

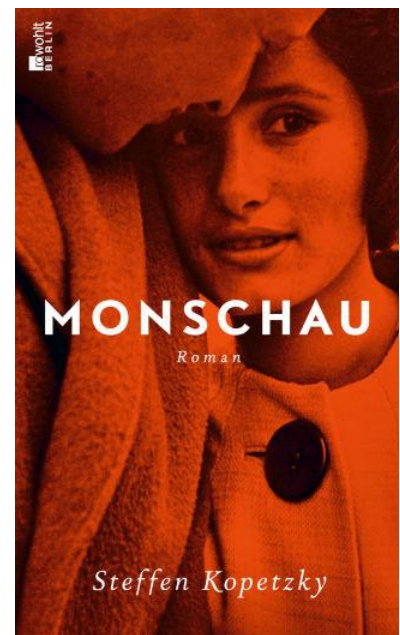
Steffen Kopetzky

Monschau

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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 tells of a love story in a state of emergency and of the rapidly-growing new economic growth in Germany – and transforms a chapter of German history into gripping literature.

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.

- “I enjoyed Steffen Kopetzky’s *Propaganda* a great deal. It’s a fast-paced and exciting novel about World War II and the 1970s, and a tale about how a young idealist becomes a jaded agent of psychological warfare and propaganda. And the novel offers the added layer of a highly lauded German writer examining the American psyche and character.”—Viet Thanh Nguyen (winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and author of *The Sympathizer*)
- Steffen Kopetzky’s gripping novel about a love affair during a state of emergency.
- Rights to *Propaganda* were sold to Italy (Einaudi).

STEFFEN KOPETZKY

MONSCHAU

1

“One more time, baby,” the ambulance driver said, heaving the blond girl racked with chills up in his arms for what wasn’t the first time on this bitter day and trudging with her through the snow. The lights were blazing. Nurses and doctors were waiting for her. Just one more little set of steps left to carry her up. The driver was a nearly sixty-year-old Eifel farmer who’d been employed by the Red Cross for years now on account of his chauffeuring abilities. He looked with apprehension at the loading dock and its three stairs he’d soon have to ascend with his shivering, already mildly delirious patient. Stumbling was completely out of the question, and he concentrated on each step, the child’s head snuggled between his chest and left arm, her body wrapped in a blanket. If he’d been at home walking along one of the dark, overgrown paths from one of his fields to the next, he’d have taken no less care, if only not to overlook anything. He’d never had an accident. He wasn’t going to stumble. Not even this time, hopefully the last one that he’d carry this sick child in his arms.

A few meters later, the icy air stung the girl’s inflamed airways, and she began coughing hard. Lashed by fever, untethered from any consciousness, this cough resembled a hoarse bark. An aching clarion call. The driver took a deep breath and, with powerful steps, took the stairs. They’d made it.

So had something else.

It was already in the air. It’d blindly entrusted itself to a little waft of wind that had blown past child and driver, a brisk wind that had driven it higher, and it was sailing along the brickwork, up, up, up. At the second story it was caught by a more intense gust swirling with a few fluttering snowflakes, then atomized even more finely. Along the opposite façade of a different hospital building, a window stood open with a patient leaning out who was recovering from a procedure and would soon be discharged.

She wanted to see what was causing all that racket so late at night. That ambulance. Who were they bringing? She leaned forward and inhaled the cold, crisp fresh air deeply, which seemed to do her good, bent even farther for a better view of what was coming, and yet never did see what had arrived on the air.

2

This story is set in the northern Eifel. Amid the inimitable scenery of that string of mountains west of the River Rhine, there lies an old cloth-making city near the Belgian border, together with an abutting factory town: Monschau and Lammerath.

The time is toward the end of the chancellorship of Konrad Adenauer, who had once begun his political career as Lord Mayor of Cologne and therefore managed to finagle Cologne’s former

royal city of Bonn as the provisional capital. In May the fledgling West German republic will turn thirteen. Quite in contrast to the vernacular association of that number with misfortune, 1962 is the year of the strongest economic output in the republic's history heretofore. There's even a shortage of workers, and the economy has dispatched emissaries to southern Europe and Turkey, who are striving to hash out so-called guest worker agreements. The chancellor has commissioned the construction of a government bunker in a tunnel created by the Nazis for the production of V2 rockets. The president of the United States is John F. Kennedy. He won the 1960 election with the promise of closing the deficit of nuclear missiles the USA has with the Soviet Union, which is to say: with the promise of rearming. Despite this he is an idol for the world's youth. He's declared the sixties the age of taking wing, in all corners of life and even beyond the earth itself, through the newly inaugurated Apollo program. President Kennedy's speaking about the USA's desire to be the first nation to put a man on the moon produces images on television that are almost as compelling as the longed-for moon landing itself. The Soviet Union under General Secretary Khrushchev, at this point still ahead by a nose in manned space flight with Sputnik, must be overtaken. Truly, rocket technology is schizophrenic; it signifies at once progress and destruction. For some, of course, this is no contradiction.

But at the time, though, none of this is really on the minds of people in West (and East) Germany. Something very different had them riled up, a question, to wit: Who is the murderer? In this case of a drop-dead gorgeous young woman, living of course in London—far beyond her economic means—who had hired herself out under the job title of “Mannequin and Artist.” She was strangled with an English neckerchief. Never before had a German broadcaster landed a larger share of the market than WDR in Cologne with “The Scarf”: eighty-nine percent. It swept the ratings clean.

