

THE ROAD TO CHARTRES

PART 1

WHERE THE TRACK ENDS

‘WHEN THE HURLY BURLY’S DONE /WHEN THE BATTLE’S LOST AND WON.’
The Witches in the first scene of *Macbeth*, Shakespeare

The train took its time to Dover. It stopped at all stations on the way and even, unaccountably, at several fields. The little ‘sprinter’ waited each time for minutes on end, wheezing gently as though needing to catch its breath like a winded patient. Magpies sat in the trees and snow covered quiet Kent fields.

The time is February 1992. I am delivering a painting to a friend in Austria. Payment for this picture will finance the rest of my journey.

Over the last five years I have been working on a series of paintings on the theme of war, nature and relationships. Sleeping soldiers, ruins and flowers are constant images in all the pictures.

The final painting of the series has still to be researched. It is a commission: *The Dark Forest*, about German history and mythology. The woman who commissioned it stipulated a specific landscape in a remote part of Eastern Europe, formerly behind the Iron Curtain. This aroused a longing to travel there. Maybe I will go further, as far East as possible, to Kiev, Moscow, the Urals, Bashkiria and even to Khabarovsk in Siberia. Friends in all these places are waiting for me.

The bargain Inter Rail card gives me unlimited travel by train through central and Eastern Europe up to the Russian and Ukrainian borders. I could not be bothered to get visas for beyond, so maybe I am not ready to go there yet.

The Inter Rail card lies next to a tiny old travelling icon from Russia, a St. Nicholas. This is supposed to bring me luck and protect me from accident and peril. The worn and mysterious object is covered in verdigris, the metal showing here and there, the eyes of the saint so sunken and faded that the sockets have become the deep hollows of a death's head. So many generations of hands and lips have stroked and kissed it that the icon has become ghost like.

First I must go to Austria and deliver the painting.

I stop briefly in Paris on the way to Strasbourg and postpone a pilgrimage to Chartres, where in the past the cathedral has provided inspiration for some of my commissions. Perhaps I will visit if I return this way. With my latest commission in mind, Freiburg-im-Breisgau on the edge of the Black Forest shall mark the proper start of my journey.

The sprinter train passes through a winter landscape of naked trees and muted colours under a grey sky.

Over the last five years several of my closest friends have died.

Christopher, an architect, the closest of these friends, died most recently. He used to joke about dying before reaching fifty, because he feared growing old and becoming less attractive. But that was just a laugh and we planned joint journeys in our retirement. Then Aids suddenly pounced. The illness's grotesquely rapid aging process mocked his vanity. Ever frailer hopes of recovery yielded to the knowledge that eventually, after a series of increasingly debilitating infections, death would come as a relief. Numb with shock, unable to cope with feeling abandoned, guilty for surviving, unsure about my own future health I withdrew into my studio to work obsessively on a series of paintings. But this only emphasised my loneliness.

I embarked on a correspondence with a number of Russian men who were responding to the political changes in their country by making contact with the West. What began as a diversion became complicated. All the correspondents had ulterior motives: to leave Russia, move to a more affluent country and lead better lives.

Victor visited. He had chosen several older men whom he considered solvent enough, and went from one to the other. He and I had nothing in common, we barely talked and he could not even bear to look at me, preferring to stay in his room, chain smoking, listening to pop music and leafing manically through gay magazines. He then demanded money, large amounts, and I told him to leave.

Bad conscience nags me, that I did not help Victor. Seeing for myself conditions in Eastern Europe might help me understand, make me more human. Christopher would have mocked these serious motives. Travel is about adventures. Yes, those...



Freiburg is a quiet backwater, a provincial university town in the south-western corner of Germany, the square round the Minster, with its characteristic red stone, sleepily quiet except on weekday mornings when the market bustles. Behind the Minster rises the Black Forest, thickly covered with dark-green pines. These woods suggest a wild country, a place of myth and fairytale – possible inspiration for my next commission.

In the town centre, surrounded by narrow streets and timbered, gabled houses, walls crooked with age, the Minster's rust-red sandstone glows and teams with pagan carvings and stained-glass. It also boasts a magnificent spire, soaring from a sturdy base to a delicate tip, carved in imitation of the forest behind, sky visible through the tracery of stone branches.

The floor of my hotel room with its rustic pine furnishings and flowers painted in folk style on the knobs creaks and the window opens onto a balcony garden where a few pot plants straggle, dying in the cold.

In the hotel dining room red cloths cover the tables. Being February, Valentine's Day decorations festoon the ceilings and corners. A young couple smooch in between sips of glühwein and several old men grunt over tankards of beer.

Finally settled a memory haunts me. On Strasbourg station the waiting room had filled with young men, each on their own and carrying a jumbo-size sports-bag filled to bursting. Victor had arrived in England with just such a sack. He then packed it to the brim with everything he could take back home to sell. When he left me, weeping with anger at my meanness, he hauled the sack on his shoulders (I could not even lift it) and disappeared. The young Victors on Strasbourg station sat silently, staring into the middle distance, eyes full of uncertainty and desperation.



GREEN MAN

A bitter winter wind blew through the dark evening streets of Freiburg. I found refuge from the cold in a sauna. The friendliness of this provincial establishment where customers of every size and age know each other and are not unfriendly to strangers contrasted with the one I visited in Paris where young and attractive boys sat in a hot tub, most of them silently and coldly avoiding physical contact with me. Among them a man sitting opposite had startled me with his resemblance to Victor, particularly in the manner he averted his hooded eyes while making his interest clear, furtively brushing my leg under the furiously foaming water. Here in Freiburg the clients chatted loudly keeping an eye on new arrivals then moving from the social hubbub at the bar to the hushed but frenetic sexual activity in the steam room where I also went. A thin figure emerged from out of the hot melee of sweating bodies, pressed firmly on my foot and whispered his name in my ear.

Roland took me to a cubicle for a more private session. We stroked each other for a while and then he suggested I return home with him. 'Can I see you tomorrow,' I suggested, preferring a quiet sleep in my hotel bed.

'O don't say that!' he protested with a hint of despair. 'It's always: Tomorrow! Tomorrow! And it never happens.'

He made every effort to make me stay, even giving my shoulders a welcome massage. He then insisted on accompanying me back to the hotel. The wind blew even more bitterly cold and the streets were deserted. Roland's shivering emphasised his waif-like appearance with lanky straggling hair, long pointed nose and the stiff gait of skinny legs in tight jeans.

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Freiburg Minster for all its size is an intimate place, comfortable, warm, light and colourful. Inside, the place glows like a winter stove.

A tiny chapel, situated on the left side of the Minster, facing the sanctuary, contains a striking example of medieval stained glass. The chapel is designated a place for private prayer. A sign forbids sightseeing.

The window always disturbs me so I peered in just to check it was still there, that it had not simply been imagined. Immediately the three familiar and startling male faces leapt out at me: grimacing sinisterly, ferocious eyes burning like hot coals. Abundant green shoots and foliage pour out of every orifice: mouth, nose and ears. They are wild men of the forest, masters of life and death. Dangerous to encounter, they recognise no law or restraint. They represent what is commonly known as *Green Man*: a pagan, pre-Christian symbol of the male principle in nature. In his incarnation in classical mythology as the god Pan he is depicted half beast, half man. Here just a face stares through thick forest foliage.

The presence of Green Man in a cathedral creates a frisson. In his presence at Freiburg the Christian saints appear insignificant, depicted as people with pale sickly expressions, bodies limp and weak. The pagan faces flame with energy and lust. Here, Green Man triumphs.

As an architect Christopher admired these gothic buildings. As a man he hated the Church, which he considered to be a corrupt and hypocritical institution because of its bigotry, apparently limitless wealth and the abuse of influence, generally siding with

the powerful when it should be helping the poor and helpless. As he lay dying Christopher became agitated at the prospect of a church service at his funeral. He forbade it. At the starkly brief cremation his parents refused to acknowledge his partner of over twelve years. When Ouzi, the man who had nursed him through the gruelling final weeks, sleeping on the floor by Christopher's bed, came up and stretched out a hand they turned their backs on him. Ouzi came from Israel. At the reception the parents made pointedly anti-Semitic remarks and expressed relief that the Palestinian leader, Arafat, had recently survived an assassination attempt. They seemed to be blaming Ouzi for Christopher's death, implying gayness to be a specifically Jewish disease.

I missed Christopher sitting by me in Freiburg Minster. On this cold clear winter's day, sunlight pierced through the windows so brightly that the surrounding walls disappeared into pitch blackness. Suddenly colours glowed, fulfilling their original intention: light penetrating a dark, tomb-like space by way of the imagination, telling stories, illuminating and embellishing them with decoration. The intensity of fiery scarlet, lush green, sumptuous crimson expressed our longing for light.

Within the concentric circles and spirals formed by the lead framework in the glass, decorative motifs and patterns become an abstract depiction of leaves and branches. The forest and capricious forces of nature inspired the design. The eight spines of the octagonal spire rest on eight carved heads of Green Man. Each expresses a different temperament from terror and menace to laughter and compassion. These heads support the entire structure.

The defiantly pagan framework of the Minster for me tends to overwhelm the Christian imagery, which seems alien, an imposition from somewhere else. Above the nave on both sides large stained glass windows depict sadistic scenes from the lives and deaths of saints: tortures and a variety of crucifixions. The blaze of primary colours and the fecund abundance of forest motifs provide a contrasting counterpoint to the dismal events. Above the brutality the tiny figure of Christ is seated triumphant in heaven among angels, with God sitting next to him like a kindly father. Is this about the endurance and victory of humanity over the world's cruelty and injustice?

I remembered attending a church in Boston, Massachusetts. A congregation of stinking, ragged and abrasive city rejects, down-and-outs regularly attended daily evening prayers before receiving free supper. This particular service was dedicated to victims of the First Gulf War. Chiefly American and British armaments were maiming and killing men, women and children in Iraq. A regular church member, in pious tones, offered up a prayer for the American soldiers. Suddenly the smelly tramp next to me burst into an explosive whisper, snarling: 'Fuck the soldiers!' Then, in a gentle, sorrowful murmur that only I could hear, he added: 'Pray for the poor people who live there.'

A woman priest at this church, besides organising a soup kitchen for down and outs, had created a special service for people who die from AIDS. She believed the words of the communion, which are meant for the whole community, should also include those with AIDS, mostly gay people who feel and are traditionally rejected by the Church. At a service of mourning, the body of the deceased lies in its coffin, visible to all, so that friends and family can express their grief before saying goodbye.

Reflecting on what Christopher's reaction might have been to such a service, I sat in Freiburg Minster absorbing the sunlight and colours, until a grand triptych on the distant altar beckoned my attention. When I eventually approached to inspect what seemed a famous painting, an officious verger barred the way. 'It is only permitted to see the rest of the cathedral as part of a special tour,' he growled, like Cerberus at the entrance to Hades, adding: 'Have you paid?'

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ROLAND

Barred from entering the sanctuary I headed for the cafe where Roland would meet me later. Apprehensive of how this adventure might turn out, not wanting to become too closely involved with a stranger so early on my journey, I hoped he might forget. Tea had barely been served and I had just begun to reflect ruefully on how the Minster, a sublime example of communal space which once belonged to all people,

rich and poor, had become a museum we must pay to see, when to my dismay Roland arrived early.

We crossed the market square where local farmers, craftsmen and beekeepers sell their produce as they have been doing for centuries. He lived outside the town-centre, beyond the medieval town-gate towers, across a busy main road in a modern suburb.

The flat contrasted strikingly with the neatness and cleanliness of the town. It would be difficult to recreate the disorder in his room: a gradual accumulation of dirty clothes, mugs with indelible stains, coins scattered over the floor and in ashtrays mixed with cigarette butts, scraps of paper tacked to the wall, objects piled up haphazardly over the months, books, magazines, boxes, rags and knick-knacks. A skimpy piece of tattered material, torn with holes, hung over the window only partly concealing the dusty pane. A wide, thin mattress covered most of the floor. The bedclothes lay crumpled up as though the night had been spent wrestling. There being no chairs I squatted down on the bed where the sheet seemed never to have been washed, my hands brushing against the grit of accumulated dirt.

