed in nothing more than red clown's noses, who now started provoking the Monschauers. The fermentation process Vera had initiated had thus reached maturity – the air, already heavy with smoke, beer and sweat, was now ripe with the threat of eruption.
'What are you lot doing here, you Typhoid Marys from Monschau?' one of the semi-clowns called out, proud to have skipped any complicated introductory insults and instantly managed to get to the point of what was egging on their drunken rage.
'You want to give us all your plague, do you? Serves you right that your carnival's cancelled this year.'
'Listen, mate,' one of the nurses defended himself, a gentle boy who didn't want to contradict an aggressive thug who'd come looking forward to a spot of bother. A lad who didn't want to dance and celebrate, who was only here because he and his mates wanted a fight. What good was carnival if not for beating up a few idiots? There were always reasons enough. This year's was variola.
'Who are you calling mate? I'm not your mate – you hear that, lads?' The stocky man spread his strong arms wide like he was about to hold a sermon. Starting the argument during the band's break showed great flair for stoking a conflict, like embers soon to be a proper fire. A sudden silence fell. Everyone listened, many in anticipation. Time for a fight, at last!
'Hear that, did you? There's lads here from Monschau, brought their smallpox with them ...' Mutterings and murmurings. Most of the guests had long since caught on that there were Monschauers among them, but one voice put it bluntly: 'If the authorities get wind – it'll be the death of our carnival in Düren as well.'

No one else had seen it that way! In other words, it was all an attack on King Carnival's fourteen-day rule, just as it approached its peak. Visitors from Monschau – an act of terrorism against the carefree days and nights they needed so badly, had hoped for so hard, waited for since last year! The Monschau plague-carriers would ruin everything, even before Ash Wednesday!
'You bunch of losers,' the clown egged on the crowd. 'They should have wiped you out like Hitler wanted!'
Nikos could tell he'd heard something appalling, but not what it meant. Had he just mentioned Hitler?
'How can you say such a thing! You must be one sandwich short of a picnic,' Vera butted in. Like the other Monschauers, she knew exactly what the clown was referring to. At the very end of the war, Hitler had given express and insane orders to destroy every last building in Monschau, regardless of the townspeople, to create a base for his troops to march on the Ardennes. A certain General von Gersdorff had managed to prevent it at the last minute. When the locals had found out about the plans, all of Monschau had started longing for the Americans to get through; the idea hadn't exactly helped the town to hold out against the enemy, or boosted Hitler's popularity.
'Why's that ugly cow getting involved for?' the clown ringleader mocked. 'Good job she's got a mask on, otherwise she'd knock us all over, she's so ugly.'
'Take that back,' hissed Nikos, who had been watching in peace but now planted himself in front of Vera, apparently prepared for any kind of escalation.
'Don't, Nikos. Let's just go.'
'Nikos? What kind of name is that, eh?'
'Let's go,' Vera repeated, now rather concerned as Nikos straightened his shoulders, glared at the clown and took a step towards him. He'd spent many hours in the steelworker's suit over the past weeks; the effort of walking in it had literally steeled him. All he was wearing now was his tweed jacket and a papier-mâché mask, which would offer him slight protection in a fist-fight. Factoring in that he was also pretty drunk – a new experience for him – he wouldn't back down an inch.
'My name is Nikolaos and I come from the island of Crete. It's part of Greece, in case you don't know.' He stared the man in the eye.
His opponent swallowed. He hadn't expected such an offensive response. But knowing his four thuggish friends were behind him and feeling both covered and also challenged, he couldn't let his nerves show. He had to prove himself.
'A Greek from Monschau? I never knew they had guest workers there. Or are you at the Düren machine factory?'
'No, I'm from Monschau.'
With these words, he turned to Vera, who was encircled by the nurses, all rather pale despite the alcohol. Nikos told them where he came from. From Crete – that was where he was born and raised. And from Monschau, where he lived and worked, and Vera was there. He'd have done better not to; now he was in a double bind. Not only was he breaking the carnival ban; far worse, he was a doctor, whose colleagues had imposed the ban. He ought to have known best of all. Nikos should have kept his head down. But he couldn't.
'And where are you from?' he asked, with the confidence of a landlord about to throw someone off his premises.
The clowns weren't short of an answer. They'd come on their mopeds from a village above the Rur Dam.
'Schmidt,' said the clown.
Nikos raised his eyebrows. Was the man introducing himself?
'It's not my name.' The man laughed. 'It's the name of the village. You'd better remember it. Schmidt. And remember this number: twelve.'
'Twelve what? Twelve villagers?'
The other man went pale with anger, making the clown-face look even worse.

'Twelve times, the Yanks tried to take Schmidt. And twelve times, we took Schmidt back. That's Schmidt.'
'Who took Schmidt back, you and your pals here? A child army?'
'The German Wehrmacht.' His voice trembled. He'd never had that before. Child army! Nikos sensed the man beginning to quake with rage, felt the tension rising, the willingness to let his fists do the talking at last. But Nikos wasn't afraid; on the contrary. He was perfectly calm.
'Ah, the Wehrmacht. A tough army, and they showed it in Schmidt. Or what are you trying to say, man from Schmidt?'
'Exactly, you Greek.' The man's voice was about to give way.
And now the Greek answered: 'You know, if you want to hear a war story about tough guys and the Wehrmacht, I've got one for you.'
As if relating an anecdote about a nice day on the beach, Nikos now told him what had happened in the Cretan village of Kondomari, in May 1941. 'The Slaughter of Kondomari', as they said back in Greece. And not only the rowdy Schmidt boys listened to his story, but everyone around them: The German parachute troops, having suffered severe losses while still airborne, had come across a small Maori unit there. Unusual soldiers in the New Zealand army, their bodies tattooed all over and pierced with wooden rods and rings in all sorts of places. They were an instant legend in Crete.
'You're talking nonsense. Red Indians from New Zealand, or what?' The incredulous thug tried to dismiss it all. But he was already feeling rattled. He sensed that this strange Greek wasn't telling him a fairy story.
'There were lots of Australians and New Zealanders in Crete. But the toughest soldiers who fought there in the war were the Maori. They fought with knives and bayonets and ambushed the enemy. The Maori killed nine hundred Germans in Kondomari. And then they cut the Wehrmacht soldiers' balls off.'
'What was that?'
'You heard me,' Nikos said in his lowest voice.
'By the time the Maori left the island, they were wearing necklaces threaded out of the dried testicles of German squaddies. The Maori in Crete – now they were tough fighters.'
Nikos could have been talking about an excellent wine. Or honey. His voice was so mild, almost savouring the taste, as if he were telling them about a very good meal he'd eaten. The Schmidt thugs couldn't think what to say, for now.

8

Richard Seuss had been through plenty in his lifetime, including unpleasant and punishing trials and tribulations, but the torments he'd been exposed to over the past two days in Bad Mondorf went beyond most of them. It had been a tailored and terrible work trip, tailored like his Bavarian suits, all cut to the original model of the suit he'd been wearing when he moved to the Eifel.
He'd been twenty-five at the time, the same age as the century, and his contemporary Bernhard Rither had taken him on because he needed a capable business manager. He'd wanted someone from elsewhere, not from Monschau, Aachen or Cologne, and he'd picked the talented and enterprising miner's son from Garmisch, who had just completed his business degree at the University of Munich with flying colours. Young Richard Seuss had seen the post advertised in the München-Augsburger Abendzeitung. To this day, he thought sometimes of the modestly sized, plain advertisement:

Newly founded industrial firm (near Aachen) with own patents seeking ambitious young business manager – those lines had changed his life. More radically than he ever would have imagined. It was early morning now somewhere in Luxembourg, the streets barely in better shape than at the end of the war during the Americans' advance, dotted with potholes and so narrow it was

frightening, but Max Lembke steered the dark-blue baroque angel as confidently and calmly through the night as ever. Seuss, loathe to spend another hour in the Palace Hotel, had nodded off on the comfortable back seat, his trousers unbuttoned to relieve the unpleasant pressure on his fleshy belly. A motorised nightmare of consecutive scenes and scraps of memory from the past two days was plaguing him, his sleep by no means restorative; more like a toxic agitation. And now the director was overcome by a powerful wave of discomfort, waking him with a start. Like a tide of nasty aftertaste and unhealthy mixtures he had indulged in, musty sickness crept in, seizing the whole of his hulking body and tweaking his innards painfully. His face was damp with sweat.
He was used to feeling bloated after eating, and he had eaten all the way through his visit to Old Lady Luxembourg, of course; some drank, others ate. Luxembourg had roasts. Cakes. Rich food. He'd known in advance that he'd feel sick now.
All the food was one thing, but then there was the terrible company he'd been forced to keep. Lady Luxembourg and her court, her playmates, her current favourites and her beasts for the slaughter. Sometimes he didn't know himself which category he was in; probably a bit of both.
The unease migrating around his body was now gradually giving way to precisely determinable pain, which he appreciated since it at least brought order into matters. And if he was no longer willing to bear each particular pain, he knew what to do. Tonight, as ever. The counterstrike case was right by his side.
He righted himself with a low groan, wiped his handkerchief over his vinegary forehead, switched on the reading lamp. He saw the chauffeur take note.
'Not doing too well, Lembke,' he squeezed out. 'Make a stop somewhere, please, where it's easy to get out.'
'Yes sir, right away.'

Well then, let's see, thought Seuss, perfectly confident despite his misery, or in fact because of his misery. He and his body, they were like a commander and his army – one which was constantly attempting mutiny. A never-ending battle against an enemy that usually obeyed, and then revolted again. Who would be the victor this time? Mind or matter?
Seuss was a man of the in-between world. He had seen the extremes on both sides, the top and the bottom, poverty and wealth, and both had affected him. He had found his calling and his joy in directing others. Obviously, he hadn't taken the communist path, not in the Germany of 1926, where he set out to help build a market-leader, then to get it through the tough times of the Depression and soon the next war – a war that German industry and its research institutes recognised as lost as early as Christmas 1941. Something Seuss too had known perfectly well. They had started planning for the post-war economy from then on.
The key starting point was a memorandum by an undersecretary of state named Ludwig Erhard, who had packaged his efforts, analyses and prognoses so carefully that no one noticed how seriously he meant them. He followed up in 1944 with a set of guidelines entitled 'War Finances and Debt Consolidation'. The very title was an indirect admission of his conviction that Germany would lose. How could a victorious Germany have owed anyone anything?
The bosses and directors had all gone ahead and followed Erhard's genius plan. Before that, they had sought to make full use of the gigantic industrial production wave financed by debt, theft and expropriation – for that was what the Second World War had meant for German industry – taking every advantage. Because anything else would have harmed their own companies, their own teams. And so they took what they could get, trying all the while to develop expertise that would be in demand after the war. The whole thing had gone according to plan.
Seuss had once come across an American magazine, and on its pages he saw President Kennedy immersed in conversation with his employee of the year, Wernher von Braun. That very same Braun was a former client. His workshops, labs and parts of his rocket production facilities were fitted with Rither furnaces. The manufacturers of certain tank models had also bought big in Monschau-Lammerath: No Panther without Rither had been the dictum in German industrial

circles. Had they won the war, Seuss could have imagined making a panther the logo of the Rither works. He already had the designs, from a Zurich agency he often worked with, since the Rithers had private funds in Switzerland as well as elsewhere. It didn't turn out that way. The Panther might have been the best battle tank ever built, but it didn't win the war. Fine, then they wouldn't have a heraldic logo like the wolf on the front of every Volkswagen, built by the company founded by Hitler's favourite engineer Porsche and the latter's son-in-law Piëch. Seuss could have imagined taking over the management of a much larger company himself, and he'd almost managed it, once. But even if he couldn't hold a candle to the Brauns and Porsches of the world, at least he had the gumption to take his own fate in his hands. Seuss had been running Rither since 1 January 1926. And now he was once again sick to the back teeth.
For a moment – and not a short one – he allowed the nausea to register; that was important, his doctor had told him. The man was a Berliner; he'd fought in Russia and was an ace at giving injections. 'Let's see, where's that wee vein ...?' he'd say, and then the needle would hit home. A good doctor. He'd explained to Seuss that a good patient had to analyse each pain and remember it precisely – that helped the doctor, later on, to prescribe or administer the right pharmaceutical product.
Once Seuss had sufficiently analysed and memorised the push-and-pull in his innards – a fractious and yet increasingly aggressive swirling – he opened the counterstrike case. Approximately forty almost identical phials, differing only in colour, glowed at him from the safety of their green felt bed. What Seuss administered now was a classic remedy; a member of the vitriol family would bring relief. Blue vitriol, in chemical terms Cu^{2+} and SO_4^{2-} ions: copper sulphate.
The ancients named it copper vitriol, and as such it numbered among the important basic substances commonly stocked by travelling alchemists. All the various vitriols were useful, but copper vitriol had been essential for every medieval physician, surgeon and pharmacist. The most effective emetic there was. Life-saving for any one of them who had gone and poisoned himself again.
'Would over there on the right suit you, sir?'
'Yes.'
Seuss pocketed the phial and carefully locked the case.

It was a small road leading gently uphill to a distant village. Altenlinster 4 km, a sign said. Easy enough for Lembke to pull over by the edge of a field. The light stayed on as limping Lembke shot out of the front to open Seuss's door. The director got out of the car, deposited his jacket on the seat, unfastened the top buttons of his shirt and rolled up his sleeves.
Lembke opened the car boot. The cool-box contained sparkling water and Munich beer. Seuss handed Lembke the phial of copper vitriol.
'Two pinches in a glass of water, please.'
It took less than five minutes for the effect to set in. Seuss awaited it in the perfect position, as composed as a Zen master anticipating an arrow. Come on now, he thought, give it to me, cherished spirit of blue vitriol. Corpus hermeticum. Little death, come over me. Help me to become an ocean for a second, to spew it all out like hurling the universe out of me. To be rid of it all and begin anew ...

9

Lembke waited discreetly in the baroque angel's driving seat until his boss had the worst behind him, a few minutes later. Lembke and Seuss were wedded by unquestioning loyalty, though the driver was well aware Seuss only entrusted him with a fraction of the things on his mind. He had driven the director at fairly regular intervals to Old Lady Luxembourg, who held court like a medieval travelling empress at various stops in her realm, one that transcended the current state

borders, an area at some point dubbed Benelux. It seemed the Old Lady had the biggest influence on Director Seuss, that was how Chauffeur Lembke would have put it; more than anyone else. Every time he left her he was worn out and slightly changed. How great her influence really was, however, only the director knew. Sometimes, when he thought the matter over, he could no longer say whether she had created him, Seuss, or he had made her. Both were possible and probably right; one might have said the Old Lady and Seuss had marched in step for the past fifteen years, bound by a common objective consisting of nothing less than the creation of a new European mechanical engineering and steel conglomerate, in which Belgian coal mines, Dutch capital, German technology and Luxembourgian mediation were to interplay. It could be no surprise that the heart of the plan was the Rither Works, so close to the border in Monschau-Lammerath, the German protrusion that Belgium had tried to get its hands on time and time again over the years. Rither had been supplying half the globe and had excellent contacts in many countries. Seuss had built that network, with major support from the Old Lady. His trump card was the fact that he could bring the Rither Works into the game, even though they didn't belong to him. There'd be no way not to make him chairman of the new corporation's board.