And yet, on this day, there were still people who weren't paying the slightest attention to this most successful German TV series of all time. Two of them were sitting in an old Volkswagen, driving through downtown Düsseldorf, in rapt conversation.

“There's a window of opportunity with smallpox,” Professor Stüttgen said, while shifting into third gear and giving the motor a proper jolt. Rush-hour traffic on the Königsallee was already fairly heavy; everyone wanted to make it home in time to see the last episode of “The Scarf.” Cars barreled along in three lanes on each side. Then, at the traffic signal, parked directly beside them was a brand-new Opel Kadett. When the light turned green, it slipped away ahead of them in its irresistible elegance. Stüttgen and his passenger nodded to one another, impressed.

“Within this window of opportunity someone can already be highly infectious without showing any symptoms.”

The professor signaled and made a truly sporting approach to the large intersection they still had to pass. His wager was correct; they made it while the light was still yellow. In the rearview mirror, Nikos watched the headlights of the cars driving behind them. They made the puddles sparkle in this city designed for cars.

On the Autobahn toward Cologne, the professor shifted into fourth gear. For the rest of the trip into the Eifel he wouldn't budge from the left lane.

“A person like that can infect dozens of others. In a municipal subway at rush hour, it might even be thousands. You understand what that means, Nikos?”

While never particularly adept at mathematics, Nikos Spyridakis had indeed learned through his passion for microscopy to deal with numerical relationships and exponential logic. Envisioning the map of the London Tube so familiar to him from visits to his mother while coolly performing calculations and picturing how things would proceed from there, just one metaphor came to mind; someone infected with this virus was like a wandering angel of death.

“A biological bomb, you mean something like that?”

“Exactly. But still: the state government has assured me we’ll get every manner of support. They’ve obviously realized what mistakes have been made. We’ll still be able to defuse the situation. Of that I’m certain. But we have to pursue every avenue. There will be strict isolation and quarantine. Now, at the outset, Nikos, our work must be very precise. The first several days dealing with an epidemic are the most important. They’re the ones that’ll decide everything.”

When Nikos had informed Professor Ruska that he would unfortunately be unavailable for the large sectioning course this weekend, with a long series of specimen jars waiting to be prepared, he’d garnered an almost resentful reaction from Ruska.

“I can’t comprehend that Stüttgen is exposing you to such risk. With such a lack of preparation, this is a kamikaze move. Very well though, the ministry made a call.”

He’d shaken Nikos’ hand resignedly and watched as the aspiring dermatologist Stüttgen deprived him of his best lab technician. The young medical fellow still had not committed himself to a specialty, and Ruska hoped to tie him tightly to his Virology Department. A lot of people wanted nothing more than to do electron microscopy, a so-called trendy field. But most lacked a certain something: the ability to section.

Electron microscopy was advanced technology based on the extensive experience of German glass processing, with the art of glass polishing pushing down into molecular levels here, but you also needed the right specimens. Spyridakis, scion of a dynasty of Cretan fishermen, knew how to handle sharp blades, how to filet. And he had an outstanding eye; that was the second quality important for interpreting many specimens. And now he’d be sidelined. Epidemic service in the Eifel. His best man called up to the pox front.

Nikos was aware how critically Ruska judged this mission. He himself saw the whole thing less dramatically. For one, he was twenty-four and at this age naturally felt himself to be immortal. Then, there was something called a per diem and that presented a convincing argument for a young man in whose life the only constant was simply never having enough money. Recently Nikos had cleaned laboratory glassware for Professor Stüttgen, test tubes, dishes. Three deutschmarks an hour, which wasn’t bad. Now, by comparison, forty marks a day—that was huge.

Stüttgen hadn’t withheld from him the fact that everyone else, the more experienced doctors in the Dermatology Department at the Medical Academy, had bowed out of accompanying him. The risk of becoming infected oneself was of course a given. And none of the colleagues had any practical experience outside of a lab in dealing with such a dangerous pathogen. And so they’d declined, regrettably, pointing to the strain on their time, their other obligations, or their families—weak. Stüttgen himself had a wife and two sons though. Nikos Spyridakis knew good and well that he was the youngest conceivable candidate at the Academy. On the other hand, he was unattached and physically resilient, a longstanding competitive swimmer. But he was by no means a daredevil, even if his grandmother had always tried to convince him otherwise by

referring to his grandfather: “Being married to your grandfather meant hearing the most incredible backstories of his more or less terrible wounds and scars every night, yet again. I hadn’t been married to him a week when I had to bandage his knee for the first time. I don’t think there were ever ten or at most fourteen consecutive days where he didn’t get some sort of scratch.”

His grandfather had taught him to dive, to fish, to handle sharp knives, and to shoot. All of them activities involving a certain degree of risk. But experience dictates that you never walk more carefully, and therefore more safely, than in the dead of night. Human beings are never more alert than on dangerous terrain.

“Please think it over, Nikos,” Stüttgen had said to him, “for me the decision is a matter of course. I’m a doctor. I see it as my obligation. But you—I don’t want to wheedle you into anything.”