Roland stepped unconcerned over the mess on the floor to a corner where a tape-cassette player perched on a speaker, balanced on a rickety shelf, itself propped up with books and boxes. 'Do you like Mozart?' he asked.

We sat together on the mattress in the middle of this depressing disorder and listened to Glenn Gould playing sonatas.

Roland commented knowledgeably on the performance, remarking on its curiosity value because Glenn Gould had not particularly liked the music of Mozart and rarely played him. But the characteristic clarity of the pianist's scrupulously controlled line and tone poured like a balm over the chaos of the room.

Eventually Roland stood up to make himself a late breakfast. He shared the flat with a woman, both engaged in a row so serious that as soon as she entered the kitchen from her own room, he left off preparing food in order not to be near her. I glimpsed someone in a shift and dressing gown, as miserable-looking and bedraggled as the rest

of the place. While she clattered pans and plates, making it clear from the unnecessarily loud noises that she was in charge and taking her time, we sat, waited and listened to Mozart. Did Roland owe her rent? Could he be under some obligation to her? He refused to say but implied that his problems were beyond the petty everyday variety; that a cosmic battle between good and evil raged between them in this wasteland of a flat in Freiburg.

During my visit he never managed to enter the kitchen again. No breakfast. I now knew the cause of his excessive thinness, felt depressed and looked for an excuse to shorten my stay. In all politeness I could not leave too soon. We embraced. It felt like taking a stray waif into my arms. He laid his sallow face on my shoulder. Long hair fell over sad eyes and sunken cheeks, from which his long nose protruded over full lips.

I stared meanwhile at the wilderness. Shrivelled remains of long-dead plants stood among filthy cups and empty bottles. Among the daubs on the stained walls, between scraps of messages, numbers and lists hung one single clean picture: a photo of himself as a child, looking out at the world with a steady gaze. It represented a recollection of order, innocence still unpolluted by the mess of life.

We began to talk. He worked intermittently as a hairdresser but considered himself to be an artist: a rock-musician and philosopher. He sought friendship and demanded explanation for my unwillingness to embark on a relationship with him. My prevarication irritated him. He pointed out how much suffering there is in the world. 'Don't you read the news?' he remarked aggressively. 'Bosnia, Rwanda ... these people have nothing ... nothing.' Later he told me, 'I have just twelve marks to last me to the end of the month. But I'm content. I don't complain. I can't afford to drink in the cafe where we agreed to meet. But you noticed I paid for myself even though I could have bought enough food for the rest of the day with that money. I do have enough ... it is sufficient for my needs. I don't ask for more. I don't ask you for anything. Just be a friend. Sit with me. People only want fleeting moments together. Nothing serious. People are afraid of more. Why ... why ...?'

Provoked I explained the purpose of my journey: 'It may help me make decisions what to do with my life. I'm an artist like you. I am still trying to achieve. You're still young. I'm almost fifty. I paint and have no recognition. I need to come to terms with that and decide how to spend the rest of my life.'

Roland was unimpressed. 'You have too much self-pity. From what I can see everything's all right for you. You stay in hotels. You travel!' Then he added with a contemptuous sneer: 'Age!'

I agreed and looked for an excuse to leave.

'Where are you going on this journey?' he asked, not interested in an answer. 'What are you taking with you?'

'Some books,' I said. 'Don't read so much,' he said dismissively.

Now it felt right to leave. He was prepared for me to abandon him and rose to open the door. I apologised lamely but he looked relieved to see me out. We exchanged addresses. He scrawled letters painstakingly on a card; then shut the door behind me quickly as soon as I had left.

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WHAT MY GRANDMOTHER TOLD ME

On the brief journey to the Swiss border, plain-clothes policemen wandered slowly up and down the compartments severely scrutinising passengers and their passports.

One of them stopped for a long time examining me with suspicion.

'Where did you get this passport?' he asked menacingly. 'Where are you going?'

Not entirely convinced with my reply he proceeded reluctantly on his way down the compartment, looking back at me as though to say, 'I'm keeping an eye on you. You're shifty - I don't like you.'

Basel straddles the borders of three countries. The guards there carefully examined my luggage and asked more questions. Suddenly I felt the discomfort of being unwelcome.



The little train to Austria wheezed as it geared up to leave Switzerland. Four other passengers occupied it. I welcomed the restfulness after a sleepless night in Freiburg: the midnight hours spent staring into the darkness.

Listening to the thunder of a dishwasher in the kitchen below I tried to calm my hyper-active brain by remembering favourite films, running them through my head like counting sheep.

One film, *The Remains of the Day*, kept me wide awake, stimulating rather than soothing. Anthony Hopkins plays a diligent, loyal and emotionally reticent butler. He serves an English aristocratic Nazi appeaser who lavishly entertains German officials in his stately home during the years leading up to the Second World War. The stiffly correct and subservient posture of the butler as he attends to the guests contrasts with their easy relaxed demeanour. They look in control of events, arrogantly sure of themselves, a cultured and powerful elite. He serves them obediently and unquestioningly, doing his job. His propriety erects a barrier against emotional involvement with either people or politics. Even the death of his father is not allowed to disturb the continuation of duties. He obeys orders without protesting. Far beyond the peaceful English countryside around the stately home, the Second World War starts. Two Jewish girl refugees, hoping to find work as servants, make a brief appearance. Their frightened eyes momentarily challenge the butler's rigid posture, but there can be no welcome for them in a place where German visitors have

only recently been making cryptic remarks about 'the Final Solution'. The butler gets rid of them. They are an embarrassment, these unwanted people and their problems.

Quickly my mind summoned up another film. *Shoah* is a documentary which allows people from the time of the Holocaust in Auschwitz - victims, bystanders and perpetrators - to record their memories. The serene faces of several of the survivors as they hesitantly agree to recall the nightmare of their ordeals in Auschwitz contrast with the bitter even tormented expressions of their persecutors. The faces of those who endured the horror of the Holocaust are like a benediction in the darkness - beautiful, like angels. How can this be, considering all they suffered?

I remembered Claude Lanzmann who directed *Shoah* commenting on Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, an Oscar-winning Hollywood blockbuster about the genocide of Jews in Poland. When asked for his opinion on Spielberg's film he appeared to be speechless at Spielberg's hubris - recreating the Holocaust as 'shoah-business' - and could only stutter: 'How could he?...How could he?...'

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Freiburg's church bells rang on the hour throughout the night. At five o'clock I remembered my grandmother. She had been just such a Jewish refugee in England who appears in *The Remains of the Day* and had experienced the prejudices widespread not only in her home country, Austria, but in England too. After the war she returned to Vienna to pick up the pieces of her life, build a new career, seek out the few members of her family not murdered and salvage her marriage to an Aryan husband who made it clear that he had not wanted to see her again. She endured this disappointment, worked and looked after him. She wagged a finger at me whenever she detected signs of self-righteousness concerning the collaboration and collusion of ordinary people.

‘You have no idea what it was like,’ she declared. ‘People survived as best they could. You cannot judge them.’

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TWO WOMEN

Bregenz in winter is like any out-of-season resort: dingy and depressing. I sat in a smoky cafe on the lake-front, taking stock of the journey so far. The place was packed with unemployed men, drinking and chain-smoking as they passed the long idle hours till work started again the following summer. Most of them had swarthy Mediterranean features which indicated that they were guest-workers or refugees from the south, perhaps the Balkans. At the next table sat two musicians from South America, wearing ethnic knitwear in brilliant colours and conversing disconsolately over several empty beer glasses. One woman served the whole cafe. She looked exhausted but resigned and treated the foreigners with undisguised contempt, observing how they held on to empty glasses because they could not afford more beer. She then chatted at length and in a pointedly friendly fashion with the few locals there, keeping me waiting.

The journey to Bregenz had passed through a string of small towns and peaceful, unspoilt countryside. The train followed the river Rhine along its lower reaches, meandering through twisting valleys surrounded by hills and forests. Along Bodensee, Lake Constance, the view became unearthly. In the wintry cold the water lay perfectly smooth. A frosty haze blended lake and sky. Swans, a few ducks and a solitary boat hung suspended in mid air. Only their reflections indicated they were actually floating on water.

The train stopped at every village. Locals dismounted and boarded. Many of them displayed exaggerated features: large noses, crooked teeth and deep-set eyes that squinted - the result of generations of inbreeding in this remote region of the Black Forest. Instantly on sitting down these passengers unpacked lunch boxes filled with

greasy smoked-bacon sandwiches, 'Speck Brot', and consumed them avidly between each stop. In front of me two elderly women with silver-white permed hair sat in heavy winter coats and whispered noisily, both at the same time, about some friend's numerous operations: '... and then they cut her stomach open ...'

At the Austrian border locals gave way to holidaymakers, skiers who represented a different race of human beings – self-assured, tall and healthy with long firm limbs stretching beyond the confines of seats.

Despite my hotel in Bregenz being empty, the patron and his wife eyed me suspiciously, requesting all my documents and barring the way beyond the lobby. Only when I had paid in full for a night's lodging did they become more hospitable, but were reluctant to give me soap and a towel.

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Sipping peppermint tea in the Bregenz café, I thought about the Green Man window in Freiburg.

Before my second visit to the Minster a furious row had disturbed my last breakfast in the hotel. While an elderly man painstakingly removed the Valentine decorations a cleaning lady had a fit. She marched to and fro, screeching, slamming and kicking doors. A man delivering groceries became the recipient of unexpected abuse as he handed over a basket of loaves. 'I don't understand a word you're saying,' he sighed. An incomprehensible dialect exacerbated her inexplicable fury. Meanwhile the regular waitress calmly served me coffee and continued carrying out her duties with the nonchalance of someone only too familiar with this commotion. I left quickly. strolled over to the Minster and sat in front of the Green Man window.

Four figures are depicted in characteristic medieval poses, leaning, like reeds bending with the wind. On the left, St Paul grasps the sword of conversion. Next to him, Mary the mother of Jesus holds orb and sceptre. On the right, St Peter carries the

keys of paradise. Next to him, St Catherine holds both the wheel of fortune and a sword. The two women are contrasted by colour. Mary the mother is a pregnant queen of heaven dressed in ocean-deep blue; Catherine wears flaming scarlet. A translucent pale blue provides the background. The contrast of these colours accentuates their intensity. The four figures dominate the main portion of the window. Above them, contained within the arch of the window, a small and frail-looking Jesus sits in judgement. Around him curl leaves and branches of the forest. At the apex of the window above and on either side of Jesus are faces of the Green Man. Their coal-black eyes blaze demonically, their venomous spite recalling Shakespeare's Puck in *A Midsummer Nights Dream*: 'that shrewd and knavish spirit .. that frights the maidens of the villagery; ...and sometime misleads night-wanderers, laughing at their harm...' For all the fun, these forces of nature exude a sense of danger. Branches snake out of mouths and ears and burgeon round their heads in a sinister fashion: they could be plants growing through cavities of skulls. Pallid little Jesus is dwarfed by these demons. They menace and yet the structure of the window expresses harmony and grace. Jesus appears to be present by invitation rather than by right. Green Man dominates the upper part of the window and is himself controlled by a forceful alliance of the two women below. The women face each other in the middle panels and turn their backs on the two apostles who are pushed to either side. The deep-blue of Mary and the vivid scarlet of the fighting Catherine exert authority over the entire window. They represent a partnership of contrasting feminine forces establishing a universal order in which demonic spirits are acknowledged but at the same time held in check. The women rule and around them circle the forces of nature in a sumptuously coloured and sculpted tracery of leaves, flowers and branches.

FAIRYTALES

The Green Man window made me think about my next commission: *The Dark Forest*. The woman who ordered this painting recommended I visit Thuringia, a region in the former East Germany. She promised me inspiration there: a romantic place where a number of significant European myths and fairytales have their roots.