Who was Old Lady Luxembourg? Doesn't an old Luxembourgian proverb say a woman is only the age she gives herself? In this case, she was an individual from an old Luxembourg family, an observer of the cruel twentieth century's politics and the long period before, who had memorised the experiences of her small country that shared so much with its neighbours, from their languages to the horrors of the wars the neighbours had fought against one another. For a long, long time. Old Lady Luxembourg had absorbed centuries of the most brutal central European experience.
Ever since the division of the Carolingian Empire into East and West Francia, the shifting rules and powers in Europe had been in constant conflict. The various states involved raided their coffers for wars, weapons and armour. In the course of the centuries spent fighting against and alongside one another, they had obtained great skill in processing iron and steel; in chemistry, where they were to develop explosives and the like; and in medicine and surgery – because where soldiers collide, there is always work aplenty for an army surgeon, and thus money to be made. Waging wars, the Europeans practised on one another at first, developing the best weapons and the hardest armour, which were eventually to make them lords over almost all the world. The Second World War brought the tipping point, wiping out the European empires and making way for the conflict between the superpowers.
All this, the Swiss, the Liechtensteiners and the Luxembourgers understood. They were too small to join in the geopolitical games themselves (and nor did they have the required coasts and ports), but they got plenty of insight into other countries' business, because they were trustworthy. They were smart bankers who could show mercilessness if necessary. They had their own intelligence service. And their code. Survival was their supreme objective. And the Old Lady was one of those bankers.
One could also call her the Cold Lady, with all she'd seen and used coolly to her own advantage. Prior to setting up business, she had carried out a thorough analysis during the confused and confusing early forties. Any neutral observer with a basic overview, something admittedly hard to obtain at that time, must have known that the world war would end up in a truly paradox situation: the losing side, and by the end that meant solely the Germans, would emerge from the war with the strongest European economy.
While Germany's men were fighting on their various fronts, millions of forced labourers kept the economy running. But where the Germans invaded, they laid waste to the local economy, to say nothing of their other atrocities. The huge amounts of public funding (stolen money and compulsory government bonds) that German industry bagged in the forties by making the material for the war of conquest and extermination were well invested. In Swiss Francs, gold or property purchases in previously agricultural German states like Bavaria. In 1943, for instance, Siemens AG

began buying up large plots in Munich, already planning to move there after the war. And after their return to the global market.
The measure on which Ludwig Erhard later based his economic approach, with which Germany planned to return to the global market after 1945, was a unit of heat: 2000 calories per person per day. This small bright heat lamp for every German, they asked the world, was all they wanted to work for at home and on the world's markets, no more than that.

As a banker, the Old Lady had started anew at a point when others were thinking of a golden retirement. She was not interested in individual companies. She planned entire industries. And in doing so, she pursed an objective – to unite Europe in peace, to avoid more blood being spilled.
If Europe fights Europe, how could Europe not be the victor? That had been the credo of past centuries. But that's where the snag came in: if mutual enmity had lent wings to European industry – what would become of future industrial production if they were to unite in peace? How could they remain as productive as ever without such nearby competitors? How could they achieve continuous strength and neighbourly peace simultaneously?
As soon as Seuss had briefed the Old Lady immediately after his early evening arrival in Bad Mondorf, he had felt dark clouds gathering. She rang for her secretary Gabriela every five minutes to order something for her guest: a little something to eat, coffee. She herself only ever took a forkful. But as she listened to Seuss's briefing, she forgot even that.
The smallpox outbreak was causing considerable production difficulties at the Rither Works. They wouldn't be able to meet the contractually agreed delivery date for the latest furnaces, bound for Congo and handled via Luxembourg.
'But Monsieur Richard – put the bird down here, thank you – we talked at length about the need to observe hygiene procedures if you want to continue assembling furnaces in Africa and Asia. And now smallpox. Do we know how it happened?'
'The installer said an Air India stewardess who served him on the flight home had strange pimples on her forehead. But to be perfectly honest, I think he caught it changing planes in Karachi. Well, not changing planes, waiting for planes. His onward flight didn't depart as planned and he had to stay in a hotel. And, well. What do I know where he got to? The WHO documented a smallpox outbreak in Karachi at the time.'
With not a single mention of the mistakes on the company's end, made due to lenience over the Christmas period after the man's return, Seuss revealed the number of employees currently in quarantine or off sick. He simply didn't have the staff to close the gap, he said.
The word gap aggravated the Old Lady.
'Monsieur Seuss, what are you babbling about? It's 1962, the post-war era is over – thanks to commerce. Germany needs labour, we all know that. Just like you did twenty years ago. You've got experience in that field, Richard. You called them foreign workers or eastern workers back then, but it sounded bad, shabby. These days they're guest workers.'
'I know that,' Seuss said, offended.
'How far have you got? When are they coming then, your guest workers?'
'We've got a Greek doctor,' occurred to Seuss after a moment's desperation. He was surprised to hear himself saying it. Mentioning Spyridakis granted him a slight breather. But he had to admit, subsequently, that he hadn't got far on the matter, aside from the young physician he hadn't even recruited himself. Monschau was very isolated, in a chilly part of the country, he vacillated; lots of West German firms in better climates were looking for staff at the moment, for working guests from the south for whom the bracing Eifel region was not first choice. He had not yet managed to sign an agreement with Turkey.
'I thought as much. Fine, back to the main thing: the delivery is delayed, you say. You do know we agreed a very high contractual penalty with the client, don't you?'
'Yes, of course. But there must be room for negotiation. Two or three months, perhaps?'

'Our Congolese clients are very strict about contracts. This puts us in difficulty. Discreet commerce has to be meticulous.'
'Well, how much will it cost us to evade the contractual penalty?'
'Forty percent of the agreed sum.'
By that point, Seuss was already feeling so under fire that he decided not to mention the far worse matter of Vera's foundation plans, for the time being. The plans weren't finalised by a long shot. First of all, the old tactician thought, they should get through the evening with the new client. A very interesting client. And a little tricky.

Karim Mekhloufi, accompanied by two personal assistants, arrived at the Palace Hotel late that afternoon. The gentlemen pulled up inconspicuously in taxis, coming from France. Seuss had taken a lie down for a nap, a pointless effort in the middle of the day. Falling back on one of his sleeping pills would have been fatal, however, wiping him out for the rest of the day. So he'd lain awake and heard the Algerians arriving, casting a first glance at Mekhloufi from his balcony. A dashing young man in sunglasses and a subtle dark suit. One thing had been clearly recognisable, even from the distant balcony in the afternoon light of the setting February sun – Mekhloufi's face was covered in scars, his bony cheeks furrowed and rutted. A more than striking appearance.
When they met shortly later for an early dinner, Seuss had to restrain himself not to stare too much at the Algerian's scars. The craggy face looked to him like a blatant provocation: the outcome of smallpox.
Karim Mekhloufi had studied in Paris and spent several semesters at the London School of Economics. He was one of the industrial policy-makers for soon-to-be-independent Algeria. Like almost every African country gaining independence from the western colonial empires, Algeria was eager to develop and build its own industry – including its own contacts to business partners in Europe.
Old Lady Luxembourg had asked her secretary to sit in on the meeting in the Palace Hotel restaurant. She introduced all her guests, and then she watched in great pleasure as one course after another was carried past her. Though she enjoyed eating, she enjoyed watching others dining even more. Mekhloufi, however, preferred talking to eating; he was ascetically lean.
The Algerian independence movement FLN, after many years of fighting both the French and other Algerian organisations, was at last about to take over government. It saw itself as left-wing but it was strongly nationalistic. The FLN had little in common with Egypt's Nasserism, which urged all Arab countries to unite and took a strongly anti-Israeli course. Mekhloufi's organisation had an intellectual background and seemed to have stable support from the population. It was looking very carefully for possible partners around the world, seeking opportunities and starting points.
And thus, it wasn't long before Seuss was treated to an enthusiastic eulogy from the pockmarked politician to the German party that the director had never approved of, but which had begun to play an almost eerie role over the past few years of booming exports: the Social Democrats. The socialists! Good grief.
'I must congratulate Germany on such a progressive party,' Mekhloufi said in his bass baritone, speaking throaty but easy-to-understand French, which Seuss could follow well. Seuss raised his eyebrows in feigned enthusiasm. But he was shocked by the deep passion with which the Algerian freedom fighter described the situation.
'It is well known,' Mekhloufi explained the strategic state to the others at the table, 'that the German government under this old man ...'
'Adenauer,' one of his companions amended in a low voice.
'Yes, thank you ...' Mekhloufi continued his analysis, consisting of the Adenauer cabinet being desperate to be involved in a French atomic bomb once the latter was operational in the near future. That was the reason, he claimed, why there had been no comment from Bonn on Algeria, not a word of criticism. The German government stood firmly by its neighbour.

The freedom fighter, an admirer of the legendary Abdelkadir, scratched thoughtfully at the deep pockmarks on his cheeks and eyed the elaborate entrée, some kind of small birds baked in pastry.
'But who in Germany makes speeches in our favour? Who supports the Algerian people's struggle for freedom?'
Dammit, you stupid arse, thought Seuss. The Salvation Army? It was a purely rhetorical question and he hated nothing more. There was no helping it, though, they had to play along with the possible future industry minister's little games.
'You mean the SPD, I assume, Monsieur Mekhloufi?'
'Exactly. Do you have good relations with the SPD?'
'We make regular large donations. I know their MPs from our region very well,' Seuss lied with the absolutely credible earnest he had picked up in over thirty years at Rither. And in some part, or rather at some point, soon enough, it was the truth: there was no way around taking the Social Democrats into consideration, in future.
'Do you know Wischnewski?'
'Er, yes, yes of course ...'
'Wischnewski went to Tunis, on a trip we organised. He wrote an extraordinary article about it. It's been widely read and discussed in Algeria.'
'Ah, yes. One of the rising stars of the SPD, so I hear. The party as a whole is on the up,' Seuss blustered without batting an eyelid.
How he hated those fools; ex-communists, the lot of them, Wehner and especially that mayor of Berlin, born out of wedlock, that appalling Brandt fellow. If things went on as they were now he'd end up chancellor – a nightmare.
Mekhloufi seemed satisfied, though. Nothing had been decided or signed, but Seuss knew from experience that meetings like this one led to big deals, sooner or later. As long as no counter-revolutions got in the way.
'Viva international solidarity!' he exclaimed with great pathos.
'This calls for a toast,' the Old Lady concluded, having the waiters clear away the last course and ordering a bottle of champagne. Later, Mekhloufi moved on to the casino, the only one in Luxembourg, in one of the hotel's Grecian-pillared annexes. He wanted a little amusement and he had plenty of spending money with him.
That meant, once the most important appointment of his stay was over and done with, that Seuss was now the sole property of the Old Lady, all night long. First, they attended a chamber-music concert in the spa auditorium. They met acquaintances of the Old Lady, who had news from the insurance world concerning the claim settlements in Hamburg after the flood, and that was the prelude to the evening.

Once the good old copper vitriol had cleansed his system on the road to the small Luxembourg sheep-breeders' village of Altlinster, Seuss puffed and panted a few times, savoured the fresh air, removed his shirt and used it to wipe down his face and neck, rinsed his mouth with water, and then, sitting in the warm BMW 3200 S in his vest, treated himself to some minerals by means of a bottle of Augustiner beer. He went to some expense to make sure he always had a few crates of it in the cellar of his palazzo and plenty of bottles in the car.
The deeper reason why he had felt so unwell that day that he'd had to purge himself was not merely the length of his stay in Luxembourg, with its increasingly copious and bizarre sequence of food and drink. It was also what he had seen after they'd spent almost half the night and half the next day together, while a veritable human circus had traipsed through the Old Lady's presidential suite. Eventually, the two of them were the last ones there, as always happened since they'd first met in Zürich, back in the forties.
Seuss had still not grasped the nettle and raised the most vexatious subject – Vera and her absurd dreams of converting the company into a foundation – when the Old Lady steered the conversation

in an unexpected direction: 'Here, my dear man,' she said. 'Don't ask me why I've got these pictures and not you, since they were taken in your town.'
She presented him with a series of large-format, sharply focused photos: Monschau, the sun terrace of the Hotel zum Goldenen Lo̎wen. At one of the little round tables sat a man with thick horn-rimmed glasses, in an elegant suit with the latest tailoring, smoking a pipe and sitting at a portable typewriter. He was clearly grinning as he typed with both hands.
'Hmm. Some kind of guest at the Golden Lion? What's that supposed to mean to me? Who is he?'
'He booked in as – what was it, a part of Munich ... Grünwald.'
'Grünwald? Ought I to know him?'
'Well, he openly admits he's researching in your town for the magazine Quick.'
'Oh, then he's one of the reporters chasing a piece of the smallpox pie. Vultures, they're all there. Stern, Spiegel. All the gutter press,' Seuss said, enjoying the honest revulsion he felt – despite paper factories around the world being some of his best customers.
'Yes, that's unpleasant enough. But do you know what's funny, mon cher Monsieur?'
'No?'
'I've heard that the smallpox is only a front for this gentleman to be staying in Monschau. He's after something else. And his name's not Grünwald.'
She set down another photo, smaller, of a driving licence bearing a not quite so anonymous name.
'Him? Isn't that the one with the caviar?'
'That's the one. He seems to have kicked his habit, according to Jack and Johnny, who know him well. And now it looks like he's chasing another story.'
'Will you look at that? And what does he want in Monschau, if smallpox is just an excuse?'
'He's interested in you, Richard.'

When Seuss returned from having to freshen up in the bathroom, she was sitting broad-legged in her seat, her bosom heaving. She looked at old Seuss, her temperamental Bavarian. It made her a little sad to have to ask the question, after so many years working together in trust. But she'd always had the feeling he'd been hiding something from her. A pity, really.
'Richard? Do you have something to confess?'
'Stop it, please! I've no idea what the fellow wants.' It wasn't entirely a sham. But of course, Seuss did have a certain inkling. He was familiar enough with these investigative reporters à l'américaine, who made a living out of raking through sex scandals and Nazi muck and shamelessly spreading it on paper for their readers.
'Fine. Now don't get a shock when I show you this photo, too.' She put down one last picture.
It showed the reporter, once again on the Golden Lion's terrace – but now with Vera! The two of them were apparently deep in conversation.
Seuss' engine stalled for a moment. He felt fear. Around him was the loneliness of the mountains, a bitterly cold wind blowing as if he'd been climbing back home in Garmisch and overestimated himself. Utterly abandoned and alone, that was how he felt. As if defeated.
After that last photo, Seuss opened up a tube he had removed from his counterstrike case hours previously and put in his pocket. He had to get over the shock. And now he set free the spirits that inhabited the case. Many substances among the forty phials resembled drugs more than medications. He selected an upper with psychoactive effects: good old Pervitin. War and industry speak the same language. Pharmaceuticals can render people entirely into appendages of the machine. That's how it had always been. Get it down you! The stuff hit so hard they could have performed heart surgery on him after that. He admitted to the Old Lady that Vera had decided not to accept her inheritance.

'If the young lady dies, she'd have to adopt you first.'

Those words went through his head again now, on the back seat of the car. Saying or thinking them would be tantamount to a pact with the devil; anything to build the steel conglomerate.
The realistic options that had occurred to the Old Lady and him over lunch, later, sounded sobering. The last and only resort they kept coming back to was this: a situation had to come about in which Aachen Technical College would refuse to accept the foundation.
'The Rither Works need a scandal, mon cher. Ridiculously high claims for damages. Contractual penalties, recourse claims, out-of-control debts.'
'But that would blacken our name.'
'The other option is more risky, though ...'
They both knew what she was referring to. A different kind of scandal. A death. Murder. Chaos. Something that would give Seuss time to keep Vera from asserting her will – though of course not the slightest thing must happen to her, for then the foundation would be set up automatically. Seuss was now considering this realisation, having felt sufficiently restored for Lembke to start the baroque angel and drive home at last, after their unscheduled stop.

The purging was far behind them. They were already in Belgium, then passing the High Fens, an ancient raised moor. There was fog on the air, light as a veil, but in the east, in the distance above Lembke's left shoulder, Seuss could still watch across the far-reaching moor, lying partly still ice-covered, partly dried-blood brown, as the sun went up. Like on the waves of an ocean, its rays broke on the damply gleaming heath, and now it went quickly, the sun was there all at once, and it seemed as if the Fens were actually surging at high tide, as had been the case five thousand years before.