“Wasn’t Hippocrates a Greek? How could I miss out?” In Nikos’ reply resonated a not insignificant pride that Stüttgen would have entrusted him with this mission at all. And accompanying the professor, you had more the impression anyway of riding into the mountains for a weekend, maybe to do winter sports or to climb and work a bit on the side. Nor were these risk-free activities, and yet they were fun.

“Okay, then pack a few clean clothes, your toothbrush, and maybe a couple of books. I have no idea how long we’ll be staying.” He knew full well that it could last a while, but making a big deal out of something wasn’t Stüttgen’s style.

While the professor sought to convey to Nikos the basics of what he himself had learned during his study trips to King Edward Memorial Hospital in Bombay, they left the watery, fog-blanketed Rhineland behind them, driving into the brisk western reaches of the Rhenish Slate Mountains, and soon they were in the middle of winter. The snowiest January in human memory gave them two-meter-high walls along the road’s shoulders, stained a filthy black below, splattered, crusty, and still solid, ultimately forming clean ramparts at the top, blanketed in white by the half moon. It was almost like driving directly into a gigantic snowball.

Lammerath bei Monschau, at the outermost edge of the German state, on the border to the Kingdom of the Belgians, lay in such a way that the region looked like a pocket on the map, which was underscored even more by the railway line which stretched to the east of it and, to stick with the metaphor, resembled a zipper. The Fen Railway, running through the Ardennes, the High Fens, and the Eifel, was said to be the fastest connection from Aachen to Luxembourg. For a long time, Lammerath had been nothing more than a farming village surrounded by Belgium. Yet it was positioned on a kind of high plateau that had predestined the area to be a deployment area for German troops stationed to defend the Hürtgen Forest at the end of the Second World War. Twenty years prior to that, seizing upon the legacy of the extinct Monschau cloth industry, a factory had been erected there, which has existed in the same place and been in service ever since: the Rither Works.

Director Seuss conferred with the foreman of the night shift, then stepped outside to watch the plant manager from afar as he directed his people to clear the freshly snow-blanketed lot in front of the foundry once again, and the wide path between beside the administrative building, and further, the driveway to the Rither villa. It was snowing hard, the snowflakes flying thick in the beams of light shining from the courtyard lamps.

“Good evening, Director.”

“Hello there, Tillich. The snow just won’t stop falling today!”

“S’posed to get cold again in the next few days. I’ll have ‘em salt afterward. Back there up to the villa. Miss Vera is coming for the weekend, don’t want ‘er to slip.”

“Vera’s coming ... do you know when?”

“Lands ‘bout seven on her plane at Cologne-Wahn. Already arranged to have Behrends pick her up.”

Christ, Seuss thought, always the same story, she just simply must irk you whatever way she can. No respect, no nothing. The plant manager knows she’s coming, but not a word to me.

And this despite the fact that Richard Seuss has been serving as guardian for Vera, now completely on her own since her father died more than a year ago, and taking pains to do everything to lend his support to this tragically orphaned young lady until she came of age. Vera, however, didn’t give a damn about his good-heartedness.

Naturally, he did not want to let any of this show to his subordinates.

“Very good, Tillich, thank you. Nice that Vera is coming to visit us.”

Seuss meant to move on, but his plant manager, wiping a drop from his cold-reddened nose with his sleeve, leaned forward conspiratorially. The courtyard was filled with the sharp scraping sounds of the snow shovellers.

“So then, what’s your guess, boss?”

“I don’t take your meaning, Tillich.”

“Who’s the murderer?”

“Oh, I see, that’s what you meant,” he shook his head, laughing. Then he put two fingers to the brim of his hat, adjusted it with a push, and walked briskly across the courtyard. Upon reaching his vehicle, a black BMW 3200 S, the driver, Max Lembke by name, endeavored to get out as quickly as possible, which wasn’t quite so simple for him. First came the cane, as always.

“Hello to you, Max. Before we leave, I’ve got to make a quick stop at the engineering building. Head to the canteen and have ‘em fill up the Thermos. Chamomile tea. Stomach problems again since yesterday. Afterward we have to make a trip to Monschau too. And bring me a couple meatballs, please.”

“You got it, boss.”

Lembke slammed the car door shut and marched off, supporting his left hand swathed in its especially thick glove on his cane. In his right hand he carried the briefcase. He heaved his left leg forward with vehemence, while the right shoulder shot upward, then followed with the right leg, at which the right shoulder again sank astonishingly low and his whole body completed a painful-seeming twist. In spite of the effort walking required of him, Lembke traversed the courtyard rapidly.

Director Seuss entered the engineering building, greeted the technical draftsmen still working at their brightly lit tables with a nod, strode down the corridor, and finally knocked once at door of the chief engineer, which was only pushed to.

“Oh yes, Director. Please come in,” Dr. Velbert called. The chief engineer had been hired shortly after the war and shown the ropes by the younger Rither, Vera’s father; after the latter’s fatal heart attack, he’d taken over his office, too. He was standing half bent over a complicated blueprint he studied with a smile.

“What is so urgent for us to discuss?”

Urgent indeed, Seuss thought, and so very urgent that it was already too late to erupt now in a fuss about it. A bedeviled tale if every there were one, almost laughable, were it not so grave. A really irritating mess.

Seuss took a deep breath. He looked around Dr. Velbert’s office in which—despite the advances in products and consequently the upturn for the factory and its business dealings—hardly anything had changed since the firm was founded. Even the death of the younger of the two Rither brothers had left no trace, except for the fact that it was now Dr. Velbert sitting at the desk over which the painting of the elder Rither had hung for decades, the founder of the company who had scooped up Seuss back then as a trader for his enterprise.