In preparation I began to read the Grimm's fairytales again. They are more than diverting entertainment for children. These tales had been collected painstakingly by

two German academics during the early years of the Industrial Revolution when people were leaving villages to work in the cities. The Brothers Grimm wanted to record a tradition of story-telling in remote regions of the countryside before it disappeared. The collection, with its meticulous regard for authenticity - even preserving the dialect and turn-of-phrase of each storyteller - quickly became popular inspiring artists, poets and musicians. Adapted and re-written for children to read, the fairytales became an essential part of upbringing.

The first three stories made such a strong impression on me I could not read any more.



IRON BANDS ROUND THE HEART

In *Iron Heinrich and the Frog Prince*, the two separate parts of the story are barely connected but the second part provides a moral. The first part which tells of the Frog Prince bears little semblance to the story most of us remember from childhood. The Princess is the same self-centred girl, but the Frog Prince is not a creature of pathos, suffering from a mysterious spell that turned him into a slimy amphibian who demands our sympathy.

The Princess plays a game, throwing her ball repeatedly into the air. The rhythmic ascent and fall have been interpreted by scholars of mythology as the rising and setting of the sun. Eventually she drops the ball and it disappears into a deep well. From the moment the Frog Prince retrieves the Princess's toy he proceeds to persecute her. Her innocent game suddenly turns nasty as the restoration of her plaything comes at a price. The frog demands unconditional love and marriage. The Princess rejects the animal, thinks nothing of breaking her part of the bargain and skips off home with the ball.

Her troubles now begin. The frog comes for supper. The father takes the animal's side. The Princess is obliged to share the food on her plate with the obnoxious creature. This intimacy leads inevitably to a sexual proposition. The father colludes with the assault. The directness of Grimm's narrative inhibits any sympathy for the frog, who represents a traditional male attitude: 'We may be slobs, but please, please love us all the same.'

The father orders the Princess to sleep with the frog. In the privacy of her bed the frog sidles up and prepares to rape her. Finally she yields to her natural repugnance and hurls the creature with force at the wall, hoping to kill it. Only at this point is the spell broken. The frog drops to the floor and turns into a handsome Prince.

So it is not a gesture of false sympathy - the version of the story for children I grew up with - but an act of violence which brings about a resolution and happy ending. In later versions of the story edited for children, the princess is compelled to kiss the repugnant creature. Only then is its ugliness revealed to be a disguise. The handsome Prince becomes a reward for her tender act: the slime concealed a civilised man whose true nature had to be awakened by a woman's compassion and her grudging gesture of affection.

There is no such moral in Grimm's original version of the story. It suggests man possesses an inherently bestial nature which can only be transformed by the violence of a woman's natural revulsion.

The story taking up the other half of the fairy tale concerns the Prince's servant, Heinrich. He is the only character with a name. Heinrich's love for the Prince is so great that throughout the period of the spell which had turned the Prince into a frog, Heinrich had to bind three iron bands around his chest to prevent his heart from breaking. This illustrates the male tradition of a stiff upper lip: 'Don't cry!'

The fairy tale ends with the ride home to the Prince's castle. Henry drives the coach bearing the newly weds. On the journey they hear three loud cracks, one after the other. Each time the bride and bridegroom ask: 'Is it the wagon breaking?' Each time Heinrich sings a verse in reply:

‘No, Sir, it is not the wagon
It is a band from round my heart
That there lay in great pain
While you sat in the well
While you were a frog.’

The title of the fairy tale places emphasis on these bands, Iron Heinrich, and conjures up a disturbing image of implacable rigour.



DOMESTIC ABUSE

Disturbed by the unexpected revelations in *The Frog Prince*, I moved for light relief to the next fairy tale in the collection, a fable: *Cat and Mouse Set up House Together*. It turned out to be cruel and cynical, even more unsettling than *Iron Heinrich*.

Predator and victim decide to live together. They are not Tom and Jerry, the cartoon characters who happen to live in the same home and are perpetually at war. In this story the cat falls in love with the mouse who is persuaded against her better judgement to marry the persistent suitor who overwhelms her with protestations of love. After the wedding their love quickly fades. Problems arise over household economics. They agree to store provisions for winter, a tub of lard, and hide it under the church altar, a safe and hallowed place, to be opened only in case of emergency. The cat however secretly goes to the church, eating a portion of the lard and on the third visit finishes it off, each time giving the mouse a clue to what he has been doing behind her back. When the mouse eventually guesses the truth, the cat sidesteps any embarrassment by simply swallowing the mouse. The story ends with the pitiless observation: ‘There you are, that’s what the world is like.’

What message does this send to a child? Life is unfair and we have to put up with it. The world favours the strong who can get away with anything simply by threat and muscle power.

However the story thinly disguises subversive undercurrents.

The crime of deception is committed in the sanctuary of the church - not at home. The story therefore depicts a parody of marriage. Mouse represents the abused housewife whose husband follows his every fancy without regard to his weaker and dependent partner. He treats her contemptuously with the familiarity of a husband who can terrorise his wife with threat of force. The mouse pathetically mutters: 'What? Going out again? What strange excuses you give!' but she knows perfectly well that things are not in order. 'How you complain!' shouts the cat, angrily, to forestall nagging, adding nastily: 'It's because you're at home all day in cap and apron, working all day. You should get out more!' Chance would be a fine thing! The mouse is imprisoned by domestic chores, traditionally the responsibility of the wife, and remains a victim to the inevitable end.

Boys hearing the story would perhaps laugh at the outcome, unaware of the subversive warning which girls, listening more carefully, might heed. Danger is in the marriage home. Not even the church which witnesses the solemn binding of marriage vows and promises can guarantee her protection.



THE THIRTEENTH DOOR

The third story, *Mary's Child*, appears in various forms in countries and cultures all over Europe, some with a radically different ending. Popularity indicates the measure of its universal significance. The story is dense with allusions. It recalls Adam and Eve being thrown out of the Garden of Eden and their time in the wilderness where they come of age, digging and spinning, working to survive in the real world. The

story reflects on the perils of marriage and the difficulty of gaining trust. Most importantly it describes the painful initiation into adult responsibility but in such an ambiguous way that the different endings provide quite contrasting moral imperatives.

The story begins in deepest winter with a family living in dire poverty. The parents are considering killing their only beloved child, a daughter, to alleviate her suffering and in order that there will be one less mouth to feed. These stories, like the most famous of all, *Hansel and Gretel*, have their roots in the trauma of starvation which used to be a frequent condition of life in Europe, and still is throughout the world. From the brute reality at the start of *Mary's Child*, the story takes a step into fantasy. The Virgin Mary appears and offers to take the starving family's daughter to heaven with her. Is there a thinly disguised truth here? Has the child actually died?

In a dream fulfilment the girl lives with the angels and eats sweets all day. She is Eve in the Garden of Paradise as a child would imagine it.

When she reaches puberty the girl is entrusted with the keys to the thirteen gates of heaven while the Virgin Mary, now her second mother, leaves to go on a long and unspecified journey. The girl has permission to open twelve of the gates. The thirteenth is forbidden. Why then did Mary leave her the key? Mary could have taken it with her and saved the girl the danger of temptation. It is, of course, a test, common to so many myths and fairytales. The girl is bound to fail, being human. What story would there be otherwise? The vision behind the thirteenth door gives the story its resonance.

Behind the twelve permitted doors stand the apostles in all their glory. The girl and her friends, the angels, enjoy the spectacle. At the forbidden door the angels take fright, remember they have to be obedient and run away, leaving the girl to open it on her own. She shows courage and stubborn curiosity. A quick peek can do no harm, surely? The angels said: 'That would be a sin.' 'What kind of a sin?' she wonders. Disobedience without knowing what precisely she is forbidden to see means nothing to the girl. She does not yet know that her act of innocent disobedience will change her life completely and lead to her bitter initiation into adulthood when she has to take responsibility for her actions.

She opens the door a little and sees there the Holy Trinity ablaze in golden glory. She stands in amazement. Then, instead of shutting the door so no-one would know she had broken the rules, she makes a crucial error. She wants to touch this glory. Her finger immediately turns to gold. In vain she rubs away at her hand, trying to remove the evidence of her guilt.

Mary returns and three times asks the girl whether she had opened the forbidden door, though she clearly sees the golden finger the girl cannot conceal. All Mary demands is for the girl to own up. The girl stubbornly resists. The punishment is unexpectedly harsh. Mary turns into an unforgiving stepmother throwing the girl out of heaven to live in the wilderness. Mary even cuts the girl's tongue off so she cannot speak.

For several years the girl lives rough, surviving on roots and berries, remembering the good life she had once enjoyed. 'So there she sat year after year and felt the grief and misery of the world.' She grows up and experiences the human condition.

During the years of wintry penance the girl becomes a woman. When, eventually, a Prince rides through the wilderness and finds her, he is not deterred by her wild appearance and the fact that she is dumb. He is entranced by the woman's strangeness and beauty, her nakedness covered only by her long hair.

They marry and she bears a child. Her happiness is once again put to the test. The Virgin Mary turns up to demand confession of the truth about the thirteenth door. The fairy tale does not explain how the woman can do this if she is dumb. Presumably Mary would intuit the woman's desire to come clean. All she has to do is admit to her childhood misdemeanour and all will be well. But if she persists in her obstinate refusal to admit her guilt, Mary will take the baby away. The woman resists the temptation to confess and loses her child. The people are suspicious and accuse her of being a witch, of even having eaten her child. The Prince's love protects her and they conceive another child. At its birth Mary appears again and demands confession. The girl resists and loses her second baby. The Prince continues to trust her in the teeth of the people's anger and their third child is born. This time Mary takes the mother to paradise where she sees the children playing happily with the angels, a poignant

reminder of her infant bliss: an ambivalent moment for the mother, surely. But her earthly happiness with the Prince and being a mother outweighs longing for past paradise. She persists in her refusal to confess. She is thrown back to earth into the hands of the people who demand her death and place her on a bonfire. She is still dumb and cannot explain or defend herself. Only when the flames melt ‘the ice of pride in her heart’, according to Grimm’s version of the story, does the woman then long to admit her guilt. Suddenly she regains her voice and shouts, ‘Yes, Mary, I did it!’ Immediately rain douses the flames. Mary appears with the three children and all ends happily. The Christian moral is stated simply: ‘She who repents of her sins will be forgiven.’

There exists another version of this story with a contrasted moral. The woman stands proudly in the flames, stubborn to the last, prepared to die. At which point rain douses the flames and forgiveness is the same reward. The contrast long perplexed me. The Christian version describes pardon for disobedience, so long as we admit to it. But this ‘moral’ version ignores the cruel streak to the punishment, cutting out the tongue, being thrown into the wilderness, and blackmailed in the worst possible way, taking away her children to force a confession. When the flames are about to consume her, the inner strength which helped the woman through all her trials deserts her. The girl’s curiosity, which gave her a glimpse of glory behind the forbidden door in heaven challenged divine authority that refuses to explain itself, and far from being stubborn, the grown woman’s defiance indicates exceptional courage and mature self assurance. She has endured brutal punishment for the curiosity which led to her innocent act of disobedience, felt the pain of the world for years in the wilderness, accepted the loss of her speech and was even prepared to sacrifice her happiness losing husband and children. But in Grimm’s version of the story, the best known, she collapses at the point of her ultimate test.

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Is ‘frog’ man irredeemably uncouth? Is the world doomed to perpetual injustice and is it necessary always to compromise on our humanity? The moral conclusions of these stories are perplexing.

A RUSSIAN PRINCESS

The person who commissioned the painting I am carrying lives in a spacious chalet on the slope of a hill overlooking the town of Kitzbühel in Austria.

Ludmilla is a Russian descended from the aristocracy. Her father served as an aide to the last Tsar. She escaped the 1917 Revolution together with her mother by running through the cornfields of the Ukraine.

Eventually settling in Beirut, Lebanon, the mother found work as a telephone operator. This Russian aristocrat devoted all her energy to providing her daughter with the quality of life she had lost.

Ludmilla met and married George, a Greek banker. They entertained politicians and celebrities and bought a holiday home in Kitzbühel. When the war between Palestine and Israel began to tear Lebanon apart they moved permanently to Austria.