10

Vera's will! That was a very special matter; there'd been times in her life when she had consisted of little else, other than a bony ghost with red-blond hair and skin that remained flawless, miraculously. And in her still beautiful but stricken body throbbed the will to survive, to get through, to hold out. The will to be free. She had the great fortune that her polio infection had left her off lightly, but she owed it to her willpower that her good luck had fallen on fertile ground.
And now, this morning, Vera's will had reawakened. She herself still felt a little jeck, buoyant and fresh as a daisy after too little sleep. She opened her eyes, and with the light of the bright day, something utterly unforeseen flooded into her, a feeling she had never felt so intensely. She was in love.
Like a poet in a tormented search for the fitting image – who has to drop her pen, leave her typewriter at the moment when language suddenly opens up and the right words come flying to her, so excited and agitated is she by finding her form that she can no longer stand to sit and hurries outside to take a walk and extend the confusing joy of finding what she sought before the act of writing brings it to an end – that was how Vera felt this morning, on which everything confirmed to her that it was so: she was in love! And she had wanted it herself, brought it on and in doing so, blatantly ignored everything on which her happy life as a free young woman had previously been built – and now she was: in love. Perhaps a mistake, possibly a disaster in the end, but certainly a fact, which meant she could hardly stay in bed for ten seconds after waking up, and ran to the bathroom to shower, all the while telling herself that the plan she'd had in her mind as she woke was not based on utter confusion and was not running away from the young man in her bed, but had a sensible objective. She had to do this now, she told herself, had to visit this place, have this one conversation, so as to finally write her big report: 'Monschau – My Hometown in Quarantine'.
She donned beige woollen tights, found a long pale skirt she had last worn a few years ago, added a white blouse and a cream knitted waistcoat. All very inconspicuous.
When Vera and Nikos had got home late at night, they had bid restrained goodbyes to Behrends. He must have gathered a spark had flown, but that didn't mean they could show it openly. Then

they'd embraced inside the house, knowing they wouldn't let go of one another that night. Confused and overjoyed but very tired from the ball, the narrowly averted fight and the beer, they had both gone into Vera's apartment and at some point fallen asleep side by side. Happy to be together, too shy and virtuous to go any further.
Vera knew she couldn't bear to look at Nikos again, wouldn't go to him and whisper sweet nonsense in his ear to arrange to meet for lunch, although that was what she wanted.
But she was in love, so she was also twisted and tangled. Her willpower had adopted a different frequency, and now she was exerting her entire will to do the opposite of what she wanted. Her wanting would soon see what came of it, once her will came along. So she didn't cast a backward glance at the sleeping man, instead only writing a note.

Dear Nikos, I've popped into town. Shall we meet later? Just ring the bell. Looking forward. Bisous – V

By the front door, she put on the Red Cross nurse's cap they'd brought back as a souvenir from Düren. A happy coincidence. She matched it with a dark coat and voilà: the perfect volunteer nurse. Handbag, gloves, keys.
She took the lift to the underground garage and decided on the red Fiat Nuova 500, which her father had bought the moment it came on the market. The garage door opened as usual – slowly and with strange jerks caused by the opening mechanism; as a child, the plodding automatic door had made her think of doddery old retainers.
As soon as she drove off, the sun broke through and cast a gleam over the encrusted heaps of snow by the side of the road. It was a wonderful morning.
She drove for ten minutes along snowmelt-kissed streets to the hospital. To cover up her nerves and distract herself, she recited once again what she thought an auxiliary nurse ought to know about variola. She ended up at the four stages. The first three and their symptoms came straight to her, but she had spent too little time on the fourth, the healing phase. How did it go again? Pocks dry up around the twelfth day. Brownish scabs. Fever sinks. Eyelid swelling reduces. Patient's facial features recognisable again.
The disease vacates the body, she thought. Dries out. Out, ex, yes, it was something beginning with ex, that was the word. She parked the miniature Fiat in the hospital's staff car park. As she strode towards the staff entrance, heart thudding, she remembered it, fortunately: the exsiccation stage.

VENGEANCE

1

Monschau. Originally a fortress, at the spot where the dialect of the Rhineland has always been intertwined with Low German, Flemish, Luxemburgish and French – rather like the region's rulers, who frequently changed. It was once governed from as far away as Jülich and even the Duchy of Palatinate-Neuburg. Yet none of this seemed unusual in the town itself. It was not far from Aachen, the seat of Emperor Charlemagne in the first Holy Roman Empire, and all these languages were spoken there anyway, none of them seeming to take precedence at first – for official purposes, Latin was used. And so the precise name of the well-fortified town had been far from clear for several centuries. Everyone knew it was located at the source of the fast-moving, stirring, almost torrential river Rur, high on the hill. Mons loci, the Romans had called the spot. Which means nothing more than 'the local hill'.
But what exactly that hillside was called was not fixed for many generations. Around a century after its earliest mention, the place was called Munioy, a year later Monjoje. Then Monsyoge. De Muns Yoia. Soon followed by De Munzoyge, Muynzie, and then back to a clearer, more Romanised

version: De Monyou. There is mention in 1429 of Monschauwe. During Goethe's days the town was known for a while as Montjoie, part of France under Napoleon. The translation of the French name is 'mount of joy'.
A literal German version, Freudenberg, was the suggestion made by the imperial Prussian administration, on ordering the name Montjoie germanised in August 1918. The Great War – started with insane jingoistic enthusiasm from almost all participating countries and their populations – had been fought and lost, but the old bureaucracy and above all the old ideas were still in charge. And a town so close to the border was not to bear a French name any longer. Heaven forbid some Francophone power might think of annexing the place again, what with it already sounding far too French. The Belgians, for instance, for whom the Monschau protrusion was ripe for the picking. And so the town was once again renamed, with iron Prussian administrative will. But Freudenberg? The locals protested strongly, including death threats against Prussian officials and officers. They would never accept that name. The matter went right the way up to the national government, and all because of the recalcitrance of these damned arch-conservative Eifel farmers! Freudenberg, never! What exactly did it imply, Freudenberg? Hill of lust. Mons Venus. Monschau's deep-rooted patriots could never accept such a thing. Being true Catholics, familiar with sin and its ways and means if granted even the tiniest loophole, there was no way they would give their town such a suggestive name, no matter what it was called in wanton French. This insistence was by no means Vatican-inspired whimsy, as is often attributed to the Eifel; a case of wanting to be more Catholic than Cologne. The discomfort they felt when the administration proposed such a frivolous name stemmed from the fact that the playful yet very literal germanisation was more than just random. Why were the gentlemen of the Prussian military so keen to visit the parade ground in the High Fens, as were the wealthy excursionists from Belgium and Holland who came to the town? Partly because poor peasant girls from farms and villages toiled in the town's clothmaking industry, alienated from their rural Catholic roots by the hard work and meagre pay in the often-brutal textile factories, and these young women would make themselves available on pleasant evenings, in the streets of the town and behind the hedges of the surrounding countryside.
Such sinful activities may not have been more common here than elsewhere. But to have them immortalised in the town's name – no, not at any price. And thus, Montjoie became simply Monschau. It sounded familiar, with the old French name merely taking German spelling. It was a solution everyone could, would, had to live with, in the town's good old tradition of varying its name for well over a thousand years, frequently and frankly, but never frivolously.

Just as thread by thread is interlaid and entwined to weave cloth, so too language knits acoustics and meaning into fabric, a fabric with sound on one side, the upper side, and a wealth of meanings on the lower side. And then there's the case in which language, seeking to sound melodious, conceals the sense of a word by honing down its sharp edges like the water of the Rur with its pebbles, smoothed and beautified. The same has also happened in Monschau. In Rosenthal – the valley of roses.
Monschau-Rosenthal lies just outside the old town centre, on the bank of the Rur. The land seems almost too steep for building; the town ends here, the name suggesting an idyllic location, seeming to indicate that wild roses once grew here. Yet brocade is not far from rags, after all, and Rosenthal was more akin to rags beside intricately woven Monschau. Rags were in fact processed in the town, traded and brought from far afield. And the sorting and picking of the delivered scraps was the work of the least experienced, youngest but still strongest women workers, just starting out and capable of performing the dirty work for a few years, thanks to their youth. All the things that had to be worked through and picked apart: worn outfits, sheets and undergarments, originally from asylums and hospitals, often the clothes their wearers died in. And these fabrics harboured poisons, disease, pestilence. Or rather germs, bacteria and viruses, as have always travelled through trade and exchange. And they took their harmful effect.

Leprosy was among the worst fates. Since the end of the seventeenth century, there had been a leprosorium in this very spot outside the town of Monschau. A house for those leprosy sufferers who could no longer wander the world, warning the healthy of their approach with wooden clappers, after ten, twelve, fifteen years of being shunned. Those who could no longer go on walking sought out a leper colony. A house where they could die. The houses were often dedicated to Saint Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. St Lazare in Paris was outside the gates of the city, and many other leper colonies were similarly situated.

In Monschau, the building was not watched over by a patron saint and was simply called the lepers' house. It was where people died of one of the worst pestilences in human history, a bacterial skin disease named for the Greek word lepra, meaning 'peeling or scaling off'. The valley of the lepers, Leprosental, was of course not the best address for its healthy residents either, but the established Monschauers were also put off by the name of the neighbourhood. Everyday language use, and perhaps deliberate change, thus honed off the first syllable: Rosenthal, that sounded and looked much better. And the wild romantic air remained attached to the pretty name even after the house for segregating the dying had long since closed down, all the Mycrobakterii Leprae washed down the Rur. That was long ago in Monschau, but Europe's last leprosorium closed its doors only five years before this story takes place. The Venetian Republic had once set it up on Isola Spinalonga off the coast of Crete. The hospital there disappeared, but islands like it live on – in the word isolation.

Isolating dangerously sick people seems cruel, but for a long time it was the only way to protect the healthy from others, their friends and neighbours, if they contracted leprosy or the plague, cholera or tuberculosis. No one must touch or come close to them, and nor did they want to see or smell all the horrors: the boils, the pustules, the pus.

For the sick, that meant becoming outcasts. Having to live outside the community. What could be worse for a person who bears no blame at all? Lepers were refused entry through city gates, some towns even banning them from setting foot on bridges. Suspicious travellers stayed on board ships from distant origins for une quarantaine de jours, forty days before they could set foot on dry land. The age of mass air travel beginning in the mid-twentieth century created a new situation. Monschau's smallpox outbreak had arrived via Karachi on Air India and Lufthansa, and the authorities had been trying to entrap it ever since. Initially, they had no other means than in days gone by, when an infrastructure of quarantine and isolation spaces came about in the St Lazarus houses, leper and plague colonies. Now such sealed-off places were sown across the Monschau district, for more than six weeks now; there was even one in Aachen, where a few mysterious cases had cropped up. Especially alarming was the infection of a senior doctor who had examined little Bärbel at the very beginning of the epidemic, and sent her back to Monschau. He claimed he had only looked into the ambulance, but had still fallen ill.

Samples of the virus raging in Monschau had been sent by army helicopter to the Institute for Comparative Tropical Medicine in Munich. Professor Herrlich there had identified them as a particularly 'sociable' viral strain. Virologists use surprising vocabulary, at times.

This sociable variola had by now had the following effects on the Monschau district: home quarantine had been imposed in over fifty cases, affecting around ninety people, on top of which five large quarantine centres were fully occupied, including the primary school in Lammerath, the vocational school there, the Protestant youth centre in Monschau, a large marksmen's club in Kalterherberg, the alpinist clubhouse in Rohren and others. Each of these housed up to sixty people, who were occasionally transferred. The centres were organised to hold two separate groups, looked after by care staff. Of course, the people staffing the quarantine centres had to stay in one place as well.

Nurses, Red Cross auxiliaries, police officers, GPs and public health officers did their utmost and protected themselves as best they could, but seven nurses and six doctors had already fallen ill. That included three GPs, who were of course responsible for other medical cases in Lammerath

and the villages. Arrangements had to be constantly adjusted. But for now, the construction was standing firm.

Its architect was doing everything in his power to keep the epidemic in check, with the aim of defeating it in the end. He reminded officers of laws and frightened politicians as necessary by painting horrific pictures of what might occur. He praised medical staff and encouraged the local doctors to keep going. He himself, Stüttgen, was everywhere, which meant he never stayed long.
All this granted him the bitter experience of becoming the face of the epidemic for all those affected by his measures, intended to protect them. Many overlooked his honesty, earnest and determination. All they saw was that when Stüttgen came along, so did smallpox. The foremost champion against variola was seen as its emissary.

2

Shortly before his alarm went off at four, Stüttgen woke of his own accord, as he did almost every morning. His first movement was to reach for the off-white Junghans travel alarm clock ticking twice a second on his bedside table with a quiet metallic hum.
It had been a gift from his parents for passing his preliminary medical examinations in 1940. Not long after that, aged twenty-one, Stüttgen had been drafted into the Wehrmacht and, like all students at universities in the Greater German Reich, put in what was called a student company, where they were given basic military training while continuing their studies. In the breaks between teaching, these student recruits were then sent off to the front, learning practical medical skills in the brutal theatre of war. A bizarre reality between lecture hall and field hospital, which made it clear to Stüttgen that he was training for nothing but to patch up the terrible wounds inflicted on the soldiers by the war machinery. The state, he saw, was primarily running its venerable medical schools only to connect them to the slaughterhouses of its war of conquest. Günter Stüttgen's company was stationed in Düsseldorf, where he finished his basic degree and wrote a doctoral thesis on biophysics. Then he was sent to the Atlantic Wall. His travel alarm clock accompanied him throughout the war years, and even then it sufficed for Stüttgen to set it, so as then to wake up of his own accord. A deep state of alertness had been his companion since that time, a vigilance that had never left him.
After defusing his alarm, he tiptoed out of the bedroom, taking care not to wake his wife Ruth. His clothes were laid out in the small bathroom, bread and cheese was ready and waiting in the refrigerator; he packed his cooled breakfast in his briefcase to eat on the road. Before he left the flat, he cast a glance into his sons' bedrooms. Thomas and Ulrich were twelve and fourteen; he had barely seen them since the start of the Monschau epidemic, having previously had time for them on Sundays, at least. The younger boy was snuggled under his covers, his feet poking out into the cold air. Stüttgen tiptoed to Ulrich's bed and adjusted the blankets.
His old Volkswagen was parked outside the house on Grafenberger Allee. Stüttgen scraped the coating of hard night frost off the windscreen and drove across the near-deserted dark city to the Medical Academy, glumly listening to a sound from the engine that seemed to be new. The nineteenth-century buildings of the municipal hospital from which the academy had originated had been severely damaged in the war, but patched up and renovated sufficiently for clinical practice, teaching and research to resume fairly soon after. A post-war concrete structure on Moorenstrasse, square and grey, housed the place Stüttgen often thought of as a secret lover: his lab.
The Düsseldorf academy was famous in the medical world for its daring operations and experiments, particularly open-heart surgery; then for its virology, and finally for Helmut Ruska's Institute of Biophysics, the home of the electron microscope that had attracted Nikos to the city a year previously. Dermatology under Professor Schreus had also been an important field for some

time, making even greater progress since Stüttgen's arrival. He was one of those dermatologists who realised that a skin problem could often have deeper causes.
'They want every evil curing at the place of its appearance,' Goethe wrote in his Elective Affinities, fascinated as he was by the interplay of outward manifestation, underlying cause and innermost substance, 'and pay no attention to where it actually has its origins and cause.' He meant it critically; it was the cause that ought to concern us. Ahead of his time as so often, Goethe had conjured up the modern turn in dermatology that scientists like Stüttgen carried out.
The skin, the most visible and, after the lungs, also the largest human organ, interacts with the inner organism and transports substances out of it, but also absorbs air and light, which help the body to form life-giving substances in turn. It functions in a constant exchange between the inside of the body and the outside world. If the skin became diseased, there were often much deeper reasons, and the skin was merely their external manifestation. That was the point where Stüttgen's research began.