The elder Rither was gazing down at Seuss, examining him from his frame, which bordered an expedient work by a proper artist from the Düsseldorf Academy, and was perhaps also rendering judgment on him. The elder Rither, what a businessman he had been! A genius, without a doubt. Vigorous and quite decisive in his plans. In the golden years after the First World War, after huge sums of money were lost, he’d founded a singular company here, on barren farming soil, on the expansive forested estate of his family as well as on his brilliant ideas about heat conduction.

Essentially, they were something like a foundry for foundries; the Bernhard Rither Works manufactured smelting furnaces, for steel production in the main, for the tool industry, for the copper industry. But they also built induction furnaces that were in demand by paper manufacturers, among others.

The Indian subcontinent, for instance, was in a paper frenzy, driven by the need for newspapers and magazines, but also for school and instructional books for two nascent nations locked in competition, India and Pakistan. The financially powerful entrepreneurs of the Indian West coast in particular, which were making major incursions into the publishing industry and had raised a large film industry to boot, were making paper on the still well-forested East coast. With Rither furnaces.

The preceding years with their high order volume had given the firm an enormous push of innovation. Delivery of a new generation of furnaces, which would place Rither at the pinnacle of the global market, was imminent. Added to that was a bulk order from a consortium in nearby Luxembourg, highly lucrative, but provisioned with painful contractual penalties in case of delayed delivery. A longstanding and very important customer.

The best machinists and engineers Seuss had available were already working around the clock. The company had no surplus of personnel. That’s why the call from the district administration, where he had a very good contact, had upset him so much.

The only thing Seuss knew so far was that the ten-year-old daughter of an employee who'd spent six months in India on assembly duty and returned shortly before Christmas was driven back and forth yesterday between Aachen and Monschau by ambulance under suspicion of having an infection with black smallpox. The connection was clear: a father who'd spent a half year in India—and his daughter, who may have contracted a dangerous virus that was by no means under control on the subcontinent.

“Well, I do hope the child is able to receive help. We've known the family for a long while. The father has worked for us for more than twelve years. Learned his trade with us, didn't he?”

Seuss bit his lip. It pained him that it always went this slowly. But that's how it had always been. True, the elder Rither had had a comprehensive understanding, but since his day Seuss had done battle with the naïveté of engineers who went to bed lucidly dreaming of new-fangled heat conduction but incapable of imagining anything of relevance beyond that.

“Certainly everything will be done for the child,” Seuss said slowly. “But what do you figure, Dr. Velbert, from whom did the girl catch the disease?”

“Yes, very good question. From whom indeed?” The engineer stared at him, helpless.

“Yes, of course, let's speak plainly,” Seuss said, “from our best assemblyman. You know, I was actually very happy to have him home again.”

“So he'll have to be on sick leave for a few days?”

“He already was, though.” Seuss looked at his chief engineer, concentrating on making a friendly face and smiling.

“After his return from India,” Seuss sighed, “Jupp was the most popular man in the operation for two weeks. They threw him a party in the canteen.”

“Now come right out and say what's bothering you, Seuss.”

“Don't you get it? If we aren't careful, then they may close the factory on us. Then we'll all go into quarantine for the next several weeks.”

“But that's completely impossible, you see. Next week we're building the ROA 15. We have everything planned.”

“Exactly, my dear Dr. Velbert. And not just that—we've signed contracts, we've got obligations.”

“Yes, of course. So what do you propose?”

Velbert's face took on an icy expression. Now the message finally appeared to have been received.

“I've already phoned our attorneys, the Luxembourgers too. And I have to leave for a meeting in a moment. A crisis team has been formed at the district council. With a medical director, from out of town. No idea what schemes a doctor like that is concocting.”

“Who is this man?” Dr. Velbert asked.

“A professor from Düsseldorf. Sent by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. I'm headed there later.”

“The second stage is called the eruptive stage.”

Günter Stüttgen was now steering into a gas station to fill up the old Volkswagen here in Düren one more time before heading to the Hürtgen Forest. They stood beside one another, in damp

air permeated with the acrid, bracing scent of fresh gasoline. Nikos examined the wolf looking back at him on the hood, the crest of a heraldic language playing off the imagery of ancient counts and their coats of arms but in fact designed in the late forties. Here the written logo of this industrial product wasn't a recreation of some older template. On the contrary, here a powerful industrial complex had been granted the privilege of wielding land law and even town charter law to found a municipality, something that might have taken place in this form before only in America and the Soviet Union, but not in the German Empire or elsewhere in Europe. The emblem of Volkswagen from Wolfsburg.

Stüttgen pumped gas and went on.

“What's important is that during the eruptive stage, around the fourth day or so, there's an initial reduction of fever that allows the right rash to appear. In fact it always starts on the face—reddish nodules that then quickly spread over the rest of the body. Be right back.”

The professor entered the gas station's bright pay booth as Nikos watched him paying for the fuel behind the pane of glass.

The rash—dermatology's specialty, plain and simple. It was always just a matter of time until it was mentioned. The skin perspired, effloresced, broke out, discolored, and changed. Aside from burns, lesions, and tumors of all stripes, rashes were the ultimate purview of dermatologists. The science of efflorescences. But this was the very reason why Nikos was uncertain whether he really ought to stick with dermatology and not perhaps switch to the other side of the Medical Academy after all, to Professor Ruska and his magical electronic gadgetry.