The chalet also has a history, designed and built by a celebrated Czech painter, Count Palffy, who spent holidays there in the years before the Second World War. When the former Czechoslovakia fell to Communists after the war, the count lost his castle, money and property. He sold the Kitzbühel chalet and lived the rest of his life modestly in a Vienna flat.

With his artist's eye he ensured the house had a spectacular view. A single pane window runs the length of the large main reception room. The town, valley and a ring of mountains lie beyond it, an incomparable panorama.

The banker George died several years after I first visited them in Kitzbühel. Ludmilla now lives there in the company of Mountaha, her Lebanese maid, and a large, woolly Polish sheepdog called Drouzhok - Russian for 'little friend' - though he is only slightly less alarming than the ferocious German shepherd dog which guarded them previously.

I came to know Ludmilla through a mutual friend, and liking my use of strong primary colours and the naive quality of my subject matter she had already commissioned me once before. My work reminded her of folk art from her homeland. That picture depicted St Francis, a swarthy youth squatting naked in a meadow surrounded by animals and birds all paired as predators and prey but living harmoniously in his benign presence. The pagan element appealed to George who re-titled the painting: *Adam in Paradise before Eve*.

A portrait of our mutual friend was the second commission, painted in tempera which is the traditional medium of Russian icons. Many layers of transparent pigment applied on a small round piece of wood specially prepared with polished gesso plaster rendered my colours even brighter.

Ludmilla is one of the few survivors who knew Russia before the Revolution and has witnessed the end of Communism there. She now visits Russia every year, sometimes several times, and returns laden with books, shawls, embroidery and matryoshkas, symbols of fatherland. Though aware of the social collapse there, something she could not help noticing on her many journeys, she only spoke of the regeneration of Holy Mother Russia, the fact that people were able to attend church again.

Ludmilla's home is itself a piece of Russia. The rules of hospitality are adhered to in traditional manner. Immediately on arrival I had been sent to my room to settle down. I then endured an alarming preliminary encounter with Drouzhok who needed to be reassured about my presence as a welcome guest. Ludmilla standing anxiously at the end of the corridor while the dog bounded over did not however reassure me. I fully expected his teeth to sink into my leg and uttered a stream of endearments in every language I knew. Perhaps Drouzhok understood some of them. He decided not to bother me and shifted his massive frame to another distant corner of the house. After I had been given time to wash and freshen myself, tea was served downstairs in the dining room. Then, with due ceremony, I delivered the commissioned painting. Ludmilla took her time examining it, asking questions and expressing her admiration with fulsome adjectives so that I felt appreciated. The money had been prepared in advance and handed to me in a large envelope. It was civilised and gracious in a way

I rarely experience. Dealings with customers are invariably uncomfortable and I am frequently surprised to be paid at all for my work.

Ludmilla looked frail. She had become so thin as to be on the verge of vanishing before my eyes, her veins threads of blue under transparent skin. Behind the delicate appearance and impeccable manners flashed the occasional angry lightning which reminded me of her grandmother, who, on one surviving photograph, resembled a cossack chief with a scowl capable of subduing any enemy.



REFUGEES

In case guests should feel hungry between meals, Ludmilla filled china pots generously with sweets and biscuits as well as providing a kettle, various kinds of tea and a large bottle of mineral water in my room. An icon hanging on the wall behind a row of matryoshka dolls depicted St George killing the dragon. The paint flaked at the edges and must have been among the collection Ludmilla and her mother took with them on their flight from the pursuing Red Army. The provenance of the icon reminded me of events that shocked me that morning as I left Bregenz.

The beauty of the train ride to Kitzbühel had temporarily put the unpleasantness out of mind. The train ascended immediately into the high Alps, leaving Bregenz down in the valley far below. A winter wonderland opened up. A blanket of fresh snow and drifts covered the dark smudges of forest, hillsides, valleys and meadows. Houses and huts peeped out from under heaps of snow. Skiers gathered in dots on distant slopes. Streams rushed in grey torrents over stones and rocks between mounds of snow hanging like dollops of whipped cream. The pure whiteness and silence made the winter landscape dreamlike.

While being entranced by this scenery I remembered the painful drama at breakfast in Bregenz. Two refugees from Bosnia, a boy and a girl about fifteen years old, were trying to obtain visas. Their uncle, apparently a Swiss national, was arranging accommodation for them at the Gasthaus while he went for help to get them into Switzerland, a bottle of brandy as bribe or gift tucked under his jacket.

The children looked anxious and dishevelled; clearly they had just arrived after a long and arduous journey. They smiled constantly out of nervous anticipation of what their uncle might succeed in doing for them, but their eyes expressed fear and shock. What had they witnessed? What had they left behind? These eyes must have seen at first-hand what I had only read about and seen on the News, the war in Bosnia raging barely half a day's train ride away. I tried not to stare at them, though they looked in my direction desperate for friendship and understanding.

The hotel owner's wife muttered discouragingly.

'They'll never get visas - not to Switzerland,' she whispered to me in an aside they were meant to overhear. She proceeded to be unhelpful to the uncle, even though he waved fat wads of notes over the counter, prepared to pay for everything on the spot. At the same time he tried to reassure the children.

'We're closed from one to three o'clock,' she kept repeating until he began to lose his temper. 'I know, I know... so you keep telling me!' he almost shouted, but suppressing the volume so as not to alarm the children and further alienate the woman.

'They'll have to stay in their room,' she said, implying they should be locked in.

'All right, I'll tell them not to leave their room,' he conceded, and stowing the children away with their two plastic bags of possessions and provisions, he hurried off with the brandy.

The woman aired her disapproval in my presence as I was the only guest at breakfast.

‘There are enough poor people of our own to worry about,’ she said, not looking as though she knew or cared about any of them and forgetting that the uncle had offered her plenty of money.

I sipped coffee and helped myself to the fresh rolls, slices of ham and sausage, cheeses, jams, honey and juices laid out on the buffet table. I commented on how young these refugees were. I did not tell her, but they reminded me of my own parents who, over half a century ago, had also been refugees, the same age then as this boy and girl now.

All of a sudden the woman looked sad and pensive.

‘Yes,’ she said sympathetically in a low and gentler voice. ‘He’s the same age as my elder son...’ then, after a pause, she suppressed this flicker of sympathy that might make her kinder to the children by clearing away the breakfast foods with especial vigour. Perhaps they might sneak down and enjoy the feast on display: after all, the uncle had only paid for the following night. Finally, even though I had not yet finished and was still sitting there, she turned out all the lights in the room.

MOUNTAHA

Tea with Ludmilla is always a gracious ritual: everything meticulously prepared and laid out with cloth napkins, the tea service with large cups decorated in vivid colours Russian folk style. A generous supply of cheese-and-ham toasts on cocktail sticks lay on a silver platter. Mountaha also presented me with homemade biscuits, crisp shortbread, each with a jam filling. Ludmilla poured the tea while Mountaha hovered at the door to check whether everything was in order and to my satisfaction.

Mountaha came to work for Ludmilla and George while still a girl in Lebanon and remained part of the family ever since. Now she is mother, confidante, nurse, companion and devoted friend. Service is all she has known and it has shaped her life. Only when Ludmilla goes on travels does Mountaha take a rest. Everything she does is carried out with powerful but tender gestures. She is an energetic woman,

though small and getting on in years. Heart trouble already causes alarm. She moves lightly on quiet feet and serves food as though it were coming from within herself - from her breast. She speaks in a soft breathy voice and opens her eyes wide as though prepared to receive criticism, accept it and remedy the fault. She is respectful of 'Madame', but occasionally they argue in the kitchen and Mountaha generally wins.

Ludmilla declares: 'Without me she can live easily; without her - I am nothing.'

So Mountaha is mistress of the house. Even the dog Drouzhok relates mostly to her. When he sits in the kitchen not even Ludmilla dares to enter. He stands to attention at the door when he hears her approach and growls menacingly. In order to keep on reasonable terms with him, Ludmilla must spend specific times each day walking and feeding him. She showers the dog with affection using diminutive familiarities from the many languages she speaks. All the while she eyes him with caution and looks relieved when he decides to return to Mountaha.

Mountaha used to live in the servants' quarters with the chauffeur who treated her as his property, roughly, scolding and bossing her. At one moment he would be friendly and obsequious to the guests; the next brusque and rude to Mountaha. He died and the gentle resilient woman survived, growing more confident and self-sufficient with every year. She prepares the most elaborate meals, yet, in the kitchen, every surface is empty and spotless with not a sign that any work has been done.

Mountaha has no concern for her appearance in contrast to Ludmilla who is always stylishly dressed and coiffured even when pruning roses in the garden. Mountaha wears comfortable cardigans and woollen socks. Serving the food on massive platters at Ludmilla's lunch and supper parties, Mountaha dresses in a tight-fitting dirndl, the traditional Austrian maid's costume, in proud acknowledgment of her recently acquired Austrian citizenship - a rare privilege. This reminded me of an anecdote told me by my grandmother from her days as a refugee during the Second World War in England. A qualified pharmacist she then had to take any work on offer and used to be housemaid in a middle-class household where the husband and wife, who had been officials in India during the Empire, believed in keeping up appearances however straightened the circumstances. It amused my grandmother that

they would dress up for the most insignificant meals such as a light supper of cheese sticks and tomato soup. She coped with the humiliation but one day her new employers wanted to show her off to guests at supper, her fine Viennese cooking legendary in the district. They asked her to wear a dirndl for the occasion. Their fine manners clearly did not include sensitivity. Never a person to cross, my grandmother took pride in stoutly refusing and left.

Ludmilla's parties are organised with scrupulous regard for protocol. Ambassadors, generals, bishops, aristocrats and bankers are seated in order of status. As an artist I sit at the bottom of the table, the last to be served, but enjoy the feeling of complicity with Mountaha when she comes to serve me. She nudges me conspiratorially, urging me to take as much as possible and whispering sweetly into my ear. On this visit, being on my own with them, it felt sad that the three of us could not sit together and share the washing up, but tradition rules in this household, whatever the circumstances.

Ludmilla had made plans for the following days. Telling her about my long journey to the East, and wanting to leave sooner, she looked me straight in the eye and embarrassed me by saying gently: 'I am not forcing you to stay.' I had been rude. Here in Kitzbühel exists a piece of authentic Russia where hospitality is by tradition lavish to excess. Anything less would be an insult to the guest. To reject it would be to deny Ludmilla her reason for being. This is no ordinary home; it is the palace of a princess.

PUSHKIN

Enthusiasing over my idea of visiting Russia Ludmilla agreed to give me practice in Russian conversation and offered to teach me some poems by Pushkin.

After supper we sat at a small table in a corner of the sitting room. Surrounded by ornate lamps, family photographs in silver frames, more icons and bookshelves, she recited the poems in such a way that I could learn the complex rhythms and stresses.

Despite the difficulties Pushkin began to tighten his grip on my attention. Imagination ranged across all dimensions from the ordinary and the everyday to the epic and

fantastic. The pared-down directness of his style disguises a control of Russian syntax which resists translation. The simplicity expresses grandeur, emotion and wit simultaneously. The humour offers an ironic perspective, creating a balance between intellect and feeling.

Morality controls the basic structure of most literature: a sense of right and wrong, of good and evil. The conflict within this duality provides the narrative drive and final resolution when wickedness is punished and good rewarded. Pushkin also deals with morality. But no one comes under any judgement. People may act despicably, but even at their most depraved they are capable of redemption; and the good characters have their faults. Good and evil merge in everybody and no easy dividing line exists between them. Pushkin treats his creatures with equal interest and affection, accepting their faults unconditionally.

This generosity of heart releases emotion. The intensity of its warmth always catches me off guard. Ludmilla recited her favourite Pushkin poems and observed the tears streaming down my cheeks. She made no comment. The frail, elderly and elegant lady gazed at me and smiled knowingly.

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EMPATHY AND IRONY

First she recited an excerpt from *Eugen Onegin*.