The professor parked the car and greeted the night porter, a war invalid who'd had to leave Silesia when it became part of Poland, his left sleeve tucked up and attached with a large safety pin. The night porter had to hold out until seven o'clock and saw the arrival of the professor, hurrying to his petri dishes and test tubes, as a morning star auguring the end of the night and his shift.
Since it was difficult to experiment on living skin, part of Stüttgen's research consisted of making substances react directly to one another under laboratory conditions. That enabled him to conclude how they would behave on human skin. A simulation of life, or at least of its chemistry. In hundreds of dishes, now flaring up in the lab's neon light, substances were reacting, changing and helping Stüttgen to understand why some people came out in a rash when they took certain medications, and others did not. Little by little, these lengthy, minute tests would illuminate the dark area of how the skin communicated with its environment. A substance called histamine played a significant role. It was a giant field barely explored so far, like a new continent: the allergology of skin.
Stüttgen's experimental setup required daily control and supervision. That was why the man set his trusty alarm clock to four every day, so as to check on his tests before driving to the Eifel, to renew them, abandon them or regard them as completed. Shortly after seven, by which point the one-armed night porter had just been relieved, he finished his notes, cleared up, went to the car and ate a sandwich before the drive. Ruth was also a doctor, an excellent general practitioner, but she'd stopped working when they had the children. West German society had no other model; East Germany was much more progressive, with universal childcare. Stüttgen had just bitten into his bread when he noticed a shadow, immediately followed by a barely audible knock at the pane beside the driver's seat. He wound down the window and there was Professor Ruska from the Institute of Biophysics. The lord of the electron microscope. In the dingy light of the academy car park, his breath drifted ahead of him in dense swathes.
'Good morning, doctor. I hope I'm not interrupting.'
'Not at all, doctor. Good morning.' Stüttgen put the remains of the sandwich back in its tin and opened the door. He immediately noticed that Ruska was keeping his distance, his hands buried deep in his coat pockets. Ruska was known for a certain quirkiness, to which pioneering geniuses were perfectly entitled.
Alongside two colleagues, he had been one of the first to view the inside of a human cell with their own eyes. The Americans wanted to land on the moon – Ruska had got further in the other direction, thinking in terms of the miniscule. He was developing a method to recognise viruses on the basis of their morphology. Viruses! The smallest biological entities that existed. Barely proper life forms. It was not even clear yet precisely what viruses were. Ruska had seen inside such incredible worlds; it was hardly surprising a man like him cultivated strange behaviour. As Stüttgen got out of the car, he took another step back.

'How are things in Monschau? I hear the district hospital has become a problem. A variola epidemic often starts with a badly run hospital where the virus spreads.'
'Good morning. Yes, the hospital,' Stüttgen responded tersely, thinking: I don't need anyone to tell me about the hospital, I know that much myself. He wasn't sure whether Ruska wasn't simply quoting standard medical wisdom. Or perhaps he was insinuating something? A medic can have no fiercer critics than other doctors. Ruska ought to be above all that.
Stüttgen extracted a hall-full pack of Stuyvesant from his pocket and offered one to Ruska.
As the staff of the institutes and departments gradually arrived at the academy and the lights went on, Stüttgen – spurred on by his lab results – described the events in Monschau to Ruska. They were alarming but also puzzling: more than two weeks ago, the patient who had contracted the virus via the air when Bärbel Reue was admitted had died in the early hours of the morning of a very severe infection; a thirty-one-year-old mother of two. The hospital was then sealed off completely, no one allowed in or out. The police, who already had a pair of constables outside the building as a routine measure, were instructed to block everything off.
'Heavens,' said Ruska, a Heidelberg man. 'How humiliating!'
'Yes, but just think,' Stüttgen replied, 'to the horror of the hospital staff, there was a young woman in the director's office that morning, a student. There's no explanation of how she even got inside the building, on that morning of all days. The police claim not to have seen her. Apparently she was wearing a nurse's uniform and sneaked in unnoticed, but that sounds absolutely ridiculous. Just imagine – she's the heiress to the most important local company. The Rither Works. They operate worldwide, including in India. It was one of their employees who brought the whole epidemic over in the first place.'
Even for a doctor practised in the art of blasé, that made an impression. Ruska stared at Stüttgen and puffed out a cloud of agitation. A pioneer of high-tech research, he depended on public funding. His apparent detachment from the world was in fact total dependence on that world, requiring very specific equipment worth millions; he knew precisely how important politics and industry were.
'What a terrible mishap,' he exclaimed.
'Yes indeed, Dr Ruska! The gentlemen from the public health department and all the other authorities went white as a sheet. Starting with the district council director. And now they're doing everything to keep the situation under wraps; the press must never find out about it. That would make people even more worried. First smallpox, and now even the company might be at risk, the biggest employer for miles around. They do have a capable director, but he's a case of his own ... And an heiress is an heiress.'
'That must be tough, doctor,' Ruska murmured. 'But tell me,' he perked up again, 'how is Mr Spyridakis doing? How much longer will you need him out there?'
Now Stüttgen understood Ruska's real motivation. Nikos, his Cretan warrior – this was all about him. Ruska wanted his student back; healthy, of course. He was to write his PhD under his guidance. But it wasn't that simple.
'He's fine. Doing important work.'
That was undoubtedly the case. However, Stüttgen had noticed Nikos seeming strangely melancholy at their last few meetings. His eyes swept around the room, looking at nothing. He sighed for no discernible reason. The young man appeared to be very worried about something. Stüttgen couldn't say what nature that concern was. Perhaps the young Greek had fallen in love with a nurse. That was not a rare occurrence. Or was it the work that was getting to Nikos, the fate of his patients? Whatever the reason, Stüttgen had no wish to mention this new remoteness and pensiveness to Ruska. He would presumably be overwhelmed by such an unscientific observation.
'Work, work – what does that matter?' Ruska exclaimed. 'He could be working for science, here in Düsseldorf. For research. Please excuse me, Dr Stüttgen. Give him my regards.'

The pioneer of the electron microscope, persuaded to return from New York to Germany in 1958, gave Stüttgen a disappointed and rather dour nod and headed for his institute.

Stüttgen drove off, weaving his way into the now considerable traffic; it was nearly eight. He breakfasted during the drive. The new car radio, bought from the first of his Monschau bonuses, announced the world headlines.
President Kennedy was insisting on the Western Allies' right to station American nuclear missiles in Turkey. The Soviet Union's missiles strategist, Defence Minister Malinovski, took a critical standpoint. He warned the USA that this unnecessary and aggressive plan, if put into practice, would incur consequences and countermeasures.
Countermeasures, thought Stüttgen; he was following the missiles situation between the superpowers with great concern. What kind of countermeasures could he mean? Soviet medium-range missiles close to the United States? In Cuba, perhaps?
He switched off the radio. He didn't want to hear any more, even though the competitive threats and rearmament – dubbed a 'cold war' by an American journalist in 1945 – were still better than a real war like the one escalating in Vietnam; or the war in Korea, which had costs millions of lives a few years ago; to say nothing of the Second World War. Like many of his generation, all Stüttgen knew was a world under constant threat of war. His father, a primary teacher, had told plenty of stories of the Great War. He had been born a year after it ended, in 1919, as the Spanish flu raged across the continent in the midst of the German revolution.
Was there anyone in Europe in these times whose life story had not been deeply marked by the Germans' wars against almost all its neighbours? Scars, upheaval, new paths and unforeseeable developments – everyone had been through it, everyone had experienced the horrors of this new thirty-year war from 1914 to 1945; yes, one really could call it that. And they all knew the numbing impotence of living on, moving on despite it all. Germany's defeat was real, and yet it also passed above them, above all those who were still there, survivors. They picked the remains of their old lives out of the ashes and started again, went on.
When the twenty-five-year-old medical captain Dr Günter Stüttgen had been expelled from the Wehrmacht in February 1945, in the eyes of the prosecution no longer worthy of serving on the battlefield, he had been shocked at first. He had done his duty as a medical officer from the very first day. And now they were condemning him to death merely for acting according to their own instructions and the Geneva Convention – it was still incomprehensible for him. The short span of time in which the demon had taken possession of language and culture, in whose name injustice was now being pronounced, in the name of the German people.
After handing the dressing station in Dreiborn over to the Americans, Stüttgen had immediately fled to Belgium, where the new era had long since begun. He had gone to the German-speaking region from where his family originated. His Great-Uncle Christian, a sculptor, had lived there until his death a few years previously. It was easy for Stüttgen to duck beneath the radar in Eupen; he knew people there. He had soon got rid of his uniform and all accessories and clothing from his Wehrmacht years – apart from the Junghans alarm clock. Kitted out in an unsoldierly manner and with enough provisions, he had spent the weeks until the war ended in a secretly constructed forest hut. An excellent English textbook on the biochemical cycle of citric acid – named the 'Krebs cycle' after its discoverer, hounded out of Germany by the Nazis – had helped pass the time. A loaded carbine stood close at hand by the door, but there was not one dangerous encounter in those three months. While Stüttgen pursued his studies during the day, reading and taking assiduous notes as long as it was light, his nights were spent thinking about all that had happened since 1943. As a young and fit military doctor, he had found it easier to maintain his mental health than many others he had seen going to the dogs, returning with their mental energy exhausted, and especially if they had been taken prisoner, as numb ghosts of their former selves. He had survived it and his soul was still alive, still feeling, although what he had seen in the Hürtgen Forest at the end had surpassed

anything he could imagine, in terms of cruelty. The images had stayed with him for weeks, haunting him day and night. The most stubborn was the sight of the soldiers injured by 'tree-killer' grenades, and the corpses they kept coming across in these forest battlefields, on the lookout for injured men. When the grenades blew up trees, which happened frequently, the heavy spruce trunks exploded into millions of fast-moving splinters that slashed through any soldiers unlucky enough to be nearby. He had treated hundreds of men in the Hürtgen Forest, Germans and Americans alike, and they shouted and screamed with pain, often until it was all over.
By the time he returned from his lonely forest hideout to Düsseldorf in May 1945, he had made a number of pacts with himself. Never again did he want to see wounds or injuries caused by projectiles or splinters. Never again would he saw bones or amputate feet. He wanted to protect human skin. Immerse himself in the chemistry of life, so as to heal it from the inside. And never, never again would he don a uniform, never speak about the war, about ranks and hierarchies, the veterans' claptrap that had set in only months after the war was lost, in certain obstinate circles. Never again would he talk about what he'd seen and done in the war. He would go on learning, researching and looking ahead – he swore that to himself.
For almost twenty years he had stuck to that oath, said not a word and set not a foot in the Eifel, but now his Hippocratic Oath and the smallpox imported from the Indian subcontinent were forcing him back to that region almost every day, that place where he had last worn a uniform and commanded a field hospital.

Monschau-Lammerath
St Bernhard's District Hospital
Room 404. 8, 15 March 1962

Dear Nikos,
I was very pleased to receive your last two letters with the Seferis poems. I think he's an incredibly dark poet (and he probably sounds friendlier in translation than in the original).
But that's certainly not surprising, considering he wrote the poems during the Greek civil war.

She broke off and bit her lip. 'My darling, I miss you so much,' Vera wanted to write now; that was what she felt. That was why, like every time she wrote to Nikos, she paused at the point when she actually wanted to write about how she longed for him, and hesitated. Could she call him that, after they had neither seen nor spoken to each other since the only night they'd so far spent together?
At least she had his letters. They'd been arriving almost from the first hour of her eternal Ash Wednesday in hospital. Every day. More than a dozen, now. But none of the letters were very personal. He always enquired after her with friendly concern and hoped she was doing well. It never sounded like he was in love. Recently, the notes had been shorter and rather cryptic at points. A few days ago, he'd begun sending her verses from poems by Giorgos Seferis. He would write a few lines in Greek and then in German. That morning's letter contained this poem:

We who set out on this pilgrimage
looked at the broken statues
became distracted and said that life was not so easily lost.

It was as beautiful as it was heart-breaking. There followed a few lines about his working day, always discreet and never naming any patients. He had also written that he brought the letters from his apartment in Rither House to the hospital by hand, a good half-hour walk. He put the envelopes in the St Bernhard's letterbox, the only part of the hospital anyone was allowed to approach without

being stopped by the police and turned away; they were guarding the entrance night and day. The only person who was allowed to enter the hospital and leave it again was Professor Stüttgen.
Vera was thrilled to receive a new letter from Nikos every morning, even though the admission of affection she so hoped for had not yet come. But every message from outside brightened her day. She was accommodated on the most isolated isolation ward the district hospital had, in a room at the very top of the building that had previously contained cleaning material for the staff and how held a bed. Despite being a glorified supply closet, the room wasn't bad at all, though it was lonely up here at the top. It had a small bathroom and even an ante-room that functioned as a double-door system, which made it even safer for Vera.
She spent day and night in the room. Vera certainly had time to answer Nikos's letters. But the spanner in the works was that none of her missives were allowed to leave St Bernhard's. No letters, no postcards, not a thing was allowed out. There might be variola viruses on them, breathed out by Vera or someone else. That was a genuine possibility, but the ban may also have been partly symbolic. Typical for a plague house like this one.
There was a telephone for patients two floors down, but it was always occupied during the hours they could use it. Tous les jours. Aside from that, Vera wouldn't have been allowed out of her room to make a phone call in the first place. And so it was that she wrote a letter a day to Nikos, and not a short one either, putting everything she felt and thought into it, now that she'd been cut off from the world in such a complete and almost incomprehensible way. A daily letter that was never sent.
Vera was a monad, a sole and single unit; she sometimes heard quiet, unidentifiable sounds from the corridor; she looked out of the window, watching the Eifel and the sky above it; and she did that very often. She had books and a transistor radio, she received newspapers and magazines from Mrs Drachsky, and Nikos's letters. But she herself could not communicate. For the world outside the hospital, she remained mute. And because she could have called Nikos her darling in her letters, but would never have found out what he thought of it, she refrained. He addressed her in every letter simply as 'Dear Vera'. That made it easier for her too to keep her emotions in check and not compromise herself. She looked out of the window. It was snowing again. Fat flakes fell from the eternally grey sky. March snow.
A person who sits down at the window to watch what passes by – she reflected on a thought she had once read by the philosopher Pascal – if I happen to pass by, can I then say he sat down there to see me? No. For he is not and was not thinking of me in particular. What, though, of someone loves a person for his or her beauty? Does he love the person herself? No – for then smallpox, killing not the person but her beauty, would mean he no longer loved her.
Was what Pascal described not exactly what she was experiencing here? So many doubts. There was the fear of smallpox itself, which she certainly felt. She had wanted to venture into its innermost realms, only to be unexpectedly swept up as if by a variola maelstrom and set down here in her remote room, like on an iceberg in the North Atlantic. But there was also the simple question of whether she was loved – or not. Who would care if she got smallpox?
Looking out of the double-glazed window, installed only four years ago, into the wide world of the Eifel and over chimney stacks and ventilator towers towards Dreiborn, she counted how many people out there came into question to love her, Vera Rither. The number she came up with was sad and small.
Mrs Drachsky, like everyone around the Rithers, it seemed, was an ambiguous character. She was strictly against having children, a conviction she did not keep to herself, because she considered people essentially evil and did not want to help perpetuate the human race. There had been a measure of trust between her and Vera's mother, a loyalty she maintained towards her daughter. But it wasn't love.
Then there were Swiss relatives on her mother's side, an aunt and a few cousins. Their contact was superficially friendly, as always in their kind of circles, but they barely knew each other. And

otherwise? Eric, the Brussels lawyer, had worked for the family for years and took care of Vera with almost paternal concern, which would have done her good long before her father's death. They thought highly of each other. But she didn't feel loved by Eric; and she wouldn't have wanted to either.
The bustling Parisian machinery had come to a standstill, consisting of university, socialising, writing, smoking, listening to music, reading, theatre, cafés and discussions that had carried her through her days at speed like a fast car. Now, Vera Rither saw that there was almost nobody. Neither here nor there. Only one person. But she didn't know it for sure, of him. And she so wished she could know. Was he thinking of her? Now?