What was so special about electron microscopy was that even the ugliest diseases put their beauty on display when viewed at the cellular level. A mouse carcinoma delicately sectioned even possessed something of abstract art about it, conjured forth from the deepest structures of nature. The pictures of bearish mites and lizard-like bugs afforded Nikos an almost childish pleasure. But of course the primary interest in Professor Ruska's department was identifying viruses and bacteria by electron microscopy. Those astonishingly compact and so precisely differentiated things fascinated Nikos. A touch of the legacy of his fishermen forebears may have resonated here, the game of finding things in his childhood, which he'd spent on the beaches of Crete. The dives off the rocks of Matala, preferably before noon, because the sun cast the richest diver's soil in a finder's light then. Here, too, it had been about shapes. Not just shells, but above all the corals and the countless other lifeforms on the ocean floor had always enchanted Nikos from the start, because of the opulence of their forms. To plunge into the aura of the sea—that's what Nikos remembered, oddly enough, far from the sun or those happy rocks, while sitting at Professor Ruska's electron microscope and poking around the realm of viruses and bacteria. Despite their tiny size, they were furnished with an obvious design and unique molecular features. And with this arsenal, limited to the barest essentials, they were capable of annihilating entire civilizations. Variola, Nikos vaguely recalled, was not yet even included among Professor Ruska's collection of samples. Perhaps he might even bring the great virologist a few samples back from the Eifel. The few illustrations of variola he'd seen in textbooks were striking. Seeing them reminded Nikos of keyholes you could spy through. One also read about the comparison with the shape of an hourglass, a sand clock.

Günter Stüttgen returned, and they got back into the car. Before starting the ignition, he opened a new pack of cigarettes, offered Nikos one, and gave him a light. The Beetle containing the two physicians quickly filled with a blueish haze.

Stüttgen characterized the other symptoms of the second stage for Nikos. He described how on the third day of eruption blisters formed atop the nodules, which soon hardened with a mother-of-pearl sheen, and felt like hailstones lodged deep in the skin. Once—of course with the strictest safety measures—he stroked the arm of a sick man in Bombay. Each individual kernel could be felt, each of them a foreign body seemingly implanted by some malicious genius.

“As soon as these granules present, deep in the skin, the remaining afflictions abate, in particular the headaches and lower back pain I described to you. The eruptive stage ends then.”

6

Patient 1. Thus had the director of the local health authority dubbed the Rither Works employee who had most probably smuggled smallpox into the Monschau district from India and infected his daughter, Patient 2, with it. Patient 1. Chief district executive Äugler, a handful of other important men from the district administration, as well as the head of police, Chief Commissioner Schwey, were looking at a sort of diagram the spry professor from Düsseldorf had sketched for them on a chalk board brought over from the building authority to Äugler’s office. At the very top in the center was written Patient 1. Each of the men had an ashtray in front of them and to the best of their abilities attempted to fill it.

First, they got a brief description from the public health officer of what all had befallen Patient 1. All the while the professor from Düsseldorf shook his head gravely, continually whispering comments to his assistant, an athletic young man with black curls, probably a Southern European, who then added these to his notes.

Before he was Patient 1, the man had just been a fitter at the Rither Works whom a commission had summoned to India for six months. Shortly before the Christmas holidays, the man had returned. He had been vaccinated against smallpox a few years prior, which is why his family doctor in Lammerath had deemed his health problems appearing at the beginning of January, fever and severe pain in his limbs, a cold, and later ensuing mutations of the skin harmless chicken pox. And that had been that. For approximately two weeks now, the man had been working normal hours again, and not a week ago he was in Hamburg for the obligatory routine examination at the Institute for Tropical Diseases. There, too, they’d assumed it was chicken pox. “Have they at least taken a blood sample from the man?” Professor Stüttgen had asked, already shaking his head in resignation, because in Hamburg they apparently had no great suspicion of variola. The question was affirmed, however. The blood sample was sent as usual to Munich to the Institute for Tropical Medicine there, the only place in Germany where this assay was possible. The results were still outstanding. At this time Patient 1 is well. Quite the opposite though for Patient 2, because she, not he, is his nine-year-old daughter. The packs of cigarettes crackled as the men each lit themselves another. A foreboding set in that things were gradually getting dicey.

So, the child became ill just three weeks after her father presented with his first symptoms. Once more, the family doctor was consulted, one more the diagnosis was chicken pox, but in spite of physician-prescribed bedrest, the condition of the girl who until then had been healthy had not improved. That's when doubts arose in the family doctor; he sought counsel with the public health officer, they'd paged through specialist books, and finally came to the conclusion to admit the child immediately to the infirmary in Aachen. That was yesterday.

At this point, what was in any case already a tense mood became altogether uncomfortable, which also stemmed from the fact that Professor Stüttgen was making an increasingly desperate impression, as though a spike were jabbed into his flesh, driven in further by each subsequent description of the disastrous circumstances and decisions on the sidelines.