Pushkin's novel written in verse examines the destructive consequences of fashionable cynicism in a young man who suppresses his true feelings beneath a veneer of bored worldly fatalism. He kills his best friend in a duel. He rejects the advances of a country girl, Tatiana, whom he despises for her provincial upbringing. Then when he meets her years later, now married to a wealthy aristocrat, he tries to make love to her. She rejects him and he ends up a lonely broken man. Tatiana is the heart of this unsparing analysis of male posturing in a culture where emotions are

considered unmanly. Onegin plays intellectual games and gambles with his life out of boredom. Tatiana in contrast grows and matures.

The passage Ludmilla recited describes Tatiana's first reaction to Onegin. In her provincial innocence she fails to see beneath his superficial pretensions. Suddenly she realises she has fallen in love. Pushkin describes the progress of her sensations in detail, step by step, like a physician diagnosing an illness. Her eyes close, she can barely move, her heart beats painfully hurting her breast, she is breathless, her ears thunder and lightning flashes behind her closed eyes. It is night; the moon patrols the high vault of the heavens. A nightingale sings mournfully in a nearby copse. Tatiana cannot sleep, so she wakes her longsuffering nurse for company. Tatiana wants to know whether the nurse had ever been in love. Pushkin takes advantage of the situation to explore beyond the nurse's comic character and unfolds a different and tragic story. 'Were you ever in love?' asks Tatiana. 'God forbid!' cries the nurse. Love was discouraged in her day. Any mention of it and her mother-in-law would have beaten the life out of her. She belonged to a tradition of forced marriages between children (she having been only thirteen) where a girl became the property of her husband and his family. Marriage was cause for fear and weeping, not for rejoicing. Tatiana is quickly bored by the nurse's unromantic memories. The girl gives in to the pleasant delirium of new and overwhelming emotion and pushes the nurse away. The passage ends with a description of the moon shining on both of them, the girl, her long hair hanging loose around a beautiful pale face streaked with tears, the nurse, her grey head wrapped in a scarf. 'Everything slumbered in the beams of the inspiring moon.'

Pushkin caresses each character with equal attention and makes no comment, but Tatiana's turmoil appears absurd next to the pathos of the nurse's loveless life spent in service. The juxtaposition of the nurse's confining headscarf and tight jacket with the careless abandon of Tatiana's hair provides a note of gentle but telling irony.



THE NEED TO REMEMBER

Ludmilla followed this excerpt with another: the monologue of the old monk, Pimen, from Pushkin's play *Boris Godunov*.

The play is a series of scenes and tableaux representing the history of Russia at a period when the country was plunged into political chaos marked by self-interest among the powerful and misery for the rest of the population. Not unlike Russia today.

Boris Godunov is a complex character. He genuinely wants to improve the situation in his country, control the forces of dissent and listen to the needs of the people. But he has committed murder in order to achieve power. Tormented by guilt he weakens and becomes an easy target for assassination. For all his wickedness he compels our sympathy. The play ends with a bleak vision of the future. Pushkin uses the drama to reveal the contradictions in power and politics, how corruption destroys idealism.

In a celebrated monologue near the beginning of the play the monk, Pimen, offers an interpretation of history and comments on the role of the chronicler. He is painstakingly writing a history of Russia. 'Just one more, one story more,' says the old man, tired but exalted by his task.

For Pimen this act of creation is the sacrifice of his life. He stoically accepts failure and dreams of the future when some other monk will 'shake the dust of centuries from my manuscript' and 'transcribe these truthful stories so that generations of believers will know of the past fate of their ancestors.' This is the prophetic role of the chronicler who helps people 'to understand the labour, the glory, the good deeds of their great rulers and to humbly beg forgiveness for their sins, for dark deeds.'

This last line has continuing resonance. Terrible events of our own time and the century previous will come to haunt generations after. The purpose of this journey across Europe is to visit significant places, remember what happened there, witness their present state, to understand.



THE GOLDEN CHAIN

Finally Ludmilla taught me the prologue to *Ruslan and Ludmilla*. Pushkin's epic verse fairy tale describes how jealous envy disrupts a wedding. The bride Ludmilla is whisked away by a magician to a kingdom where she is offered every incentive to stay and be queen. But Ludmilla's love for her bridegroom Ruslan remains constant and she resists the temptation of luxury and power. Ruslan needs not only the help of other jealous rivals but the magic powers of a wizard to find his bride. The story celebrates the need for friendship and collaboration: the hero, however brave, cannot win by himself. Magic is an important element in the story. Human beings are powerless on their own against the implacable forces of nature. Pushkin's prologue describes the world of the imagination. It is a popular passage in Russian literature and Ludmilla could recite it from memory.

'By a seashore stands a green oak tree...' The poet sits under it and listens to a 'learned' cat which walks around the tree on a golden chain. If the cat decides to go one way, it sings, if another, it tells a story. The tree is alive with spirits, mermaids, strange beasts, wizards, princes, wicked kings, witches, a captive princess served by a faithful grey wolf, spells, secret paths and valleys full of mysteries.

'There is the scent of Russa - Russia breathes there!'

At this point Ludmilla drew her frail body upright and raised her right arm, eyes flashing. For a moment Russian nationalism made me uneasy.



'Shall we read more?' Ludmilla asked eagerly. I preferred to leave Pushkin drinking mead in the shade of his fecund green oak and listening to the cat, the homely symbol of our imagination.

I leaned back in my chair and we looked at each other with brightly shining eyes. How different we were: Ludmilla a princess from a distant eastern land where generations of her family took part in the shaping of its history, Mountaha clearing dishes in the kitchen, a Lebanese Austrian and me, a child of refugees, my ancestry a mystery.

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A NIGHTMARE

Pushkin and the Bosnian children made me think about the purpose of this journey.

Ludmilla's house stands at the edge of an exclusive part of the town. Beyond it a meadow falls steeply down to a farm. Behind are large chalets designed like small mansions affordable only to the very rich. Limousines line the driveways. The windows are protected by iron grilles, security cameras rotate perpetually up and down the road and alarms blink red lights.

The winter air had an extra sharp nip. A woman with silver blonde hair and a glossy fur coat that reached down to her boots walked past with her decorative small dog. She looked preoccupied and did not return my greeting.

I turned back and descended into the town. In the centre of Kitzbuhel, a place devoted to tourism, there is silence on the streets even when crowded because people are strangers here.

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A retired ambassador, his wife, his sister and a young banker were the guests at Ludmilla's lunch party in my honour. They paid a cursory glance at the painting I had delivered and quickly embarked on the business of money, royal scandals, private lives and the political conditions in Russia.

When Ludmilla announced that the fascist Zhirinovsky might be a stooge of Gorbachev the outlandishness of the suggestion brought the chatter momentarily to a stunned halt. The ambassador gently brushed it to one side, as though humouring the whim of an elderly lady out of touch with reality. They all agreed, however, that the fascist French politician, Le Pen, offered the best policies. ‘Too many immigrants!’ they concurred while Mountaha served the first course. ‘They have to be stopped. We can’t be taking responsibility for these people. They should definitely be sent back where they came from.’

They ignored Mountaha’s presence and so failed to consider that her Austrian citizenship would not prevent her being the target of racist discrimination. How quickly we forget history. Within the lives of most of the people at the table discrimination led to genocide in their very own countries. And this keeps repeating itself throughout the world. Pushkin’s old monk Pimen felt compelled to chronicle good and evil deeds so the future does not forget.

Over coffee the banker, a handsome young man on whom the women lavished extra attention, focused his steely grey eyes on me. We spoke for several minutes about my painting. Initially surprised at his interest I rapidly became aware of his main objective. Knowing I had access to a West End London gallery he subtly threaded a business proposition into the friendly conversation. To enhance his cultural standing with his colleagues at the bank he had taken on a protégé, an artist-photographer specializing in portraits of famous catwalk models. The banker quickly realized I could be no help - perhaps he noticed the light go out of my eyes - and before I had time to respond, he abruptly ended our conversation and turned to the ambassador’s wife.

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In bed that night I put off going to sleep, apprehensive about a recently recurrent nightmare: being forced to witness executions and torture. A sadistic officer carried them out, proudly showing off to me his grotesque skills. Every time the dream

recurred, a new torture had been added to the show. Last night the screaming victims were being slowly burnt alive.

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AN ORDINARY TOWN

The slow train from Kitzbühel to Vienna stopped at the town of Mürzzuschlag just as daylight began to fade and I broke the journey here.

The town is so undistinguished that I found only one hotel. In the last available room the wallpaper was peeling, the bed shook unsteadily and a musty smell hung in the air. The window looked onto the hotel car park walled in by the back of a four-storey office building and a shopping precinct.

I then found a cafe round the corner where mothers gathered round the tables, gossiping and smoking, while their children screamed in vain for attention. Shopping bags piled on neighbouring seats. In the middle of this hubbub a middle-aged man sat reading a girlie magazine, closely examining tits and bums.

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A subtle 'put-down' by Ludmilla's lunch guests yesterday depressed me throughout the journey. Having glanced at my painting and been suitably 'ravis' they eyed me sharply and said: 'How lucky you are to know Ludmilla. She loves art.' Then, without pause, they turned to more important matters. They meant to say: 'We wouldn't dream of being so stupid as to buy it.'

Mountaha packed a hamper for my journey. The guests had declared themselves to be on a diet, much to Mountaha's dismay, so a large quantity of food remained after the lunch party. But she had not slaved in vain. Her special Lebanese pies stuffed with buttery spinach and nuts nourished me throughout the next leg of the journey.

The two women stood at the door and waved goodbye. Their relationship had grown close and interdependent over the years, more than any they had known in their lives. Ludmilla's and Mountaha's lives continued untainted by new customs - like the view from their window beyond which no human being is visible, only nature and the town buildings in the valley below. I turned back to wave and almost slipped on a treacherous sheet of ice. They showed consternation but I felt a deeper and sharper pang at the thought of what will happen when one dies before the other.



The half empty train meandered through the southern valleys of Styria.

Snow gradually disappeared leaving the lower slopes of the Alps bare with brown dead grass waiting for the spring to urge fresh colours. These valleys are remoter than the more popular tourist resorts further north and back west. Here the towns are less touristy, the mountains not so high. It is possible to discover valleys with forgotten villages and cheap accommodation. In these backwaters streams rush through mill wheels as they have done for centuries and the locals look with curiosity at foreigners. In the high hills cowherds still decorate the horns of their cattle in the late autumn, according to tradition, before driving them down to winter pastures. Buttermilk is served to passing rambles and the huts smell of smoked sausages and sour cabbage soup. Religious pictures of saints hang on the walls and sprigs of alpine rose decorate simply carved wooden crucifixes. An air of eternity hangs over the unkempt and muddy pastures, woods and overgrown paths along which clumps of wild raspberries fight for space with fir saplings.



In the middle of my reflections in Mürzschlag the mothers left the café with their shopping and children, followed by the man with the dirty magazines. A courting couple remained, sitting in a corner, whispering intimacies and slipping morsels of cake into each other's mouths.

Finishing off my coffee I wondered why the manager of my hotel here had been unfriendly and suspicious. Perhaps I look like a refugee. On the way out I encountered two cheerful women taking towels into a garishly advertised sauna. 'Grüss Gott!' they both shrieked at me, hoping to tempt me inside.

Back at the hotel I at last organised a bath for myself. The manager had been unwilling to give me a towel earlier. 'We only distribute them after dark,' he informed me with the rat-like expression of someone who expects to be robbed and will do whatever is necessary to prevent such an outrage.

He took me for another refugee, of course.

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DECISIONS

The precise itinerary and purpose of my journey became clear on the slow train from Müzzuschlag to Vienna and immediately on my arrival I bought a ticket to Krakow in Poland.

The quiet ambience of a cosy cafe in the Josephstadt Theatre encouraged recollection of family stories, events which reflect the history of this century.

The theatre stands on a minor road some way off the main thoroughfares. Harry Lime's girlfriend worked here in Carol Reed's *The Third Man*.