'Dear Nikos,' she began again; she had ripped up what she'd written previously, something which had happened a few times now. 'I'd like to tell you that I'm missing you terribly. I keep thinking of that morning when I was so confused and crazy that I sneaked into the hospital to talk to the senior doctor about my application again. I was certain he'd turn me down again this time, but I hoped ...' – she broke off, sighing – 'I hoped I would find something out that would help me with my story. And perhaps I wasn't even really serious about it all, perhaps it was just an idea.
'But there's no playing around with variola. You knew that, and now I'm finding it out too. And so I'm back in hospital for a long stay, not for the first time in my life. I'd never have thought I'd end up in a situation like this again. And this time, unlike back then with polio, I got myself into this mess.
'I've been put in the loneliest room in the hospital. That's the whole point of it. I don't even hear voices or footsteps, I could be all alone in the building.
'A nurse comes three times a day to bring my meals. She's only a few years older than me but she treats me like a schoolgirl. She never mentions the fact that I'm probably the worst possible hospital inmate for the doctors and nurses. Not vaccinated because the jab's not compatible with an old case of polio; as you know, of course, I'm like the rawest of all raw eggs – nothing must happen to me. That's why my room has two doors. That's why I only ever see the nurse through a pane of glass when she brings my food to the ante-room, and even that, Professor Stüttgen explained, is not entirely without risk for me.
'He comes on his morning round every few days, and I'm always the first person he visits. Wearing a rubber suit, he looks at my skin very carefully, and even though it's quite difficult communicating with an astronaut like that (and like you), our encounters have always been friendly and also cheering, for there have been no changes to my skin so far and my temperature is normal. But I am incredibly bored. And at the same time, scared. It's not just a Sartre play, it's the world I'm living in. I'm afraid.'

Why was she afraid, in fact? Because people did come to her window, but no one who had really seen her. She was observed, yes, but no one recognised who she really was. She navigated life alone. The Rithers built the best special furnaces in the world – but other than that, warmth had never been their thing. She had always felt and then later seen clearly that her parents hadn't loved each other. She didn't understand how estranged they had really been until Eric explained the structure of their private assets and company networks.
Her father and mother had married so that the Rither brothers could put their funds into Switzerland more easily. The whole thing had been arranged by a Zurich marriage agency. It was perfectly normal. Small-scale Swiss aristocracy, not very wealthy, got along just fine with German industry. A partnership for security's sake. Though her father had not loved her mother, he had at least treated her with respect. But neither of them was alive now. Vera had been twelve when her mother died of cancer. Vera's musing grew into self-pity, as occasionally comes over lively young people in moments of enforced motionlessness.

'I'm nothing but a bundle of sad stories,' she formulated the next sentence, 'and if I get smallpox and die, it'll be only consequential, and then our story will end right here. In St Bernhard's Hospital, named after my uncle.'
For a moment, she saw the family crypt in the Monschau cemetery in her mind's eye, a stonemason adding her own letters beneath the familiar names of her parents.
But she must not dwell on thoughts like that. She had to banish the gravestone from her imagination. Immediately. As a child with polio, she had always imagined all the famous places and cities she would go to, once she was finally outside and healthy. The Mediterranean. And Paris too had been at the top of her list back then, the list of her yearnings for the time that was hopefully to come. She would go to Paris, with her mother. They had never been able to make that trip together. But now she'd even moved there. She'd bought her French eau de cologne on the Champs-Élysées. Where did she want to go next? Amsterdam? Rome?
She tore her second attempt at that day's letter to Nikos into a hundred pieces, threw it in the waste paper bin underneath the washbasin, turned on the tap, washed her face thoroughly with warm water, cast a glance at the mirror, went to the window, which she could only open a crack, and lit a cigarette. Then she took a new sheet of paper, sat down at the desk and picked up her pen.

15 March
Dear Nikos,
I'm so looking forward to the moment I can give you all my letters. I hope it will be soon, and since we're here in the Eifel, it will still be cold. It must be wonderful to stand outside and feel the chill of the raw wind.
I think the Seferis poem from your last letter is very good. But also very harsh. Especially the line ...

She picked up his last letter and read the part he had written down for her in his remarkably legible handwriting, for a doctor:

'that while we, still upright on our feet, are dying,
affiliated in stone
united in hardness and weakness,
the ancient dead have escaped the circle and risen again'
I think Seferis, although his style is entirely modern, connects very much with ancient tragedy, like Sartre. I like it a lot.
Unlike my stay here. Today is a particularly miserable day, yet again. Since I read the poem earlier, I've been imagining what it would be like to go to Greece with you. I'd like to see lots of ancient white buildings gleaming in the sun, half ruins, half pure immortality. The Acropolis. And then we'll take the ferry to Crete. Matala.
I'd like to read a Virginia Woolf novel, and you might only have Seferis with you, and if we get bored we'll take your grandfather's boat out a little way, and if we're still at sea in the evening we'll take our bearings from the stars. Or look for the beam of a lighthouse.
Yours,
Vera

4

Nikos was moonstruck, so hard was he wishing and yearning for the next full moon. Without revealing too much about his feelings by asking directly, he had gathered from Günter Stüttgen that once the next ten days were over – the period up to the full moon – with no complications or

symptoms, the chances were good that Vera could discharged from the hospital without breaking any laws.
He knew this, in turn, thanks to Vera's openness during Stüttgen's visit that day. She had brought herself to break her silence, had taken a leap of faith and risked impropriety: she had asked the professor to inform Dr Spyridakis that she was very pleased to receive his letters and would give ten light signals in quick succession at ten o'clock that evening, to draw attention to her location in the hospital. Stüttgen had passed on the message without the slightest comment or change of facial expression.
And so, the moonstruck Greek was now biding his time, at last with a little hope for the future. He was a perfect equivalent for the character once described by the writer Wieland, a fatherly friend of Goethe's: 'The curious fellow was in love when he imagined all this; and so he wrote down everything he imagined as the truth (as every honourable amoroso and virtuoso, faddist and moonstruck fool tends to do).'

Alongside the district council director, by this point an unbridled chain-smoker with amber-stained fingertips, and the various administrative and public health officers, the routine meeting at the Monschau district's variola HQ was also attended by Professor Schnabel – the head of disease control for North Rhine-Westphalia, no less.
Schnabel was in buoyant spirits. There were new studies, he said; they were on the right path. Professor Stüttgen had done a very good job so far, on deck of the warship battling variola.
After the meeting, the ship's captain discreetly took Nikos aside to pass on Vera's short message.
'Did she say anything else?' asked Nikos, inflamed by the idea of a special nocturnal excursion. But Stüttgen had nothing more to report. He shook his head, gave a benevolent nod and made a comment about the quarantine inmate's lack of symptoms. Then he raised the prospect of discharging Vera.
On the back seat of Behrend's car heading back to Rither House, Nikos thought with excitement about all he had just learned. If everything went as hoped, the whole rigmarole would be over at the next full moon. The old chauffeur noticed the change in Nikos, the hope on his face, a cheerful look he had not seen on him for a good while. Behrends had an inkling it might be to do with Vera. He'd driven the two of them to Düren, after all, and on the way back in the early hours he had spotted that something had changed between them. Despite being a dyed-in-the-wool bachelor, he wasn't blind; quite the opposite. Sparks had flown between the two young people.
'She'll be out soon, will she, our Vera – what d'you think, doctor?'
'Could be, Behrends. I hope so,' Nikos replied. He rubbed his knuckles over his lips and teeth and almost fell into the boyish bad habit of biting his fingernails. She was going to get out. It was going to be over.
Over – his terrible longing for her.
Over – his guilt because he'd been unable to prevent her from sneaking into the hospital, that morning after the carnival. The hospital that had transformed into a closed isolation ward that very day. Why hadn't she told him about her plan? Why hadn't she trusted him?
Over – the gnawing fear that her previous polio infection rendered her defenceless and a case of smallpox might turn into a terrible misfortune.
Over – the tormenting worry over her wonderful skin.

Waking the morning after Düren, he'd felt joyous, amazed and happy about what had happened between them. And a little hung over. She'd disappeared somewhere but he'd found her message: they'd see each other that evening. That made everything alright for him, at first. He took a shower and went to work.
Of course, as the alcohol worked its way out of his system over the course of the morning, a moral hangover surfaced. The smallpox carnival, a reckless undertaking in itself. They'd come within a

hair's breadth of a punch-up. But the story with the Maori – an anecdote told by all the schoolboys in Crete – was so absurd and incredible that it had brought an unexpected carnival catharsis for the lads from Schmidt, who'd only come to cause trouble. There had been a moment of silence. Is this guy really serious? Yes. And then it was love, peace and harmony. The young hooligans had backed down. From that moment on, the Düren carnival positively exploded; everyone needed to get rid of the accrued substances somehow, and if fighting was off the cards it would just have to be revelling. It had turned into a rousing party. And Vera. How intoxicating!
But, Nikos thought more and more as his working day went on, what if all that non-fighting and hugging of strangers had spread variola, or they themselves had contracted it in the process? His worries went up and up like a fever chart. The consequences might be huge for the two of them, especially for him, the apparently not so responsible medical man.
And then, when he got home and saw Vera's rooms brightly lit, went up the stairs and even found her door open, it dawned on him that something must be wrong. Mrs Drachsky was awaiting him. She pointed a cigarette at him like a dagger and accused him of turning Vera's head and driving her out of her mind. Love itself as a disease. These irresponsible young people! And now the upshot of it all: Vera in hospital. Isolating. Not allowed out. Out of the institution where they'd lost control of the smallpox.
The causes and consequences were in fact quite different to what they thought at that point. But Nikos's suffering still began that very moment.

By day he was busy, sweating in the heavy steelworker's suit, visiting the quarantine centres, dealing with paperwork. When he got home at night and passed Vera's dark front door, no jazz ringing out these days, he had to pull himself together to suppress his tears. Food no longer tasted of anything, and he was even more exhausted now than before, especially with his walks to the hospital every night. Instead of devoting himself to the generous portions now delivered again from the works canteen, he turned more to the cognac bottle Stüttgen had given him. Alcohol could only numb his pain, worries and yearning, not silence them.
Inconsolably melancholy, he wrote his evening letters to Vera, hating the fact that he had to hold back. How could he know who really read the letters? And how could he know what she really felt? He couldn't write openly in a way that might compromise her, couldn't put his longing into words – and that only doubled his torment. In the end, no matter the weather, he would set off for the hospital. As if of its own accord, the melody of the Cretan song about the man sorely tested by love formed on his lips, chapped as they were by the Eifel's winter weather:

T'akuses, Aretousa mou
Have your heard, my Aretusa,
the sad news of my banishment?

After these weeks in which he'd first felt the violence and cruelty of love, during which no consolation seemed possible or conceivable, he now had a sense of hope. Land was in sight.
Though they wouldn't yet see each other face to face that night, the thought of receiving a signal sent only for him in a matter of hours put him in a happy state of haste. He wrote the day's letter to her quickly, no poem this time, telling her only how much he was looking forward to seeing her signal later. He wouldn't put it in the letterbox, he wrote, until he'd received that missive.
Then he took an old broom from the corridor of the old servants' quarters and wrapped a tea towel around one end, pinning it into place. A bottle of cleaning spiritus from the pantry and a box of matches went into the knapsack he carried on his shoulders. And then he set off.
Since the cold night set in, a harsh surface had formed on the snow fallen by day. Nikos's determined footsteps crunched audibly. The icy wind from the High Fens chased the last scraps of cloud past the already larger, almost three-quarter moon. Nikos enjoyed every step he took. In the

nights since the carnival, which he had passed as a lonely wanderer, he had learned how to walk in the Eifel, in gnarled old boots. He knew how to place his steps in spruce forest, on the edge of the deceptive moor, he knew the paths between the beechwood hedges and across rocks and stones; and the poor moonstruck fellow had even visited villages with gruesome names like Kalterherberg – cold hostelry – the only purpose of his excursions to exhaust him enough to forget his worries.

This night, though, was special. The expectation of a signal from his beloved was like reaching an unexpected cape on a sailing trip. Nikos strode straight to the hospital, reaching it in twenty minutes. The policemen guarding the entrance were smoking in their car, the standard Volkswagen, and didn't see Nikos.
Unlike his usual routine, he didn't go straight to the post box, instead encircling the building to get to the hill, which offered a view of the hospital from the west. Since he didn't possess a watch, he had to listen for the bells of St Joseph's. He had not quite climbed to the top when the church tower rang out ten o'clock.
He stopped where he was, savouring his breath held out horizontal to the moonlight in the cold air, and gazed at the row of dark and illuminated windows. If he knew Vera – in fact, he was sure he did know her – she wouldn't be late. But there was nothing unusual to see on the side of the hospital he was looking at, no flashing or flickering of light. Not even after minutes. And so he went back down the hill and crossed through two archaic hedges with enormous gateways cut into their centuries-old beeches, until he could see the smaller back wall of the complex. At first there was nothing to see. But then, clear and simple, came the sign. A room in a strange position on the top floor, two small windows facing west. Two windows that were lit up and now darkened simultaneously. Then shone out again. Grew dark once more. Vera. What joy!

5

And what joy for Vera! After switching the light on and off every twenty seconds for minutes, staring out into the darkness in between, as she stepped up to the dark window now she saw some kind of torch flare up outside. On the high ground opposite, before the forest began, someone was making fiery signals like a Phoenician! At first she thought it must be coincidence, a bonfire perhaps, but then she saw the torch was being swung in a semi-circle. She clapped her hands for joy. He was here! The message had reached him. He'd come and he'd prepared a signal of his own. How she loved him at that moment, that man so close and so far away. Why on earth had they not had the idea of communicating this way earlier?

6

Then the spiritus-soaked tea towel was burnt up, and Nikos rammed the blackened end of the broomstick into the stony earth. Burnt splinters crunched off. He waved over to her. She switched on the light and waved at him. They had each other, saw each other, even though she perceived only a dark shape and he could make out merely a silhouette in the window. He thought again of what he'd written in his letter; it would be the first thing she read the next morning. And he thought it was good. 'I'm so longing to see you. Yours, Nikos,' it said. Black ink on white paper. He had revealed himself to her. Surrendered himself. But he was confident she felt exactly the same way. What a night. What a sight: Vera at the window!
He tugged the burnt broomstick out of the ground; from now on, he would carry it with him as rod and staff. At speed, he ran down the hill; he still had to post the letter with his admission. The policemen were back outside the entrances now, talking quietly. Nikos put the letter in the box; rarely had the clatter of painted cast-iron sounded so beautiful. One of the two officers looked over and greeted him with a brief nod. Nikos raised his staff.

He crossed the car park outside the main entrance and was beating a path through the winter-thinned bushes, taking a short cut to his favourite route, when he noticed something odd.
Ahead of him, up on the edge of the forest, stood an old army VW. He knew that car. It was the one Max Lembke drove to go hunting. Nikos was surprised that the Rither hunting grounds extended so far, and so close to the town. Then he banged his new stick on the road and enjoyed the crunch of the burnt end again. He'd better get going, though; with the staff in his hand after his wonderful mental meeting with Vera, he felt a great need to stretch his legs. He set off at a wild pace, through idyllic Rosenthal along the Rur, into the half-timbered and slate-clad town of Monschau with its narrow streets. The auspiciously waxing moon hung clearly above the old fortress. Striding the cobbles three-legged like the Sphinx's riddle, Nikos saw an inn that still looked open, and thought for a moment whether to go in for a drink.
Zum Goldenen Löwen was the name of the classy-looking place, which was also a hotel. Nikos peered through the window to see who might be inside. And spotted someone who made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end – that impossible journalist from Munich. Grünwald. He was sitting at a large table with his smoking pipe, papers spread before him, leaning over them with his rictus grin. He had a large bottle of mineral water on his table as well.
The sight of that unlikeable man looking so satiated and self-satisfied was enough to make Nikos turn on his heel. He'd rather head back to the hospital to gaze at her windows again, even though they might be dark by now.