Nikos Spyridakis, whom Stüttgen had asked to log everything relevant to them and to note whatever else might stand out to him as well, kept intermittently studying the faces of the other men in the room. The chief district executive maintained a straight face, no matter what was said; he simply chain-smoked. A conspicuous amber ring glimmered on his left hand, the one holding the cigarette, which remained quite still. Color-wise, his fingertips and nails were already themselves headed in the direction of amber. The public health official endeavored to give a punctilious account of what had occurred, but one could tell that Stüttgen's reaction was making an impression on him. The whole matter would certainly not go down in the glorious annals of the medical profession between Aachen and Monschau, that much was certain. Indeed, what had unfolded yesterday evening around the severely feverish, sporadically delirious child's, Patient 2's, referral to the hospital was hard to believe.

Even Nikos—who in general found almost anything to be possible, hailing as he did from a people who for more than two thousand years, since the self-inflicted downfall of their legendary advanced culture on account of an all-encompassing, absurd civil war, had been continuously ruled by outsiders or fighting among themselves and caught in the middle between all cultures and who were probably able to gain deliverance only from a new homeland called Europe—gaped over his notes while following the public health officer's report and occasionally watching as Professor Stüttgen's face grew more and more grim.

In Aachen, the Red Cross man who'd driven the Monschau district ambulance, a loyal farmer in his late fifties, had been forced to wait for more than two hours in front of the entrance to the hospital because the child's admission was initially denied. The night nurse had fetched the doctor on duty, who in turn had had to phone his way up the list of his absent superiors. At temperatures barely above freezing, the driver waited outside, the girl, coughing and febrile, inside the vehicle. At some point they were all assembled there: the senior physician, the chief of the ward, the clinic director, and even the director of the municipal health service. They shined flashlights through the vehicle's windows to examine the child riddled with pustules. Hard to say what's more harrowing, the sight of the poor girl inside or that of such authoritative men in their winter coats and gloves waving flashlights around. They looked through the window panes as though into an aquarium, asking the driver again and again to turn the child over so that they could see her better, so that they could better see what wasn't possible because it shouldn't have been possible: a highly infectious German child sick with black smallpox in the year 1962. Yet as luck would have it, from Aachen's point of view, this child, who wasn't allowed to be, came from

Monschau. She was therefore turned away and sent back. Although it was equipped with an isolation ward and had more than a dozen doctors on staff freshly immunized against smallpox, Aachen categorically refused to admit the child from Monschau, for reasons of form. Scarcely had the ambulance left the lot when the Aachen health director called the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The ministry official shared his view and informed the director of Monschau's hospital, indicating that he must immediately make all arrangements for the admission of a case of smallpox.

"If only I had known this!" Professor Stüttgen called out then, "We'd have been able to admit the child anytime at our hospital in Düsseldorf. Besides, at the beginning of January we had our own case of smallpox, an engineer who'd been infected in Africa. We'd have been prepared."

"The director of our hospital—he told me over the phone—made that very request. Explicitly. For a referral to Düsseldorf," Äugler interjected. Nikos watched as his amber ring leapt up and down in time with these words. Clouds of cigarette smoke swirled vigorously.

"But there was strictly nothing to be done. The ministry insisted the girl be treated here."

Exporting machines made in German to India, taking blood in Hamburg. Assays in Munich. Yet when there's a case, then the patient comes from Monschau and ought to stay there, Stüttgen thought. But at this juncture there was no time to get caught up in such things and bellyache.

Patients 1 and 2 were presumably surrounded by numbers 3 and 4, for what he'd heard earlier about the younger brother and the mother made this supposition obvious. There were often mild progressions of the disease, too. What's more, both were vaccinated, which suggested they'd get off more easily, though they could still be contagious. So that was the nuclear family.

Stüttgen got up, wiped his lips with his cuff, and began sketching out for the gentlemen in broad strokes, in part associatively, a potential battle plan.

"We have to proceed like detectives. We can't overlook anyone."

These words jolted the police chief, who had drifted off in thought a bit, checking his watch with a very discreet glance to see how much longer until a certain television program would begin.

It wasn't just he, though, whose head Stüttgen spun with what followed, but the chief district executive and his officials as well. The only person who secretly liked Stüttgen's approach was the public health officer, who at some point in his studies had been required to take a course in epidemiology. He was happy that the professor was so tough; that gave him some wiggle room himself. The public health officer knew what was coming their way. Everyone who'd been together with a member of the family over the prior four weeks, in fact even since the man's return from India, had to be investigated. That concerned first neighbors and relatives, but also the school, since both children had been with their classes for a few days after the Christmas holidays.

"But what then? What's that supposed to imply?" the district executive asked. "I mean, for the school?"

"We'll close the school, put all the children from both classes and possibly others into quarantine, preferably on school premises themselves," Stüttgen said drily before continuing on quickly. He gave the others no time to express their horror at this. Line by line, connection by connection, he illustrated and sketched a rough network of potential paths of infection: the family doctor's practice and the patients then waiting in the waiting room with a father seemingly ill with flu or

chicken pox. The assistants in the doctor's practice. The doctor himself and his family. The ambulance driver. And his family.

With each new line, the whole thing reminded the district executive more of the family tree of some deviant new ruling dynasty—a diabolical Carnival Anti-Prince and his retinue of near relations and kinsmen. Who were in the process of taking over his district.

“This is where we'd be now,” Stüttgen said, noting with satisfaction that Nikos had quite diligently transcribed his diagram. It would soon grow larger, but for the moment one connection was missing, one nexus of contacts that absolutely had to be included.