The film examines the physical and moral chaos at the end of the Second World War. The occupying victors: England, the United States and Russia attempt to establish order in the ruins of Vienna. They are hampered not only by mutual suspicions but by the resentment of a defeated people. Criminals move secretly and with ease through the different areas of occupation, using the underground sewage system. Their chief, Harry Lime, trades corrupted medical drugs on the black market. Not even when she is made to witness the suffering of crippled children poisoned by the tainted medicine does his girlfriend Anna stop loving him. He had after all saved her from the Russian

soldiers conquering Vienna. He had protected, looked after and loved her. Nothing else matters. Harry Lime makes only brief appearances in the film. The actor Orson Welles gives him a seductive charm and intelligence. He first emerges from the shadows with an ironic smile flitting across brightly lit features, tempting our complicity. He is hunted down and perishes ignominiously. The final image is however not of his hands desperately clawing escape from the sewers but Anna's blank expression as she leaves the graveyard after the funeral. This last shot is calculatedly long drawn out. Anna approaches from a distance and without a flicker of emotion passes us by.

The film illustrates the moral uncertainties at this decisive moment of European history when the continent lay in ruins. Reflecting on the film helped me to focus on the stories of members of my own family and what happened to them.

First I intend to visit Auschwitz and pay respects to my grandparents who were killed there.

Then I explore Thuringia to find inspiration for my commission, *The Dark Forest*.

After that my journey will end in Chartres.

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Beefy sportsmen surrounded me at breakfast in Mürzzuschlag this morning. They chain-smoked, grunted and growled at each other oozing machismo and waited for their star player. When he appeared they treated him like a Golden Calf. Tall, beautiful and gentle he was the only person to acknowledge my presence with a polite 'Good Morning'. Then I noticed how all the others had shy and vulnerable eyes in contrast to their robust physiques and uncouth manners.

Two trains stood on either side of the platform at Mürzzuschlag station, both going to Vienna. I hesitated. The slow train looked cold and uncomfortable. The guard tried to dissuade me from boarding. 'It stops at every station all the way to Vienna. Very

slow!' he said. It was empty whereas passengers packed the fast train. Being in no hurry I boarded the empty one.

The train meandered slowly round the valleys and mountains of the Eastern Alps. Dramatic views opened up on both sides. Snow lay fresh again. Lines from a Robert Frost poem kept running through my head:

Two paths diverged in a wood.
I took the one less travelled by,
... and that has made all the difference....

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My lodgings in Vienna stood on a side-street. The bed in my room lay unmade. A couple had obviously been having sex there the night before. A maid gingerly lifted the sheets while the receptionist, a pretty young man with a ponytail, scurried about to clear away condoms and soiled towels. Leaving my bags in the sleaze I went straight to the cafe at the Josephs Theatre and pondered my decision.

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My parents were refugees: father fled from Berlin and mother from Vienna. They had been no older than the girl and boy I saw in Bregenz a few days earlier, waiting to reach a safe haven, both anxious, disorientated, expectant, exhausted, unwanted, patronised and mistrusted.

Of my father's family only his sister survived the war. Being young, healthy and useful, she avoided the worst horrors of Auschwitz by being delegated to work units which serviced the camp officials. When the Russians approached to liberate the camp, she and her unit were taken on what became known as the 'death march', the last convoy fleeing westward out of Auschwitz. She watched friends dying from illness and starvation. She survived. The hope of seeing my father again kept her going.

Their parents perished in Auschwitz. All I know of them is a photograph in which they sit with their children in a warm and affectionate huddle. My aunt kept a few of their letters. My father to the end of his life finds them too painful to read. They express concern for the children and punctuate the usual parental exhortations with repeated declarations of love. Who can measure the degree of loss and pain experienced by young teenagers when they are wrenched from so protective a nest? In the event this was harder on my father. The sister had always been the black sheep of the family, the rebel. She developed a tough skin early in life which helped her survive the horrors to come. While the brother queued through the night outside the Berlin Staatsoper to hear Tiana Lemnitz sing Desdemona in Verdi's *Otello*, the sister collected Shirley Temple records despite parental disapproval. The brother was the favoured child, the sensitive and clever one from whom much would be expected. Before he could deal with the demands of these expectations, his loving parents were murdered. He never came to terms with the loss.

The effects of the holocaust continue down the generations. A crime of such ungraspable magnitude, a global earthquake, sends ripples and after-shocks long after the initial devastation.

Eventually they also took the ground from under my own feet. One sunny summer's day on a quiet road near my home - the exact spot branded on my memory - aged ten I asked about my grandparents. Where were they? After a brief whispered consultation my parents told me the facts simply. Suddenly a bottomless pit opened up ahead of me. I realised that there could be little hope for humanity which had allowed such an event to happen.

A more sophisticated interpretation of history came with growing up. The holocaust was neither an aberration nor a blip in human history. It was part of the culture which conditioned me. The sense of despair at this colossal outrage continued unabated but tempered by the need to understand why it happened.

Years later my aunt gave me some information about her parents. They came from a relatively prosperous background of shopkeepers and businessmen. Her mother grew

up in Königsberg, now Russian Kaliningrad: a city then in the far north-eastern corner of Germany when that country's borders adjoined the Baltic States. My grandfather, born in Berlin, became rich managing a chain of cinemas there during the Weimar years, the wealth enabling him to fulfil his ambition of being an impresario. Already before Hitler's rise to power colleagues he trusted had betrayed him and he lost his cinemas. When the National Socialists took over Germany the musicians whom he had elevated to fame and fortune turned their backs on him, ashamed of being associated with, let alone beholden to a Jew. The family experienced the sharp contrast of wealth and poverty: first life in a palatial house with park-like gardens in an exclusive district of Berlin, nurses for the children and holidays in Italy then a frugal existence in a cramped town flat, looking out on a busy road. It became clear that the Jews in Germany were in danger. Both children were meant to find refuge in England, but only the son found a sponsor, a farmer who needed male labour. The parents made no attempt to leave the country they knew as home. When my father said his painful good bye, he guessed that he might never see them again.

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My mother came from a family of intellectuals, cultured and respected members of society. The father of this elite brood of lawyers, doctors and teachers was Chief Rabbi of Vienna, a famous liberal who died just as Nazism began its rise to power. When the Second World War began, a few family members survived by fleeing to various parts of the world where their high qualifications as doctors, professors and lawyers, guaranteed welcome and work.

These included my great-aunt Fritzzi, a formidable woman. Though well into her seventies, she took me on holidays in the Alps, leading me on lengthy treks over several peaks in a day. At night in the mountain huts we shared bowls of semolina pudding and she told me about her adventures rock-climbing in the Dolomites at the turn of the century when women rarely undertook such sport. This amazon had wanted to be a solicitor, but friends, among them Sigmund Freud, persuaded her to be a headmistress telling her: 'As a lawyer you might rescue a few poor thieves, but as a teacher you will help form a generation.' Proudly unmarried and openly preferring

the company of women, she occupied a small flat on the Sieveringerstrasse, a quiet neighbourhood of the city, occupied mostly by the professional classes and fringed by the Vienna Woods. I happily slept alongside her bed in the cramped room stuffed with culture, and stared in awe at the signed photographs of famous friends, several fine original paintings and numerous drawings covering those parts of the wall not already lined with packed bookcases. Together we read poetry and novels, and listened to concerts, plays and discussions on the radio. Occasionally she burst into guttural explosions of disapproval: 'Schlamperei! Quark!' ('Laziness! Rubbish!'). She was feared by the rest of the family, but I preferred her company to anyone else. Her conversation enthralled. Aware that she might be overburdening my young mind with too much politics, philosophy and socialism, she would regularly spoil me, taking me out for special meals. Once, after a long trek in the Alps, arriving at a mountain inn as night fell she ordered the host's wife to whip up a large bowl of fresh cream for me. It arrived sprinkled with sugar and she lovingly watched me as I worked my way through the mountain of bliss, spoonful by spoonful.

Great-aunt Fritzi worried about my mother. Gruff exasperation concealed her affection. The cause of this anxiety stemmed from a history of strained relations between my mother's incompatible parents.

My grandfather came from a remote village in Slovakia, the illiterate son of a poor peasant family. Handsome, muscularly built and ambitious he could also be violent when not allowed to have his way. The marriage challenged the Rabbi's family. A family with liberal outlook this had nothing to do with him being a non-Jew. They feared that the uneducated interloper would not be able to support his wife, by all accounts an emotionally unstable woman, who eventually found the stresses of her marriage intolerable and committed suicide. Her daughter, my mother then ten-years old, found the body slumped in front of the gas oven. He married again: a tough, well-educated and hardworking woman whom I always knew as grandmother. She also came from a Jewish family.

Germany annexed Austria, a country that enthusiastically embraced Nazi ideology, and my mother followed her stepmother and my great-aunt Fritzi to become a refugee in England. There she met my father.



An elegantly dressed pair of women entered the cafe, settled down at a table in the corner and embarked on a long conversation over coffee, as they might have done at any time in the last century. The timeless tradition of this scene shows life going on regardless of wars and holocausts. The easiest way of coming to terms with the horror is not to think about it.

Aunt Jutti, my father's sister, spoke of a colleague in the typing pool where she worked during the 'economic miracle' in 50's Germany. The colleague complained about the gloom and recriminations concerning the war years. Pointedly ignoring the concentration camp number branded prominently on my aunt's arm she told everyone cheerfully: 'I had wonderful times! It was fun. I'm only sorry they're over.'

Rousing Nazi songs about bloodstained skies and a purified fatherland were sung regularly and enthusiastically in German youth hostels throughout the fifties and early sixties. At a Stuttgart factory producing cheap transistor radios, where I took part-time employment in my gap year before going to university, my bosses formed a sinister couple. The older man, crippled by war injuries, patrolled the workshops in a wheelchair, spreading terror at his approach. If someone happened to be playing a radio he would switch it off with an alarmingly sudden and ferocious slam of a metal fist. His scruffily dressed partner reeked perpetually of beer and schnapps. One day he came up behind me and began to stroke my blonde hair. Then putting his face close to mine he said in an intense whisper: 'What a splendid SS officer you would have made!' My aunt shrieked with laughter when I told her.

'We cannot be made to feel guilty for ever,' say my German friends. 'We are the next generation and have nothing to do with what our parents got up to. Why should we have to pay?' They do not mention the holocaust.

Friends hardened to reports of atrocities on television and tolerating gruesome horror films, still have to turn off when the holocaust is being discussed and pictures are

shown of carts with emaciated naked dead bodies piled like waste ready for the rubbish tip. These images are hard to deal with and feelings about the holocaust remain unresolved encouraging universal amnesia. The general consensus is to carry on as though nothing happened. Pundits explain it in rational terms: 'It is the beast in man,' they conclude, adding glibly: 'We are all capable of good and evil,' as though no further explanation is necessary.

For most people Auschwitz consists of flickering images of children being herded, skeletal bodies and haunted faces peering through barbed wire - a permanently black and white place which belongs in the distant past. What happened there remains a mystery, something so terrible that it might easily be shrugged off as a lie. It could not possibly be true.

So what really happened to my grandparents?

Over my shoulder hover ancestral spirits. They demand to be laid to rest.

Seeing that place of horror might lift the mystery. Absorbing it might help me understand its place in history, not as a freak event, something that might have been avoided or, as some people still persist in believing, may not even have happened, but a part of human nature.

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In the elegantly furnished room of the cafe next to the Josephstadt theatre large gilded mirrors reflected the light from glittering chandeliers so the place looked even grander and more brilliant. Within the lifetime of my parents, people did their utmost to prevent a Jew like me from being here. They killed large parts of my family in the process. But here I sat.

The apple strudel tasted all the better.

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AT THE EASTERN CROSSROADS

A dishevelled and unwashed man, like a tramp, face flushed and smelling of alcohol breakfasted at the table next to mine this morning. He wore a shabby suit covered in stains but was a priest according to the hotel owner, a cheery motherly figure. He slurped and gulped coffee, stuffed bread rolls into his mouth as though afraid they might be snatched away, then left in a hurry more like a criminal on the run.

At another table a Japanese business woman spoke into her portable telephone, her neat elegance incongruous in this sleazy place. She asked to send a fax. The hotel mother and the assistant with the ponytail fumbled around in a small office to unearth a fax machine.