7

Events that don't happen can be just as significant as facts; it's just that we'll never know it. Due to time's miserly tendency to only let a single event happen at once, however, there are infinitely more unhappened things than transpired occurrences.
We don't know how this story from Monschau would have gone, had 'Grünwald' the researcher and Nikos the moonstruck lover got along, talked that evening and exchanged a few anecdotes. They would have discovered remarkable parallels.
One story from the older man's life would certainly have made Nikos think. Twenty at the time, the young Mario – calling himself Grünwald here – had still been living in Vienna and working as a chemical technical assistant. In April 1945, he had witnessed two colleagues being shot by the SS for trying to prevent the destruction of the electron microscope at their workplace. The technical miracle was not to fall into enemy hands. The two scientists died. The innovative magnifier, which Mario had been allowed to look into a few intriguing times, was blown up. The son of a non-Jewish mother and a Jewish father thankfully safe in England, he had felt no sympathies for the National Socialists, but that brutal execution before his very eyes showed him once and for all what kind of place the Nazis had made out of the world. That act of brutality remained with him as he wrote his first short stories not much later, all of them set in post-war Vienna. Then a stage play. A screenplay. Reportage, reviews, essays.
In 1950 he got a job in Munich, now a star reporter crusading against society's hypocrisy, always on the lookout for stirring stories that showed the wide range of threats dangling above the world. And always, he wrote about and against the Nazis, wherever he came across them.
With the land of the economic miracle veritably crawling with threats, lies, scandals and Nazis old and new, and with him always working on several projects at once, he had quite a workload. Ever since his first nights at the typewriter he had counted on a magic remedy to get him through, one so many writers trusted – alcohol.
Now he had countless novels, films, plays, reports from around the world, secret service stories, chases and love affairs under his belt, and he had entered into a marriage of convenience with Uberkinger Spring. He couldn't rule out that he might one day actually like the taste of the mineral-rich water. Until then, he chewed on the slightly salty flavour with every sip, calling to mind –

despite the slight reluctance caused in him by this increasingly popular sparkling water – the principle his psychiatrist had drummed into him in the drying-out clinic: to always remember the night of his breakdown. Think of how you'd soiled yourself, lay helpless on the ground, drooling and incapable of getting to your feet. You have to preserve that feeling of being absolutely abandoned, through alcohol. It's horrific. But it's your best protection.
On top of that, the psychiatrist had instructed him to get a week of healing sleep, and then used a new hypnosis technique to implant an anchor of revulsion to any kind of alcohol deep within him. Thus newly configured, the illustrious journalist was now working on his first story since his release from the private clinic in Rome. The supplies of Uberkinger in the Golden Lion were running low. His expense account at Quick, previously a spectacular testament to self-exploitative extravagance, looked positively wholesome. The Munich office was awash with speculation. What on earth was up with their previously excessive star writer?
At the time when Nikos the nocturnal wanderer had cast his glance through the window of the inn and seen the reporter surveying the results of his research, Quick was the most persecuted mass-medium in West Germany.
That coming autumn, it would be knocked off the top spot by Spiegel magazine, which would draw the law-breaking ire of Defence Minister Franz Josef Strauss, but at the end of March 1962, Quick was still the publication under most pressure from the government.
With the second-largest circulation after Stern, the magazine had recently provoked an unprecedented police operation. And the whole thing had been dreamt up by our very same star journalist. Using the pseudonym 'Strindberg', he had produced two pages that triggered the whole affair. All he had done was to pick up on an already very good article from the Hamburger Abendblatt, do a little more research, and add a decent photo and an eye-catching headline.
The gigantic dinosaur bone of contention was the entrance to an 'old, never completed railway tunnel' – so read the caption. Uphill of this access route was a vineyard. Rails and vehicles for the V2 had been made here in the Ahr Valley south of Bonn towards the end of the war, using forced laborers from the Buchenwald sub-camp Rebstock. And here of all places, Adenauer and his defence council wanted to seek refuge in the event of nuclear war. Seven men were to survive here, according to the plan, so as to continue running the country. The Hamburger Abendblatt had reported in detail – but Quick had printed a large-format photo!
Absurdly enough, the picture didn't show the real entrance to the secret tunnel; it was just a random tunnel in a vineyard. The photo was simply an illustration of how it might look. Nonetheless, and for that very reason, Quick was accused of 'ingenuine treason'. Section 100, criminal law – for falsifying news that would be a state secret in the event it were genuine.
On instructions from the interior ministry, tens of thousands of police officers combed newsagents, kiosks and station bookshops and ripped the offending two pages out of each of the 1.2 million printed copies they managed to lay hands on. There weren't many left.
'April Fool's or sales gag?' asked the later terrorist Ulrike Meinhof, at that point still editor-in-chief of the GDR-financed leftist magazine konkret. And she was right about the second option – everyone wanted a copy of the edition. Quick sold out in the space of two hours.
The mastermind behind that stroke of genius was now sitting in Monschau's Golden Lion Hotel. While researching the bunker story, he had come across a former Wehrwirtschaftsführer by the name of Richard Seuss and his links to Robert Ley, the head of the German Labour Front. Ley's organisation had pooled all trade unions and employer associations in one – the largest state labour institution of all time.

8

Grünwald had been looking for some time into Ley and his hypertrophic plans to set up a gigantic new industrial city. It was to do with his research for a novel on the subject of forced labour in the Third Reich.
On close inspection, it was plainly astonishing how German companies had been squirming to evade reckoning on the subject since the end of the war, aided by Adenauer's government. They took the line that German industry had been compelled by the state to employ forced labourers. In 1953 the London Debt Agreement had ruled that all reparation issues, including this one, were not to be cleared up until a future peace treaty. With Germany divided and the victorious powers locked in conflict, such a treaty was not on the cards. But who needed a peace treaty anyway when business was booming and West Germany was now even bringing in foreign labourers again; this time, not under duress?
The times called for a certain pliability and selective memory, and those who had those qualities slithered cleverly through the post-war era with its miraculous economic upturn, doing excellent business. People like Richard Seuss. The perfect manager for his times.
The journalist and author Grünwald wanted to make a man like him the protagonist of his new novel. He would insert facts, real events and individuals into an altered plot – faction, it was called; the Americans had been writing that way for some time now. But in 1962 Germany, it reaped only shame and scandal. Combined with massive sales.
But the money he'd been raking in from his last novel neither consoled nor gratified him. The only question he asked himself was existential – can I write without alcohol? Will I find the material, the contacts, the people when I'm sober?
That had already failed in the case of Spyridakis. Had the journalist somehow managed to get talking to the young man, he would have learned a perhaps revelatory detail: namely that Max Lembke, Richard Seuss's chauffeur, was loitering in his VW near the district hospital by night.
But what clouded the journalist's view of the whole Seuss research was Monschau's ultimate troublemaker: smallpox. It was a bright distraction for him, a lightning flash that confused him and clouded his vision. He had come to Monschau to crowd out Richard Seuss! But from almost the very first day of his stay, the epidemic had taken over. It had escalated, changed everything, and now Vera Rither, the young heiress to the company, a woman with radical ideas and possibly an interesting writer, the woman he'd met twice in the Golden Lion, was in the sealed-off hospital herself. A very puzzling case. What would happen to the company if something happened to her? And how was Seuss dealing with it? The reporter had noticed a marked increase in his activities over the past weeks, since Vera had gone into hospital. But why might that be? Grünwald had no idea. Smallpox had shaken everything up, seemed to be unleashing strange, dangerous irrationalities, instinctive behaviour, in many people here and in many ways. Including Seuss. The researcher could rearrange his notes on the tablecloth in the Golden Lion as much as he liked; it didn't bring the story together. He wasn't a magician, after all. He needed something more tangible. Realising that once again with a sigh, he returned his research to the expensive leather briefcase given to him by one of his girlfriends, downed the last of his Uberkinger and beckoned to the landlady, who already knew he was planning a late-night walk and called over that the night porter would open up for him; Mr Grünwald only had to ring the doorbell. Then he stepped out onto the moonlight-shimmering cobbles and strode towards the nearby residence of Director Richard Seuss. Past the town's slate-walled Protestant church and across one of the delicate bridges spanning the wild waters of the Rur.

Dangerous at times, the joy he was beginning to feel once again was that of the researcher who has decided to abandon the purely observational side of the job and intervene in the game – like an inspector knocking at the suspect's door out of the blue, confronting him with his suspicion just to see his reaction.

He heard a car on the old cobbles somewhere, a few people's footsteps one road along. The more-than-half-moon hung bright above the town's narrow streets, and as Grünwald looked up he saw a large night bird silhouetted against it, flying away. The wind picked up. The elements seemed to be coming to the fore to watch over his shoulder.
The anticipation of his move in the game lent a seductively ticklish aftertaste to the last traces of Uberkinger in his mouth. If there was a light still burning in Seuss's palazzo, the reporter would have the temerity to ring the bell despite the late hour, to face in reality the man previously consisting for him only of letters, file memos, remittance slips and donation receipts: Richard Seuss, whom Grünwald sometimes thought of as the 'Reich Drunkard's paymaster', because the amount of restaurant and drinks bills Seuss had covered back then amazed even him, the one-time king of the Quick expense account.
'Reich Drunkard' had been the informal epithet for the notorious drinker Ley.
A few minutes later, Grünwald reached the red clothmaker's palace with its pompous symmetrical façade, to find the ground floor and first floor illuminated. A faint light burned above the heavy door. He climbed the granite steps and pressed the doorbell.
Instead of a ring, he heard a very familiar chord echoing around the palazzo, a fanfare. What was it? He pressed the button again, and now he remembered it: Richard Strauss's 'Also sprach Zarathustra'.

9

Dammit, that was fast, thought Seuss, already in his silk housecoat but still at his desk with his figures. He immediately cast aside the thought, because he knew it was only due to his tense expectation. One made a plan, laid a trap and then could think of nothing else. But now was far too soon. Do stay realistic, man ... But what if it had already gone bang? What nonsense! Enough of this silliness.
Still, he instantly dropped his pencil and stood up. Who on earth had the cheek to disturb him so late, even ringing twice? His displeasure on recognising Grünwald, that bothersome but previously ignored nuisance, could not have been greater. His rather ugly upturned lips were unmistakable. Was nothing spared him?

The journalist, having long watched Seuss from a distance and followed the activities around his home, was impressed by the mountain of moustachioed flesh looking down at him. He certainly hadn't anticipated how amicably the little eyes embedded deep in his corpulent face would look back at him – especially since Seuss obviously recognised him, knew who it was standing there.
He introduced himself, and Seuss nodded. 'Quick, is that right?'
And instead of attacking him – how dare he disturb a man so late at night? – Seuss was politeness personified, inviting him straight in, taking his coat and leading him into the drawing room. The dark coffered ceiling and the bright-blue silk-lined walls hung with a plethora of Flemish masterpieces came as a slight blow to the reporter, who was very susceptible to all earthly pleasures and beauties. Not bad at all.
'Take a seat, young sir,' Seuss said, emphasising his Bavarian accent and showing him to one of the luxurious leather armchairs.
Seuss recalled the Old Lady telling him the hack had just come out of a drying-out clinic.
'What can I get you?' he asked cheerfully. 'A nice cold beer? I've always got fresh stock in from Munich – I bet you haven't had a good Munich beer for a while.' He gave a very inviting smile. 'Or white wine, sparkling wine. A red? Cognac, or would you prefer whisky? I've got a very, very good one from Scotland. Like a breath of open fire.'
The guest laughed; this bastard was a real barkeeper. Grünwald bared his teeth like a flehming stallion and adjusted his glasses.

'Sparkling water, please. Uberkinger, if possible?'
'You're in luck, young man. I've got some.'

That was the last time Richard Seuss budged an inch for his guest. He didn't fall for a single one of his rhetorical tricks, refused to let his guard down. Kept himself under control. After all, he had long awaited attacks from this flank. He let this Grünwald fellow say his piece. The man had put his story together nicely and was now trying his best to impress Seuss with it. The Robert Ley file. Waldbröl.
'If I understand rightly,' the reporter asked naively, 'this place Waldbröl, where Ley was from, was to become one of the Reich's important new towns. The city of the people's tractor works. VTW – the biggest factory in Europe. How many Porsche tractors were to be made there?'
'To start with? Thirty thousand a year.'
'Four factory halls, each of them a hundred thousand square metres, the largest manufacturing halls of their time, is that right?'
'Yes, that's what was planned.'
'And not just the largest factory – the town planning was enormous too: "Germany's most beautiful square" on the old cattle market, complete with its own opera, state theatre and university. All brand new, all planned by Robert Ley's Cologne architect, Clemens Klotz, am I right?'
Grünwald took a sip of Uberkinger. It tasked like a cocktail in Havana. He drank another mouthful. Licked his lips. He had Seuss where he wanted him.
'But who – that's the question – who was to manage Europe's most modern factory, run on wind-powered electricity, the Waldbröl National Tractor Works, who was it to be?'
'Well, well, you've done your research. Congratulations. You're right: everything you're saying is absolutely right. They're plain facts, very old ones. But you seem so het up about them. What's there to get upset about, Mr Grünwald, that's what I'd like to know. And what you want from me in the first place. Where's this conversation heading?'
Grünwald laughed aloud, shaking his head. As if that wasn't clear!
Seuss continued calmly: 'Just because Robert Ley, who made a clean sweep and killed himself before his trial in Nuremberg, just because he once considered a certain Richard Seuss the most capable industrial manager in all of the Greater German Reich, that doesn't mean Seuss has to feel guilty for all Mr Ley's crimes, does it?'
'Certainly not, Herr Wehrwirtschaftsführer,' the reporter said with a smile, and he took out his research folder and handed over a few of his photocopies. They all bore Seuss's signature.
Seeing the smile freeze on the face of the overweight man in his expensive-looking housecoat compensated for the turned-down cognac, which he'd have loved to knock back but now never would again.
'Where did you get these?'
'That's for me to know, Director Seuss. I'll leave the copies here for you. You'll find me at the Lion. Oh yes, you asked where this conversation was heading? To more conversations, I hope. I'd like to have a much longer chat to you about this type of thing. About the things I haven't yet found out, of course. Think about it. My regards.'

10

Once the reporter had left, it took Seuss several wide-awake hours to work out all the implications. There was no point trying to sleep, probably not for some time. The donation receipts, all signed by Reich Treasurer Franz-Xaver Schwarz from Erlangen, the head of the NSDAP's finances, must come from the Nazis' feared bookkeeping convolute. Terrifying rumour had it, the books had been seized by the American secret service at the end of the war and not lost or destroyed, but somehow ended up in unknown but not at all well-meaning hands. It might have been when all the Nazis

bigheads had been locked up together in a Luxembourg grand hotel, where they tried to get their secrets out of them before chauffeuring the gentlemen to Nuremberg. That was in Bad Mondorf – in the very same hotel where Seuss had celebrated the secret Algerian deal, a fortnight before. Where he'd received photos of this Grünwald fellow. But where did the man get the donation receipts and the other evidence? Seuss had a very unusual queasy feeling, and he knew none of the remedies in his counterstrike case would help.

What's the matter with you, Richard; since when have you been afraid of the truth? You don't think this is a coincidence, do you? Pull yourself together, even if it hurts. The matter's as clear as day, no matter how bad it looks. It was all documented. Including embarrassing photos. The really stupid thing was that he'd kept all this to himself back when he was de-Nazified – well, what else could he have done? He felt perfectly clean. There was no blood on his hands. The country needed workers, forced or not. What else was he to do? Let sleeping dogs lie, he'd thought at the time. But if it came to light now the hounds would bay, no matter what had really happened. Now of all times, now that there were so many press men in town chasing down the smallpox epidemic.
There was a horrific possibility he couldn't even really consider: that Old Lady Luxembourg was behind it all. He had disappointed her and now she wanted to – not destroy him, perhaps, but get rid of him. Drive him away like an outcast, lock him up.