“What's left: the workplace of Patient 1. These Rither Works.”

Nikos gazed with interest at the district executive who swallowed audibly. The hand with the amber ring and the cigarette adjusted his glasses. The administrative chief looked at his officials.

“I've already informed Director Seuss,” one of them blurted out. “He should be arriving here any minute.”

“How many employees works at the plant, here locally in Lammerath, I mean,” Stüttgen asked, lighting another cigarette.

“Fifteen hundred. It's by far the largest employer in the region. But it's not possible to ...,” the district executive broke off, gesturing indistinctly at the family tree of smallpox dominion over his district.

“What's not possible, if I may ask?”

“We can't just shut down the Rither Works, now can we? You could just as easily cancel Carnival, that also wouldn't work.” The chief district executive had attempted to inject a bit of cheerfulness into the topic.

“Are you so sure you couldn't?”

The police chief shot the district executive a doubtful look. Äugler tried to regain control. He adopted a slightly tougher tone.

“Please, Professor, enough with the jokes. A girl is sick, which is unfortunate. Maybe a few others have been infected. But there are limits to what we can impose on people.”

“With an illness like smallpox we are faced with a natural phenomenon. That must be clear to you. Nature doesn't know the concept of imposition. It has no regard for Women's Carnival Day or Rose Monday. Or for anything else.”

After this statement, as unbelievable as it sounded to the Rhineland as to the Eifel, Stüttgen added, his voice emphatic:

“We have one chance to get this genie back in the bottle. But in order to do so, right now at the outset absolute precision is required. Analysis. And resoluteness to carry out the consequences of that. Do we understand one another?”

Everyone was looking at him gravely. And in silence. The police chief cleared his throat because he suspected that the republic would take the murderer into custody tonight without his help.

Vera Rither, her reddish blond hair trimmed to a jaunty bob and dressed in tight-fitting stirrup pants and an elegant but much too thin suede coat as was fashionable this winter on the Seine,

watched with a skeptical smile as old Michel Behrends heaved her luggage into the trunk of the Mercedes—while expelling a more than respectful grunt—does Miss Vera perhaps think there’s a shortage of rocks in the Eifel? The suitcases were so heavy because Vera had jammed them full of an absurd number of new LPs and books. In her hectic quotidian Parisian existence, she scarcely found time for such things anymore, and she had resolved to spend the planned two-week stay in Monschau, apart from all the legal issues, listening to music and reading.

It was none of his business, Behrends said after insisting on holding the car door for Vera and waiting until she had taken a seat, but how such a skinny girl could have such heavy suitcases just didn’t add up to him.

Behrends’ haggard face had wizened more and more in recent years, growing more leathery and tougher, though without any loss in his agility. Due to an early workplace accident in the Rither Works foundry, he was missing two fingers on his left hand, and as a child Vera had always marveled whenever the remaining three plunged into his trouser pocket with extreme dexterity to fish out one of the bonbons he reliably carried with him. The crippled hand, in her childlike view, was less a deficit than a mark of distinction that honored Michel Behrends more than it hindered him—which may also have been due to the sweets the three-fingered claw was so uncannily capable of doling out.

Now she looked at those old familiar fingers gripping the steering wheel of the bulky Mercedes and navigating it out of the airport’s parking garage into the sinking depths of winter, amid muffled purring and flawless engine performance.

With his gravelly voice, the old man related to her what all had been happening at the firm. The problems caused by the bulk order from the Luxembourg steel consortium. The three-shift operation that Director Seuss had instituted more or less overnight. Everyone had pulled their own weight, but given this year’s hard winter, the night and early shifts in particular were pretty onerous for the commuters from nearby villages. Not everyone had made their home in Lammerath, after all.

And then something really sad had happened on top of that: Bärbel Reue, little blond Bärbel, whom Vera had known since birth and seen frequently, had been admitted to the hospital yesterday.

“That sweet kid’s got the flu,” said the driver in Lammerath dialect, “and now she’s real sick.”

Vera wanted to know the details. You weren’t normally taken straight to the hospital because of the flu? But Behrends didn’t know any more about it. This news bothered Vera; she knew the girl and her whole family quite well. For a time, Bärbel’s mother had helped out her housekeeper, coming during the week to clean in the afternoons, and had always brought little Bärbel with her those days. That she was now lying in the hospital also affected Vera deeply because for her Bärbel was intimately connected to the time of her own convalescence. Indeed, as a child Vera had been severely ill with polio and had had to spend quite a bit of several early, critical years of her youth in a wheelchair. She couldn’t play for long periods of time, couldn’t run, and couldn’t ride horses, which she had especially wanted to do.

As her condition gradually improved, Vera had pushed Bärbel, still in swaddling clothes, in her pram through the villa’s garden and over the factory grounds while giving her sensational live reports of the goings-on around them. You could say that, on these very walks and thanks to the unusually sunny Bärbel, Vera had actually gotten back on her feet. The pram had been the perfect

walking aid, an opportunity to leave the crutches she still needed so often at home. This was why her recovery was connected in no small measure with little Bärbel—a fact she herself probably didn't realize much at all.

Back then, in those bitter days of her illness, Vera had begun to write, too, soon with the ambition of describing things she couldn't take part in with such perfection that the act of describing was more than just a substitute; it became her manner and method of being able to experience and learn about the world in spite of everything.