Three workmen coughed, spluttered and smoked heavily over coffee at the next table, listening to the hotel mother loudly delivering a stream of orders to the ponytail, instructing him on the basics of the hotel trade in such a manner that relevant guests could also get the message: how to clear rooms of late-leavers, how to save on extras and avoid wastage. 'This is a business,' she regularly intoned like the chorus of a song, 'We have to make, not lose money!' Now and then she entered the breakfast room, beamed maternal smiles and dealt with unpaid bills.

The hotel needed repair. The cupboard doors in my room no longer closed properly, opening with a sinister whine moments after being shut. A skimpy duvet in a much-used floral cover spread over a cheap foam mattress. Easily imagined activities had brought the bed to a point of collapse. Broken in several places the frame shook, jagged edges bruising and cutting arms and legs.

'Where do you come from?' asked the hotel mother of a woman registering that morning. 'The Czech Republic,' sighed the woman, disappointed at having to reveal her poor credentials and wearing the apologetic expression of people from deprived backgrounds who are treated as pariahs by their new hosts.

The workmen left. A young man and his father took their places. The hotel mother questioned them carefully, speaking a mixture of German and Hungarian in the loud

and emphatic tones of someone assuming they can be neither heard nor understood. Unable to disguise her mistrust of these guests, her motherly manner disappeared. ‘So where is your wife now?’ she interrogated the father. ‘She’s left has she? Will she be back? Are you planning to stay? You don’t know how long?’ The young man, strikingly handsome, tall and muscular with long jet-black hair looked confident and optimistic. His father, more anxious and belligerent had a wrestler’s physique. A tiny ponytail decorated the nape of his neck beneath a head shaven to a shiny polish. The young man looked round the breakfast room examining all the details. Scrutinising me as well for several seconds he suddenly burst into a dazzling smile, bearing his teeth.

The door opened and a black woman stood in the entrance in dressing-gown and flip flops. Hesitating, conscious of her unkempt appearance, she uttered a sigh so heavy it sounded like a groan. Wanting to share her problems she looked with a pained expression at the hotel mother who immediately turned her back and disappeared into the office.

Stories filled this hotel, standing on the crossroads of East and West, North and South.

After breakfast the hotel mother approached my table. A warm smile indicated her excellent humour with me. She expressed pleasure at my being English. More importantly, I had paid my bill in advance.



THE WINTER JOURNEY

In the Cafe Heiner on the Kärntnerstrasse, a narrow space downstairs allows only for the sale of cakes and a few tables where people are served a quick snack. Upstairs the cafe is more spacious. Newspapers on bamboo frames are available for reading and the atmosphere is congenial for long meetings with friends or sitting alone. Waitresses in dirndls take orders from a large choice of pastries and open sandwiches, displayed beneath a canopy of polished glass.

While gazing at the Jugendstil mural on the wall of the building opposite - a song from Schubert's *Winterreise* (*Winter Journey*) kept running through my mind.



The cycle consists of some two dozen songs in which a young man tells of his journey through a winter landscape, confessing alienation from a world he is rejecting for reasons that are left deliberately ambiguous - it could be rejection in love, an unwillingness to conform, a general disaffection with life. The unrelieved pessimism that leads the young man either to madness or death is offset by simple, haunting melodies, poignant harmonic shifts and sparsely evocative note patterns in the accompaniment. The effect is paradoxically consoling and affirmative. The song that kept running through my mind was *Im Dorfe* (*In The Village*). The young man wonders whether to stay the night, but does not want to disturb people who are asleep. So he looks at the peaceful scene and moves on. The piano accompaniment constitutes a repeated shudder. The place is unquiet. The guard dogs rattling their chains are either warning of the stranger or just being restless. Then as the song progresses, the accompaniment changes and suggests that even the people sleeping oblivious of the traveller and the world outside their normal experience may actually be dreaming about something beyond the everyday, of other worlds and things they do not know or have. The music ceases to shudder and rises in an arc like a yearning sigh. For a moment the traveller feels contact with the people behind the dark windows and is not alone.

My mother used to accompany herself in several of the songs obsessively. The whole cycle is an emotional, interpretative and technical Everest to perform in public, but several numbers are within reach of amateurs to play at home. My mother kept repeating the songs of the crow haunting the young man with premonitions of his death, the will-o'-the-wisp tempting him into a ravine, the dogs rattling their chains in the middle of the night, and played incessantly the fateful tread of chords which describe the signpost pointing the way down a road where there is no return. Finally, and most shattering of all, she sang about the organ-grinder swaying unsteadily on the ice, dogs growling at his feet, his plate always empty. The young man asks him in abject desperation: 'Will you go with me? Will you play my tunes?' The hypnotic

phrase of just a few notes the organ grinder keeps repeating is as frozen as the winter outside and within.

In the first song of the cycle the young man leaves town at dead of night, careful not to disturb his lover, and starts the journey across a bleak snow landscape where his footprints follow those of wild beasts. It is his choice, although he can never explain why. Now people are crossing Europe today, intent on survival, forced to look for new homes and areas of opportunity. They share the young man's experience of being unwelcome. He denies himself human contact though he frequently stops to look at fleeting possibilities, observing others with a poignant desire before then pushing on alone ever more resolutely and without self pity towards possible madness or death. Schubert while recreating the bleakness of the whole experience in pared down evocative figurations pours out one melody after the other. Some like *Der Lindenbaum*, *The Lime Tree* are so catching that they have become folk songs. In a chilly world the melodies envelop the traveller with a consoling glow.



Several women in ostentatiously expensive fur coats entered the Café Heiner and sat at the next table. They represented traditional Vienna, a city aspiring to material perfection: clean, hedonistic and easygoing where music is taken seriously only in so far as it provides entertainment, from waltzes to opulently mounted operas, a pleasant distraction from the cares of life. After several decades being tucked away at the far eastern corner of Western Europe, the borders with its formerly communist neighbours have now opened. Foreign intruders from these poorer countries now gnaw at Vienna's posh carpet. And young men wander like strangers over the continent, trying to survive.

Some years before she died my grandmother took me to a performance of Chehov's *Three Sisters* at the Vienna Burgtheater. In the foyer of the grandly elegant theatre, built as a cultural monument to an influential city with a large empire, I noticed my grandmother, a person who knew when to turn off art, intently observing the parade of

people. The women had covered themselves in furs and jewellery. No mention of the play. She pointed at them and said with an ironic smile:

‘Do you realise how much money you are looking at tonight?’

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Last night in the early hours of the morning the Hungarians lurched drunk and disorderly into the room next to mine. They yelled, roared with laughter and fell over the furniture. At one moment it sounded as though the whole room had collapsed on top of them, everything crashing to the floor. Then - complete silence.

Next morning other men entered their room and proceeded to have a party, clanking bottles. They exchanged anecdotes, shouted approvingly and howled with laughter.

The Turkish Baths on Weihburggasse had been recently restored to their former imperial grandeur and elegance. Mostly elderly men roamed around, treading cautiously down the marble staircase to the lower floor, a dark and neglected area, cold and uninviting. There they could grope each other in the dark and slap flesh, their heavy sighs echoing through cavernous spaces. Now the lower floor had been transformed into three saunas, showers, a swimming pool and a warren of corridors leading to several private video rooms, spaces for communal relaxation and cubicles. Men of all ages crowded the passages and rooms: among them young rent boys. They were easy to spot: teenagers, attractive but with the bruised expressions of youngsters forced to endure abuse. These waif-like figures stood mournfully waiting for customers at strategic positions near cubicles or they solicited in the video rooms. Their pretty features sour and surly could not disguise disgust. Their eyes were bloodshot from too little sleep and moist with distress.

A pleasant-looking swarthy and muscular middle-aged man rubbed my leg invitingly in the steam room before surprising me with a demand for money. He had been loitering by the pool for a long time without success, too old for the competition. He took advantage of my sympathetic ear and told me he came from Iran. A wife and

several grown-up children were dependent on his earnings at the baths. His face had the fresh and friendly expression of people from under-developed regions, not used to the devious ways of conducting business. He did not seem to mind his lack of success, though he complained at the cost of entry, money he needed to recoup at the least.

He then stood by the pool under the high vaulted ceiling with its newly repaired stained glass windows. Elderly men, wheezing, hauled their large bodies past him, casting a quick glance at his small and wiry frame which bent apologetically under a face lined by years of heavy outdoor labour, and which provided a rugged setting for disconcertingly innocent and childlike eyes.



The map showed how close the next stage of my journey would take me to Russia, to the Ukraine, birthplace of my Viennese step-grandmother. She had been raised in the town of L'vov at the end of the 19th century when it belonged to the Austrian Empire. Like many others then and now she moved to the imperial capital Vienna hoping to improve her prospects.

My step-grandmother's family had been prosperous. On one surviving photograph she sits at a table, while the rest of her family stand behind it: father, a storekeeper, mother in a fine dress, and three good-looking teenage brothers who perished in the First World War. At the age of sixteen my grandmother decided to be a nurse to help the war effort. Memories of the horrors she witnessed affected her so deeply that she could not bring herself to speak about them. Not even during the Second World War did she experience anything more terrible. She cared for crippled, blinded and gassed soldiers who could have been her brothers.

After the war she insisted on studying medicine in Vienna despite the disapproval of her father, who wanted her to stay at home and help in the store. He considered medicine to be a man's job.

In Vienna she qualified as a pharmacist and met my grandfather. Later she told me about those early days, a dreamy expression in her eyes at odds with her usual practical, no-nonsense demeanour. She used to queue outside the Vienna Staatsoper for a chance to hear her idol, the legendary singer Lotte Lehmann.

Auschwitz is on my way to the Ukraine, a country with a history of pogroms, where all members of the family she left behind were murdered.

THE SOBIESKI EXPRESS

Next morning the sun shone brightly and my apprehension began to lift.

At breakfast the hotel mother changed her spots. The cheery hausfrau suddenly turned into a vengeful fury. ‘The scum in room three haven’t paid! Chuck them out!’ She shouted the order to her granddaughter who had taken the place of the pretty waiter with the ponytail. The slight and slender girl, looking incapable of chucking a cat out, never mind two strapping Hungarians, listened dolefully to a stream of complaints about unpaid bills. ‘The ones in room seven only paid for a day - they’ve been here a week!’ ‘Number four paid anything yet?’ asked the granddaughter. ‘Fuck all!’ spat the hotel mother who only the day before had delivered a further list of tips on hotel management to the ponytail. She then emerged from the office and seeing me at the breakfast table quickly regained her usual good humour. She brought over a pile of glossy hotel brochures which described an elegant establishment, bearing no resemblance to the one I sat in and said: ‘Tell your friends in England about us.’



I boarded the Sobieski Express to Poland and shared my compartment with an elderly man and a woman dressed smartly in boots, coats and draped in wide brightly-coloured scarves. The man settled himself in the corner by the corridor and began to read from a pile of theological books.

The elderly man paid no attention to either me or the woman who wiped tears from her cheeks after leaving Vienna. She settled with a sigh in the other window seat, then opened a thermos flask and unwrapped a packed lunch.

As the train approached the border with Slovakia, customs officials frequently entered the compartment. They opened the doors with a crash, suddenly, as though on purpose to catch us off guard. The elderly couple - accustomed to years of fear - looked timid and guilty in the presence of officials. The fierce young men in uniform put on stern expressions which implied that all passengers were criminals until proved otherwise.

The train stood a long time in Breslau across the border. The landscape had changed. The prim neatness of Austrian fields and towns gave way to acres of unbounded meadows and farmland. A large crowd milled on the station platform. A girl dressed in the flamboyant style of Vivienne Westwood staggered by on platform heels - her appearance incongruous among the other people drab and dishevelled. The station cat passed by, stretched itself, cast an indifferent glance at the train and proceeded down the platform followed by a guard with outsize whiskers. He checked the joints and banged them with a hammer.

Then the quiet atmosphere on the train was roughly broken by a sudden arrival of people who filled every compartment with loud conversation, the clatter of bags and boxes being moved and stowed away. The crowds gave the impression of a *Völkerwanderung* - a movement of whole populations. They gathered in the corridors to smoke in defiance of the prohibitions, leaning out of windows and took charge of the train, filling every corner, and wasting no time in striking up conversations with whoever happened to be nearest.