Huffing, he put on his best Bavarian suit; he wasted little time packing. His forehead was damp with sweat as he cleared out his safe. He was aware he couldn't take his whole counterstrike case along. He selected a few compounds and substances he might need most urgently in the next few weeks. Then he took an American amphetamine that would help him through the night. The rest, he simply left behind in the palazzo. He wouldn't find a residence like this again, ennobled by sparkling mountain streams. What a wonderful place. The sound with which the heavy door fell shut brought pain to his ears. He stroked its ornate carvings, touched the golden handle he had so often turned with pleasure. He pressed the button to hear the epic opening of 'Also sprach Zarathustra' once more. The doorbell to his life.
Then he drove to the works in his small personal BMW, kept in a side street near the house. He nodded from the car to the night porter, not meeting anyone else from the night shift. The foundry brightly illuminated, the chimneys smoking. He hurried to the administration building, only lighting his desk lamp, and combed his office for documents he'd be better off taking with him, to get rid of them somewhere later on. The desk was covered in papers; variola had held a lot of things up. He rifled through letters from the past weeks, sending up a cloud of dust; he rubbed his eyes and sneezed a few times.
He picked up the telephone, dialled the exchange.
'Yes?' said a woman's voice, rather hoarse. She cleared her throat. 'Excuse me. How may I help you?'
'Get me a line to America, please, New York. A number in Manhattan ...'
The lady at the exchange connected him. After five ring tones, someone picked up. Seuss conducted the phone call he'd hoped never to have. He took a scrap of paper kept in his wallet at all times and read aloud a sequence of numbers, a code. Every single number the stab of a blade and a relief all at once.
Once he finished he wrote a note to his secretary, telling her he'd gone abroad to visit important clients; he'd be in touch soon.
Just because he'd prepared for this moment often – without ever believing it would come – that didn't mean it wasn't bitter for him as he got in the car, turned the ignition and left the factory founded in 1924 by Bernhard Rither, where he'd spent almost all his life, left it behind him. It wasn't long, the sun just rising, before he reached the Urf Dam, where Robert Ley had built his Nazi Ordensburg Vogelsang – using donations from Seuss and other leading men of industry. A

building straight out of a science-fiction film, it towered over the lake. Here in Vogelsang was where they'd met in person, Seuss and Ley. Corrupt from head to toe, Ley had been drunk at the breakfast table, but a rousing speaker. A fantasist. But because he always said what everyone wanted to hear, he cast a spell on his listeners. When he told people it wouldn't be long before the Germans' outstanding technology took them not only to the moon but to other planets, they believed him and saw it all before their very eyes. Because they wanted to believe him, because it was a beautiful fantasy. All the machines, the furnaces, all the steel they'd use along the way, in the imminent conquering of space.
What a goddamn arsehole, thought Seuss as he watched the rays of the sun beginning to play across the gigantic structure of the Ordensburg. What an idiot. He put his foot down. He wasn't quite sure who he meant – Ley or himself. Probably both.

Yet even as he was leaving Monschau's horizons, contritely wrangling with his past, something of him remained behind. Biding its time. Waiting for its opportunity.

10a

The public health officers had quickly traced the infection route of patient 37, whom Günter Stüttgen was facing right now on his round at Monschau district hospital. Patient 37 was an old man who lived alone in a village in the High Fens, a proud bachelor who earned his living and saw his life's purpose in keeping a pair of milk cows, a few sheep and a couple of hens, with which he more or less cohabited, quite literally. In the village of Heckenley, where his smallholding was on the outskirts, he was known only as the hermit.
He had been infected by the son of one of the carpenters who had installed the first provisional security doors in the district hospital at the start of the epidemic. The boy, himself in one of the children's quarantine centres and displaying no symptoms to date, had often visited his old neighbour to watch him taking care of his animals.
Now the hermit was in a one-bed room, nodding up at Stüttgen in his rubber suit.
'Ah, the professor. I won't shake hands.'
'How are you feeling, Mr Broich?'
'Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, oh protect me in my need, from fire, flood and death's great speed,' he proclaimed in his joyful elderly voice, and shook his head with a smile. 'I'm grateful to the Lord. As long as my animals are alright. I'm missing them.'
'You'll soon be back home, Mr Broich.'
'I thought to myself and promised myself, if I get out I'll go dancing in Echternach.'
'A pilgrimage to Saint Willibrord?'
'That's right.'
'I'm sure that's a good idea.'
Stüttgen nodded at the old man. He'd put on weight since he'd been admitted; he was coping well with smallpox, despite his age. They'd be able to let him out in a few days' time – provided the discharge system worked and there were no more incidents.
With satisfaction, Stüttgen watched the hermit receive the usual treatment from a Red Cross nurse, a young woman who had accepted the voluntary isolation for weeks without complaint. She dabbed zinc oxide oil on the almost completely healed pustules. The old man didn't have much of a rash on his face; it was mostly his lower arms and legs that were affected. They'd been large pustules, not particularly many but unevenly distributed, mainly on his lower thighs. Variola was unpredictable.
If the last possible point for a vaccination passed, around five days after infection, the virus made its way around the whole body, living parasitically in various organs and often damaging them. The

heart and kidneys were particularly vulnerable. And the brain. A shocking number of patients lost their eyesight to variola.
Modern medicine knew no protection other than vaccination. If it was too late to vaccinate and the disease had broken out, it took its course. Every third patient died.
If it only got as far as a rash, the patient was lucky. The medics could then provide care and try to avoid a second infection of the pustules with another pathogen. Bacteria like staphylococci were everywhere, apparently just waiting to turn smallpox pustules into other inflammations, which further attacked the already weak patients. Hence the zinc oxide. It soothed and disinfected, despite its repulsive smell. It had helped the hermit. He wouldn't come away with major scarring, and even if he did, the devout old man would hardly be concerned with how his thighs looked.
'See you tomorrow,' Stüttgen called from inside his suit, and waved at the hermit with his wide rubber hand.
'God bless you, Professor!' the old man replied, raising one arm already treated with zinc oxide. The nurse smiled at him from behind her mask, using her eyes so he could tell.

The hermit had been Stüttgen's penultimate patient on today's round. Twenty-six people were currently in the isolated hospital, but the situation was easing with every day that passed. Since the tragic death at the end of February, they had lost no more patients as yet. Most of the severe cases had the worst behind them. And the most important thing: there had been no new cases for over a week.
The hospital doctors, nurses and auxiliaries stayed there night and day, living apart from their families for weeks now. They had worked untiringly, as had the GPs in the villages; those that were still there and not in quarantine or isolation themselves. To say nothing of Spyridakis's hard graft.
Yet there was one worry that Stüttgen couldn't shake off. Patient number 2: Bärbel Reue. He'd go to her in a minute. The room at the end of the corridor was hers. She'd been given lots of toys, dolls and even a small television set to watch the children's hour in the afternoon. Her favourite was the American show Fury, all about the adventures of a fiery black horse.
Bärb, as the nurses called her, was a sweet child; in town, she might be called a typical shy village girl. It would soon be forty days since she'd been admitted. Stüttgen couldn't rule out that the painful Odyssey between Aachen and Monschau, shaken by chills and fever that night, had worsened the already harsh course of her infection. Considering the severity of the second phase of Bärbel's smallpox, he'd been glad at least her eyelids weren't affected; that could have cost her her eyesight. But that was almost the only consolation. The child's face and hands had been riddled with pustules, the way Stüttgen had seen in some Indian patients. Extreme cases.
Her skin was strewn with fat pustules, bejewelling her cheeks like the work of a devil intending to replace the child's countenance forever with a grotesque mask. When the rash had reached its peak, Bärbel's face had been so swollen she could no longer see. She'd cried for days and nights. One nurse had taken care only of Bärb, until she herself fell ill, and then another had come. They'd treated the pustules with zinc oxide three times a day, consoled her and persuaded her to resist the hellish urge to scratch her itches. The pustules had dried out now. But the gruesome fact the dermatologist was now facing, with helpless regret, was that the scars on Bärbel's hands and especially her face were there to stay.
As yet, they were scabbed over, and the scabs had to be carefully removed. But what came to the fore would remain a terrible disfigurement. There was nothing Stüttgen could have done over the almost forty days to halt this terrible development. The nine-year-old girl would have to live the rest of her life with a face riddled with scars, an ugly face. How could this already shy child deal with that fate, how could she ever again be really happy?

'Hello, Bärbel,' Stüttgen said, nodding at her slowly, as reverentially as if she were a princess. Problem children, problem patients were always the ones that meant the most to him.

'Hello, Doctor. Have you been to see Vera today?' she burst out, her dark eyes looking at him from above the scabs on her cheeks.
'Yes, Bärbel dear, I've seen Fräulein Vera, first thing this morning.'
'And is she doing alright?' the girl asked.
'Yes, very alright. And she says hello to you, Bärbel.'
She smiled as best she could. Facial movements were still painful.
They talked a little more, Stüttgen amazed all over again at how cheerful Bärbel was. She had acquiesced to her pain during her time in hospital. But once she'd found out Vera Rither was there too, she had suddenly let go of her fears.

11

While Günter Stüttgen was sitting in his Beetle in the district hospital car park, almost despairing after his rounds, lighting one cigarette from the remains of the last and worrying he would never be able to help little Bärbel, his young assistant Nikos Spyridakis stepped out of the staff changing rooms at the Rither Works, showered, shaved and in a clean shirt, and walked the few yards to the almost abandoned Rither House. The only light on was in Mrs Drachsky's room.
The moon, his best friend since Vera had been in isolation, had made an effort this evening to hang precisely above the building, high above the astronomy tower. Nearly three weeks had passed since Nikos and Vera had been up there, looking out into space and examining earth's satellite. And since he had held her in his arms, a few hours later.
He tipped his head back and stared up at the more than three-quarters-full fellow, who looked this evening like an Athenian drachma worn away over the centuries. Exchanged countless times, spent over and over and miraculously renewing itself every time, as no earthly coin could.
Then a few scraps of cloud scudded across, covering it. The air was still cold, a breeze from the Ardennes, but there was a definite freshness and dampness on it, seeming to promise something like spring in the distance.
The sluggish clouds bothered Nikos, though. He wanted to see his friend the moon.
Are you leaving me already? he thought. You were so close a moment ago, and now you've vanished, gone again? But instead of doing its friend a favour and showing itself, the moon was squatting in a knot of lazy cloud-sheep that had decided to take a rest right there.
Fine, thought Nikos. Then I'll go and have something to eat. See you later, buddy.
He could say that with such a light heart because he'd be writing his letter to his beloved and posting it that night. His beloved. Yes, there was no doubt about it. They'd been communicating every day, with one night's delay. In the most devoted tone, he had asked Vera the question of all questions in his letters, which she could then answer with signals at set times. If the answer was yes, then three short flashes at quarter past ten. She had answered him every time, and so it was clear: he and Vera were together.

The light went on in the Gothic stairwell. Nikos shuffled upstairs, tired. He had spent his working day since noon on the last, in fact the very last vaccination drive, with the Red Cross's mobile vaccination unit that had been traipsing around the whole district over the past weeks. Since no new suspected cases had come up at the Rither Works for a week, thankfully, he had offered to help the Red Cross team. They'd taken him along on their bus, a welcome change – without his protective suit. Today's port of call had been a hamlet up in the Fens, vaccinating in a small church hall. All of the sixty or so villagers had come along, forming a long queue out into the front garden and chatting away excitedly. They'd seen each other far less than usual over the harsh smallpox winter with no carnival.
The last two people Nikos vaccinated ('I know it's difficult – but please never scratch the scar!') had been a little boy and his mother. They both got the shot from the jet injector in the upper arm;

the boy opened his mouth to reveal a pirate's gap-toothed grin once it was over. Then he listened to Nikos, interested.
'The little vaccination scar on your arm will grow with you until you're as big as me.'
'How big will it get?'
'This big,' Nikos said, shaping his hands slowly into a giant balloon, a moon that made the boy's eyes widen. His mother burst out laughing at the look his face.

Later, picking at the canteen food without much appetite, he listened to the radio. Sometimes there was a jazz programme on around this time, and he was in luck. The presenter announced that Ella Fitzgerald would soon be performing in Berlin. In the city's Sportpalast. A famous and yet infamous venue. And then the best jazz singer in the world: Ella! She and Satchmo together: 'Dream a Little Dream of Me' ... heavenly!
Hellish. The thought was enough to drive him crazy. When would they finally leave this endless mountain range, in which one valley preceded the next and one difficulty came after another, without ever reaching the redeeming peak? When would the full moon hang high above the Fens? When would spring come at last?
He had already picked up his Bakelite fountain pen to begin that evening's letter in this wistful melancholy mood, when there was a long ring at the front door. Something that happened extremely rarely, in fact had only ever happened when he'd asked for a second helping of food, which a young cook had then brought over.

'Sorry to disturb you, Doctor.'
'Michel, what's up? Do you want to come in?'
Behrends wanted to, but didn't want to. Nikolaos had only seen the old driver briefly that morning, and now there was a pressing matter on his mind, as anyone could tell. Three-fingered, he took a loose sheet of paper out of his creaky leather jacket and handed it to Nikos. The doctor saw it was a photocopy of an official document.
'In the name of the ...' he read aloud in a murmur. Then he shook his head, doubting.
'Is it a court verdict? A death sentence? Where did you get it?'
It took Behrends a few minutes to fill Nikos in. The story began vaguely. The old Eifel man sensed a threat, a malevolent turn of events that had been looming over the Rither Works for some time now. It had begun, he said, when Vera went into hospital. That had been kept a secret, but of course the staff had got wind of it after a while and started guessing and speculating. People always talk. Had she fallen ill? If not, why was she in isolation? Soon there had been new, darker rumours. It was all a wicked conspiracy.
'What conspiracy?' Nikos asked. Behrends gave a worried nod. The Düsseldorf smallpox professor, that Stüttgen fellow, had put Vera into isolation on purpose, people were saying, and now he was keeping the young woman a prisoner in the hospital until she caught smallpox. One local said they must already have infected Vera by now. They wanted her dead – they wanted the heiress gone.
Who were 'they,' Nikos asked. The ideas seemed so absurd to him that he couldn't believe anyone would think they were true. But Behrends insisted. No one was saying who 'they' were, exactly. But it was well known that the Rither Works would go to Aachen Technical College if there was no heir left from the family.
'They want to get their hands on the company, some people reckon,' said Behrends.
'Heavens, what a heap of nonsense,' Nikos responded, confused and perplexed. He shook his head with an unwitting ironic smile, but froze again instantly. He had an inkling. Nikos looked at the death sentence and began to decipher the handwritten name of the accused. The captain sentenced to death in the name of the German people at the end of the war was none other than his mentor: Günter Stüttgen.

Behrends had found the copy of the verdict in Max Lembke's company-owned flat; they were neighbours in the same building. Lembke was a hunter and a gun obsessive, everyone knew that, but recently, said Behrends, a few things had seemed fishy to him. There was something going on, he'd felt it in his water. And so he'd found out when Lembke was next down to go hunting. Tonight. There were four of them going out. All war veterans.
When he'd seen his younger colleague driving off in the VW he'd got out his picklock and taken a look around Lembke's flat. He knew it was wrong, he said, but he'd happened to luck upon the verdict.
'I didn't know who to turn to. I can't go to the cops, can I? They know me from the old days. Used to do a bit of breaking and entering. And Seuss took off a few days ago. Gone abroad looking for new clients, they said at his office. What d'you reckon, doctor – what should we do?'
Nikos immediately called the hospital, got through and learned that Professor Stüttgen had left for the variola crisis committee over an hour ago. Apparently, there was a meeting there with the district council director and the head of the public health department.
He hung up. 'How long's the drive to the smallpox headquarters?'
'Lammerath Vocational College? If we leave now we'll be there in no time.'
Nikos picked up his jacket, put on his hat and then they were off. Half his meal was left on the table, the radio still playing as if he'd be right back. Outside stood a small Borgward from the Rithers' car pool.
Nikos got into the car, not wasting a thought on what he was letting himself in for. His friend Fengari, as the Greeks call the moon, had just taken a large cloud lady by the hand as if to dance a pas-de-deux.

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Converted into the headquarters of the anti-smallpox campaign at the start of the epidemic, the vocational college was a low building, well visible from all sides. Its large windows were brightly lit, despite the late hour. The site was on the edge of town, a small forest beginning just across the road. Behrends and Nikos immediately realised that was where they had to look. The chauffeur parked a little way away so the car would go unnoticed, and their paths separated.
'You go on, find Professor Stüttgen and tell him not to leave the building. I'll run up that side into the woods. You come straight after me, as soon as you can. Perhaps we'll spot Lembke's car somewhere.'