Whenever she described her classmates' playing in the meadow in the recess courtyard, trying to catch one another, she would find this task almost as appealing as it would have been to run barefoot across the sun-drenched lawn herself. She kept a diary of her youth as a consolation for the limitations inflicted on her by a nasty disease; yet, once she had learned to walk again confidently after several long years punctuated by operations and courses of treatment, she still kept writing, having sketched out the path to her career as a journalist. From a young age, she was conscious of her privilege, and the fact that not every young woman in her day enjoyed such opportunities.

Writing had long since become a kind of physical praxis—and doing so with a typewriter was special in this regard. She'd really begun keeping her diary at the beginning of the fifties. Encountering *The Diary of Anne Frank* then had had a lasting effect on her, with respect to her writing technique as well. At first she'd just written to an imaginary friend in imitation, but after a while she understood that you could also change the invented addressee. You could even write a letter to a gorgeous black horse you absolutely adored and had so very much wanted to ride one day—that pure impossibility. For this she used the company letterhead of the Rither Works, sitting in the business office after the end of the workday, when her father was still poring over blueprints with his engineers. At twelve, she knew almost every one of the innumerable typewriters in the offices and administrative areas, and quite soon thereafter she received her first one, an Olivetti Lettera, as a birthday present. Unlike what may happen sometimes with expensive gifts, the allure of typewriting in no way dissipated with the constant availability of the soon beloved device. Not long afterward, she began writing under a pseudonym for the Monschau newspaper about club evenings, riflemen's festivals, soccer games between village teams in the lower league, facilitated by a well-intentioned editor who reported on the Rither Works from time to time and thus had learned of Vera's delightful talent—though his receptiveness to the young writer was certainly not unfavorably influenced by the economic significance of the company bearing her name. Vera herself was initially quite indifferent toward the subject of her articles; it was capturing the world in writing that gave her joy. That intuition for the right material was naturally of the greatest importance for a journalist, however, wasn't something she'd needed to be taught by the time she'd begun studying.

For the stretch from Cologne-Wahn airport to Monschau–Lammerath they needed three hours, and old Behrends left no doubt that that was good time. Time and again they passed the yellow lights of the plows tirelessly keeping the roads clear since the afternoon hours.

“Just you wait. That's headed our way next.”

He meant the weather forecast. Two meters of new snow. It was as if they were in the Alps.

“Yeah, I know. On the plane the captain made an announcement before landing. There were Luxembourgers on the flight, too, who wanted to catch the Fen Railway. There’s probably already delays on it because of all the snow.”

Despite the oppressive thought of knowing sweet little Bärbel was in the hospital, she nodded off at some point in the back seat in the cozy warmth of the Mercedes after having been unable to get any shuteye on the plane earlier—striking, considering her exhaustion. There was really a lot to do at the university and for the student newspaper, for which she wrote a weekly column. And then there was the city’s cultural life! Book presentations. Theaters large and small. She hated Sartre, and she loved him. The jazz clubs. She was constantly underslept, and today was Friday. And yet still, flying hadn’t rocked her to sleep this time right after the airplane took off. From the outset she was, instead, unsettled. Then came intense turbulence, somewhere west of the Ardennes they’d crossed through a thunderstorm, and for whatever reason she was forced to mull over the physics of a collision and how horrible it would be then, on top of it all, to thud down onto an ice-cold, rain-wet rock or plunge into the trees ...

When she awoke from her flushed slumber, the car had just reached the eastern branches of the Hürtgen Forest. They passed the gigantic military cemeteries, reached the enormous lake behind the Rur reservoir dam at Schmidt, and headed slightly northward, high above the lake along the ridges, then descended again, in the end arriving at Monschau, a Baroque hamlet seemingly fallen out of time and buried in snow. Finally, the Mercedes rolled through the thin ring roads of the developing areas in the Lammerath district, passed the local market square that hardly could be recognized as such, now a large parking lot. They then drove past the campus of the hospital that had opened a few years earlier. It was named, to honor the memory of her deceased uncle, St. Bernhardia. Her father had come to the aid of the public purse, donating a colossal sum to avert an excessive accumulation of debt by the township—and certainly also in gratitude for the medical care of his own family, which is to say, of Vera. Vera hated the air in hospitals and yet still owed recovery of her health to it.

“Tell me, Michel, is Bärbel here? Not in Aachen?”

“Here, in Lammerath. Up in that ward.”

“Drive a little slower, please ...”

Behrends obliged her, bringing the vehicle to a halt with its motor still running in the hospital drive. Right away Vera noticed that that entire wing had its lights on, in spite of the late hour. In its right-angled severity, the building lay there like an open secret. Vera could imagine precisely the hectic affairs transpiring inside, so obvious did it all seem: twenty brightly lit rooms in a row, on both floors. And all that for one kid who had the flu? That didn’t seem plausible to her. In a way she found hard to determine, this unusual sight jibed with the malaise she felt on her flight—and for that very reason left such an impression. The night I came home.

When they finally arrived at the company grounds and caught sight of the prevailing commotion on what was otherwise always a factory courtyard kept as tidy as a barracks, she immediately grasped that this was connected to the brightly lit hospital wing. Was she seeing correctly, weren’t those even two police cars up front? Several vehicles had Düsseldorf plates and looked vaguely official. Even so, a model less redolent of state business, an old VW type 1, known as a Beetle, was also among them.