Behrends watched Nikos vanish into the patch of forest, then entered the building and found the gentlemen deep in conversation. Stüttgen was just telling the two local officials about his helplessness with regard to little Bärbel's therapy. The two men, far from insensitive, regretted the severe infection, especially for the child who had once been patient number 2, the beginning of it all ... But was that the only topic? Such a disagreeable, or rather sad detail surely couldn't completely dim the basic and no longer doubted prospect of the end of the epidemic. They'd tried everything, they said – but there was such a thing as individual fates that couldn't be changed. At least they had the prospect of returning to the old life, on the whole.
That was the thrust of the discussion when Behrends burst in. The meeting room where the three men were on the brink of arguing was so full of cigarette smoke, Behrends had never seen the like; not even in the communist bars of 1920s Essen. The chauffeur, whose two fingers on his left hand had not in fact been lost in a factory accident, instinctively stepped back.
'Evening. Professor Stüttgen, sir, it's nasty weather out there – I've got a message for you from Doctor Spyridakis.'
Stüttgen got to his feet and went out to the corridor with Behrends. After a short conversation, the professor informed the other two men he had to leave the meeting – by no means unwelcome

news for the important gents, who wanted to wallow a little longer in the thought of having soon laid waste to the damned virus. He was an excellent doctor, that Stüttgen, but he was always such a quibbler it was good to see the back of him.

Günter Stüttgen himself, meanwhile, was furious about the idea Behrends had reported to him from Spyridakis: he was to stay inside the building for safety reasons, and please wait. The professor refused to follow the advice and immediately left the college with the old man, heading for the forest. Marksmen in the woods! As if he hadn't survived them under much worse conditions.
Stüttgen had heard about the strange rumours going around the staff and the villages since Vera Rither had gone into isolation. People thought up all sort of nonsense. But this was strong stuff: that old Wehrmacht veterans were now apparently considering violence against his person, an assassination, and not just because of the smallpox epidemic but seemingly also as planned revenge for Stüttgen's actions in Monschau-Dreiborn back in February 1945!
He knew why he'd sworn never to talk about the war. Walls had ears, but people never understood. And now Spyridakis, one of the most gifted young doctors at the Düsseldorf Medical Academy, had ended up plumb in the middle of this mess. It was all Stüttgen's own fault.
'Come on, Behrends, you take that path up there. I'll stick to the edges down here. We must aim to prevent any violence.'
'Right-O, Professor.'

But they were barely a hundred yards apart when they both froze, a rifle shot ringing out of the woods, followed by silence.

EPILOGUE

Just as an archer might think he could stretch his bowstring a little further to send his arrow to its target even more swiftly and oblige all those watching to pay him even greater attention, so the teller of this story, spurred on by its spirit, might want to increase the tension at this point, taking secret pleasure in binding the reader to himself until the very last letter.
Perhaps he might invent digressions to lend an echo to that shot fallen in the dark woods, before loosing the arrow at last from the string and sending it speeding into the bull's-eye of the question as to what occurred there, between the Wehrmacht marksmen seeking false revenge and the moonstruck Cretan.
But we shall not venture into such delaying tactics, just as little as we would allow ourselves to relate an ending untrue to the real events, in line with the aforementioned conviction of Mrs Penelope Spyridakis that the truth is the only thing a person cannot change, for which reason the Greek gods would settle for nothing but myth, 'the word that speaks the truth,' to quote Homer, at the point in his poem at which Telemachus, the son of Odysseus, prepares in secret for a journey to seek his father, now missing for ten years.

At the end of our story, too, the characters set out, leaving the town on the High Fens. The tapestry has been fully woven. 'Smallpox in Monschau' was the name of Grünwald's three-part series for Quick. It included none of what he'd found out about the Rither family and Director Seuss, nothing about Vera's isolation and the dramatic assassination attempt on the very doctor who had rescued the Monschauers from variola. In view of the shocking occurrences, a report on it would ultimately only have furthered Richard Seuss's malevolent plan: there would have been a scandal and Aachen Technical College would have had to turn down the Rither Works.
Grünwald, regarding the sole heiress Vera as a rather remarkable person who showed great vision, with her foundation and her determination to uncover the company's involvement with the Nazi

regime, decided to exercise discretion on the subject. There were plenty of opportunities to be had, that was for sure, but one had to know when to play the gentleman. Aside from which, he had been compensated.
Vera had let him have Seuss's counterstrike case, which she had discovered in the abandoned palazzo. The alchemist's collection of remedies, drugs, psychotropics and steroids fascinated the barely dry alcoholic Grünwald, and so in his Munich apartment, with the aid of tobacco and Uberkinger, he came up with a novel about a desperate man who enters into a pact with an unscrupulous doctor, the physician injecting and doping him to help him leap the abyss one last time.

It will come as no surprise that Richard Seuss himself often thought of the pharmaceutical miracle weapon he had left behind. Of course, he had known how to get hold of the essentials on the various stages of his journey, but that pharmaceutical treasure chest had been perfectly equipped for his now sixty-two-year-old body. He had spent several days in New York to begin with, in his usual hotel on Fifth Avenue, a discreet place where a person was safe from prying eyes. He had taken walks, eaten too much and waited for the signal, or at least some kind of explosion from Monschau. But the German newspapers available in New York mentioned nothing of the sort. No assassination. No scandal. Quite the opposite: the smallpox epidemic appeared to be over. He gave up, went to a branch of the Chase Manhattan Bank and opened a safe deposit box set up some time ago, from which he withdrew money and new identity papers.
Then he flew to Seattle. At the newly opened World's Fair, he met two old colleagues. Alweg from Cologne, who had built the monorail system on the exhibition grounds, and Wernher von Braun. Together, they viewed the exhibits and partook of an excellent lunch in the panorama restaurant at the top of the specially constructed Space Needle. They had a table by the window, while an exuberant group of Boeing employees enjoyed a works outing further back in the room. A timid, hare-like young man couldn't stop staring over at them, which troubled Seuss until he realised the man was fixated on the waitress's partially visible garter.
Parting from Wernher von Braun, who had been approached by autograph-seekers all day, was an almost nostalgic experience for Seuss. They shook hands, perhaps for the last time. Shortly later, now alone, Seuss jettisoned his old passport into a futuristic V-shaped waste bin, one of those found all over the Century 21 Exposition.
Precisely a fortnight after clearing his desk at the Rither Works, he boarded a Pan Am Super Constellation bound for Caracas. He had been rather tired during the day, but now he was gripped by chills, growing hot soon afterwards. With cold sweat on his forehead and painful recollections of the magnificent possibilities of the counterstrike case, he stumbled to the toilet. He felt a strange itching on his lower body, around the thighs. Panting, he unbuttoned his shirt and saw that his chubby belly was covered in a finely distributed rash.
Severe turbulence shook the Super Constellation, jiggling the plane and making it drop so suddenly that Seuss passed out, somewhere above the Caribbean Sea west of the Bermuda Islands.

The end of the epidemic had seen the start of a systematic disinfection of Monschau District Hospital and the now defunct quarantine centres, which could at last return to their usual purposes. Like early Easter fires, sheets, towels and countless other objects used during the smallpox time burned bright, destroyed for safety's sake. Günter Stüttgen was glad to be back in Düsseldorf and his lab, especially as his time in Monschau had ended with such unexpected horror. And yet, after all the fortunate outcomes, he could not bring himself to face the fact that his patient Bärbel Reue would be deformed for life. There were new procedures developed in the USA to remove scar tissue, but they had barely been tested in Germany, would have been regarded as a luxury – and were therefore out of financial reach for a working-class family. They could perhaps have asked

whether the Rither Works would carry the cost. But that solution would not have brought Stüttgen closer to the objective he saw on the horizon.
He came to the solution after visiting another of Düsseldorf's institutions, the Art Academy. He had attended a very unusual lecture by a newly appointed professor of sculpture, which admittedly had little to do with sculpture or statuary as previously known. Instead, the artist, who wore a hat due to a war wound, shifted the focus to the meaning of art in society. 'Social sculpture', the man called his idea. In democracy, he explained, every individual not only bore responsible for society; he also shaped it, like the sculptor his work. Art's task, he said, was to remind people of their creative force and the responsibility it entailed. Stüttgen, mindful of his Great-Uncle Christian, who had left a number of beautiful sculpted works, could not shake that thought. Shaping society. Social sculpture. Responsibility.
A few days later, he knew what he had to do. He drove back to Monschau and met the district council director, and while the two men worked their way through two packs of cigarettes and several glasses of brandy, he began to explain to the baffled man that there was a plastic surgery method developed in America that was incredibly complex and expensive, but which might possibly remove the scar tissue from Bärbel Reue's face and hands without a trace. They just had to make sure somehow that the Reues' health insurance would pay for it. In a case as severe as this, he said, it wasn't a matter of cosmetic surgery; a child's whole life perspective was at stake, a human life. That was why this modern dermatology had to be officially recognised in Germany; it was about responsibility, it was all about moving medicine and society forward. And that was why they shouldn't ask for donations from the Rither Works, for instance.
He had decided, he told the district council director, to forgo his fee for performing the procedures. The insurance would only have to cover the treatment itself, medications, the stay at the clinic and aftercare – still huge costs, but together, Stüttgen said, they could convince them. If need be, they could activate political pressure. Weren't they living in a social market economy? The district council director, reluctant to get pulled into another medical dispute with the stubborn dermatologist, soon abandoned his initial resistance. The two men moved on to badgering the head of the public health insurance company, until he too admitted defeat and gave official permission for Bärbel's plastic surgery. The treatment process took a year, which Bärbel spent more or less entirely in hospital. It was a success, wiping all traces of variola from her skin as if by magic. Bärbel Reue went home and led a wonderfully healthy life from then on.

Oh, sweet homecoming! For the old Greeks, a nation of seafarers scattered across a thousand coasts and islands, a long-awaited homecoming was one of the primary themes for poets. Nostos, it was called, and almost guaranteed a fortuitous outcome. The traveller, cast about and risking his life many a time, for a shipwreck was part and parcel of every good epic journey, was himself the most important message to himself and others: I'm alive. Here I am again.
And what of the return of an only child from abroad, after years of absence? What mother would not be prepared to hear every truth about the horrors and dangers occurring to her child on his long and risky journey, as long as she saw him again? And what mother wouldn't await this reunion with tensed nerves and great concern, not knowing what the passage of time, the journey and its dangers had done to her child? It goes without saying that such a homecomer will never tell the whole truth. There will be episodes he has not yet formulated for himself. Such as the nocturnal encounter between moonstruck Nikolaos and the marksman Lembke.
Nikos had never been one to avoid conflict, but the meeting with Lembke had been genuinely dangerous. Crippled by the war, the man had nursed his paranoia that the doctor was to blame for his misfortune. The fact that it was instead caused by human cruelty towards those who fought in the war and their smashed souls – that went beyond Lembke's understanding of politics and society. And now a new disaster. Seuss had egged him on like an attack dog, Lembke had suddenly realised as he stood in the dark woods, ready to carry out the assassination. But then the Greek had

shown up, and all at once it was too much for Lembke. He knew he had failed once again. Out of his senses and pumped full of Pervitin, he wanted to put an end to his wasted life.
Nikos, noticing the psychotic shift in Lembke's behaviour, launched himself upon him to wrest the rifle aimed at the chauffeur's own head from his clumsy hands. They fought for a moment, then the shot, and Lembke writhed in pain. The bullet had hit his left foot and he was losing blood rapidly; Nikos made a tourniquet of his belt and less than two hours later, Lembke was heavily sedated in Düren Hospital. Nikos had needed a couple of days to think but then, following his ethics as a doctor, he had visited Lembke and found him a heap of misery. Man was a monstrous creature, truly.
Now that the epidemic was over and the thaw setting in, Nikos could no longer stay beneath the full Monschau moon. His contract with the Rither Works had come to an end. Mrs Drachsky, who still blamed him for Vera's isolation, insisted he vacate the guest apartment in Rither House immediately.
And so he returned his steelworker's suit, picked up his pay from the personnel department, and called his Düsseldorf landladies that evening to enquire whether his old digs were free. The next day, Behrends drove him back with his few belongings. Nikos gave Behrends a last letter to Vera, to be handed to her as soon as she was discharged. It contained his address, that of the Medical Academy and a few telephone numbers: for his landladies and the Virology and Dermatology Institutes, where she could leave messages. He was waiting for her, he wrote; she should get in touch immediately. Then, partly to overplay the emptiness and his sudden lack of employment, he wrote another letter, one to his mother, in which he promised to come to visit her in Athens for Orthodox Easter and then to go to Crete. He took the envelope straight to the post office.
Sitting on his sagging bed in the evenings, every motion causing a scornful creak, spotting the dust bunnies in the corners and hearing the student in the room next door scraping at a tin saucepan as he illicitly made himself something to eat, Nikos was so dejected he could have cried. Over and over, he saw the three-fingered hand of the old Monschau chauffeur accepting his letter to Vera, before he and Behrends said their last goodbyes. Had she received it? Why had he not heard from her?

Like a child closing her eyes at a frightening sight, thinking of something nice and promising herself only to open them when the horrors are over, so Vera had learned to focus her gaze through the tunnel of bad times, and trust in the light at its end, which would soon come. That was how she had got through her isolation in all its smouldering discomforts, had not fallen ill and had at last been released, only to face a new situation, one which brought surprises almost every day – and never good ones.
The biggest, most terrible surprise was the organisational state of the company. This structure, it turned out, was largely in Richard Seuss's head, and that had worked perfectly well as long as Seuss was around. With Eric's aid, whom she had called straight after her discharge and asked to come to Monschau, she took her first look behind the scenes of Seuss's Rither theatre. Without the man who had staged it all, various contracts and agreements were almost cryptic. They soon noticed that the role played by a certain Luxembourg consortium went far beyond that of a very good customer. Then they came across clauses that looked rather frightening. There was a lot of money at stake. The foundation, too, seemed under serious threat. And naturally, she felt strong concern and responsibility for job safety. Vera couldn't endanger families and existences with her plan; she had no wish to leave behind scorched earth.
She had of course read Nikos's letter immediately, her heart thudding, and had carried it with her in her handbag since. Of course, she thought night after night of finally calling Nikos – who cared what the old landladies said? But then she didn't, because she didn't want to show her nerves, her weakness, to say nothing of that fact that she was once again mired in problems she couldn't simply explain to Nikos. She had a firm plan to contact him only once she had everything under control,

so that their yearned-for reunion was not besmirched after so long by the mess and confusion of the Rither Works 'post Seuss', as Eric had put it.
One day passed after another. Easter approached. And at some point – she was around a table with Eric and two other lawyers – she looked out at the afternoon moon hanging in the sky with milky spring strength, played upon by the red-blue dusk, and felt an icy chill run down her back. She left the meeting that instant in her suddenly onset concern, grabbed a fast car from the garage and drove across the Eifel pass to Düsseldorf.

A week before the Greek Easter festivities, Penelope Spyridakis had started cooking in her small flat on Athens' Drossopoulou Street. She'd made every dish Nikos had once enjoyed, with moussaka in pride of place; he had waxed lyrical in his letters about it and bemoaned the unavailability of aubergines in Germany. The small stove in her modest kitchen had not cooled down for three days.
The waiting was awful, and it was wonderful. The clock on the wall ticked away. It was still light outside, not yet half past seven. She heard children running and shouting out in the street. Oh, if only he'd come at last. And then the doorbell rang.
As always when a moment so long awaited comes, Penelope did not really have time to grasp it, because then it was over. The point we have yearned for so long – it doesn't exist. Because the new is perpetually beginning, the unexpected.
She dashed to her front door, opened it and instantly jumped with surprise, hearing not only Nikos's voice but also another. Nikos and Vera laughing, holding hands as they came up the stairs.

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