The train left Breslau and passed through the undulating Slovak countryside, open fields, un-hedged, stretching over rolling vistas eventually merging into a distant horizon.

At Prerov, halfway through Slovakia yet more crowds boarded. They crammed themselves into the already packed train, stacked the train from top to bottom with bags, sacks and boxes, and straight away unwrapped lunches. The smell of sausage, cheese, orange and apple peelings mingled with sweat and unwashed clothes.

The train moved slowly towards the Polish border and stopped for a long time at the edge of a bleak wintry meadow, drained of colour after recently thawed snow. A cold mist hung over the horizon and clung to trees whose branches had been snapped by winter storms. Snow and ice persisted in the shade, on ponds and slow-running streams. A swan floated transfixed on the surface as though frozen to the ice.

The train passed Slovakian villages where houses have traditional high steep-sloping roofs. Geese and hens roamed freely among the carefully pruned fruit trees and over empty well dug vegetable plots.

A family of three had squeezed themselves and their luggage into the compartment. There was now barely space to move. A cherubic small boy leaned on his mother's lap and stared deeply into her eyes, keeping silent for the whole journey. In the next compartment a family were engaged in a slanging match. Two large bedraggled women surrounded by carrier bags filled with bottles of orangeade looked sorry for themselves. Their husbands drank beer and scolded them.

At the Polish border a guard studied my passport long and hard, checking for my name in a well-thumbed book he carried with him. 'English!' he muttered with a heavy sigh, now having to attend to an unfamiliar problem.

The family with the angelic boy had now left the train together with all the crowds. The elderly couple breathed a sigh of relief as we crossed the border into Poland. Large churches loomed tall in the flat landscape.

KATOWICE

Dust hung in a dense cloud over the cavernous hall of Katowice station. Bedraggled and bored looking people leaned over the railings on the upper level watching

passengers moving among the cramped kiosks below. The shops sold a limited choice of cheap chocolates, fizzy drinks, pistachio nuts, bananas, oranges and plastic watches.

Scrupulously following the printed directions for my connection to Krakow I arrived on a platform where a young man stood alone carrying a huge sack. Station loudspeakers interrupted the perpetual transmission of pop music with information about destinations.

The train to Krakow closed its doors behind me and moved off at a leisurely pace.

Katowice would have been the last stop on the journey my grandparents were forced to make to Auschwitz. The name sounded like a death knell.

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The last hour on the Sobieski Express had not passed without incident. It transpired that the elderly gentleman was travelling with an unpaid ticket. The ticket-collector, a friendly and obliging young man, sat down in our compartment and patiently tried to unravel the mystery, assuming the old man had made a mistake. The man tried to confuse the collector. The woman caught on to his game and sneering gave me knowing glances. The man was a cheat despite his books on religion. Suddenly the ticket collector stood up sharply, shouted alarmingly and slammed his book against the door. The man paid up, but reluctantly and without losing his cool. The collector departed crimson with fury. The woman shook her head all the way to Katowice.

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Now a solitary young man shared my compartment on the train to Krakow. In appearance he reminded me of Victor, the Russian who came to England and confounded me with his demands for money. This young man wore similar worn-out jeans, T shirt, and dirty sneakers. He sat on the other side of the gangway and studiously paid no attention to me for the whole journey, though I tried to attract his

attention. He persisted in staring out of his window. Was it shyness, Polish reserve or simply that he did not like me?

Victors were everywhere in Katowice, carrying the same sack stuffed with belongings.

Musak accompanied us all the way to Krakow, blaring from loudspeakers in the compartment, track after track. *Send in the Clowns* followed *Santa Lucia*; then *It's a Wonderful Life* arranged for saxophone. The much used tape crackled violently and kept breaking down. The clarion tones of Piaf in French chanson would suddenly be interrupted by a different track, as though several tapes were trying to play simultaneously.

Musak took precedence over heating and lighting, neither of which worked on this train. I sat huddled in a scarf, pullover and coat. As darkness fell outside and inside, bang on queue sounded *Heavenly Shades of Night are Falling*. The lush orchestration and sentimental melody made me wish Victor at the window opposite would talk to me. He turned his back emphatically.

The train stopped and we sat in pitch blackness. *Let Me Hold Your Hand* boomed through the ice-cold compartment.

The train then sprang a surprise. For hours it had trundled along slowly, squeaking and rattling with age. Now it suddenly picked up alarming speed and hurtled through the blackness as though trying to break the sound barrier, paying no heed to obstacles, changing tracks with tremendous jolts and hurling me about. The young man strained to keep his position. We arrived at Krakow as though in a clap of thunder.

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Panic seized me. The colossal violence against people like me happened here not so long ago. Perpetrators are still alive.

A TV documentary had recently reported how a Holocaust survivor, Henry Gryndberg, succeeded, fifty years after the event, in ferreting out the murderer of his father. He tracked down a grizzled old man who showed no remorse and excused himself by insisting shockingly that Henry's father had actually asked to be killed.

Throughout the war Jews had hidden in the forests, starving and freezing to death. Fathers went in search of food and assistance. The Poles were either too afraid to help - Nazi reprisals were merciless - or they collaborated. Henry Gryndberg persisted in his search until he dug up the skull of his father. He had been killed by an axe-blow to the back of the head: cold-blooded murder. Finally the truth came out. The father had in fact been begging for milk.

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KRYZTOF

The cavernous underground passages at Krakow Main Station seethed with rush-hour crowds. Darkness outside made it difficult to know where one was going: no street lights, no directions. People squeezed passed market stalls trading in the murk, tiny lamps providing the only illumination. Heading for the glitter of a large hotel in the distance, reckoning that the city centre would be close by, I walked down a wide road leading into even thicker blackness. First passing a bus-stop where my fellow-traveller caught sight of me and immediately turned his back again, I then crossed the wide road empty of traffic hoping to reach the distant hotel.

On the other side of the road lay a park, the darkness so dense that I had to grope my way through. It gradually lightened as the trees gave way to open space. Suddenly a tall thin youth appeared in front of me. He mumbled phrases in several languages, clearly wanting to make contact, and at last I heard the classic opening gambit: 'Do you have the time?' In the dark he looked cold and wretched sneaking a curious glance at me, measuring up what size of prey he had picked on. Quickly realizing he had a stranger in his clutches he immediately made himself indispensable, agreeing to take me to a particular hotel I wanted in the city centre, though trying in vain to persuade me to stay at another place, perhaps better for his own purposes.

The young man shivered in the biting wind, a freezing drizzle falling on his old jacket and tousled hair. The nose on his freckled adolescent face ran with cold. He hunched his shoulders and hopped rapidly from one long thin leg to the other. He spoke some French so we managed to communicate and in gratitude for his help in finding the hotel I invited him for supper later. He jumped with delight in anticipation of a good meal.

‘I’m Peter,’ I said and held out my hand. ‘I’m Kryztof,’ he replied, drawing himself up for a moment with dignity, as though conscious of the occasion, then immediately collapsed into anxiety as to whether I would let him down. He left me at the hotel entrance and moved reluctantly into the gloom.

The Hotel Pollera is an old-fashioned family-run hotel in the grand style, then costing £8 a night. The vestibule, staircase and restaurant were smartly furnished with quality carpets and drapes. The wooden surfaces gleamed with polish. The landings creaked. The receptionist however sniffed at my dollars, saying: ‘We only accept Polish currency.’ Then she directed me to an exchange at a hotel round the corner.

Kryztof must have been watching me, because on my return from the exchange he suddenly materialised, breathing heavily down my neck, eyes flashing. Did I not trust him? Had I changed my mind? He needed reassurance and we fixed a time.

First I sat in the dining room of the Hotel Pollera where the tables had been laid out with spotlessly laundered pink and white linen tablecloths. Three Polish businessmen at the next table abruptly stopped their conversation and watched me take stock of my thick pile of zloties. The rate being thirty two thousand zloties for every pound, the notes mounted untidily in my hands and fell all over the place. Even my pocket calculator seemed reluctant to deal with so many noughts. The businessmen observed my confusion and one of them gave an ironic smile looking me straight in the eye as I stashed a half-million note in my back pocket. The waitresses also monitored my movements as they sat at a table nearby. Occasionally the door to the kitchen opened and a pungent whiff of sour soup and smoked sausage drifted into the dining room.

My comfortably furnished room, in marked contrast to the hotel in Vienna, had plants and decorative lamps in all corners and an elegant oriental carpet covering most of the floor which creaked gently as did the bed when I lay down on it. The hotel seemed to be speaking in welcome and reminding me of the generations of guests who had been and gone over the centuries.

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Kryztof had been waiting all the while outside in the bitterly cold drizzle, keeping a steady watch on the hotel entrance. He jumped from one long leg to the other to keep warm.

‘About time!’ he sniffed impatiently. Why had he not waited in a cafe for me? He evidently did not have enough money even for a cup of tea, was too proud to let on and had no intention of losing his catch for the night.

Holding the half-million zloty note firmly in my back pocket I struggled to keep up with his long and rapid strides through the traffic-free streets of the city centre. Crowds of people seemed to be having an outdoor party. The streets converged on to the main square where yet more crowds bustled in the darkness. A huge church reared up on the left like a dark monster. Along the way Kryztof made perfunctory gestures at places of tourist interest all hidden in the misty gloom of an dimly lit city. More concerned about supper he wasted no time in leading me to a restaurant on a side street.

On my own I would have passed by without noticing it. A dog-eared menu stuck to the door, but inside beyond a cloakroom a maitre d’ ushered us into an elegant room with a vaulted ceiling. The tables were neatly covered with white linen cloths. Kryztof looked out of place there in his shabby jacket, jeans, unkempt hair and runny nose, but nonetheless received a friendly welcome from the staff. He sat down, made himself at home, stretched his long legs round our table like a spider and took charge of the menu. He engaged in a serious discussion with the waitress who immediately

took a maternal interest and suggested a traditional Polish supper. First we launched into a series of toasts with local beer.

Over a substantial soup with meat, smoked sausage and vegetables filling a sour broth, Kryztof told me how at just sixteen years old he had become a seasoned hustler. His father, now unemployed, lost his job at the local car factory, because no one wanted Polish cars anymore. His mother worked as a poorly paid cleaner. With a new baby in the family, Kryztof stayed away from home as much as possible, with no money and many hours to spend.

At the next table sat two English businessmen being entertained by their Polish host. Out of deference to his guests he had dressed formally in a dark suit. They however had dressed down for the occasion, though he had carefully chosen the place to introduce them to the best Polish cuisine. They spoke in loud voices with the flat accents of suburban businessmen, lecturing their host who looked depressed and defeated. The dynamics of the conversation were alternately bullying and patronising. 'You ought to...' and 'Why don't you...' started most sentences. Their discouraging suggestions implied he should hand over his business to seasoned experts, themselves preferably. The urgency of their hectoring tones indicated that his ailing business contained rich pickings. He sat hunched over the soured soup and fingered a cigarette lighter, puffing disconsolately at one cigarette after another.

'To English Football!' Kryztof shouted suddenly, fortunately in French as I did not want to engage in conversation with my compatriots. He succeeded in taking my attention away from the next table and began discussing the next few days, planning a substantial programme for us. I kept quiet about Auschwitz, not knowing how he would react. He noticed my sudden gravity and looked apprehensive.

The main course arrived, consisting of steak smothered in a thick mushroom sauce and served with fried potatoes, a bowl of salad, grated vegetables and a fat gherkin. We sat silently for a while, consuming the expertly prepared food. He polished his plate clean and pushed it away. After glancing anxiously at the next table for several minutes he suddenly leaned over and asked for a cigarette. Shocked, the noisy

Englishmen stopped their lecture and stared at the disreputable-looking intruder. The host froze with embarrassment and did not respond, hoping Kryztof would disappear.

‘Don’t ask us,’ said one of the Englishmen, ‘The cigarettes belong to him.’ Kryztof persisted, his impertinence fortified by several beers. At last the host without looking brusquely moved the box towards him. But Kryztof needed a light. The drama continued until the host had eventually to turn and face the scruffy teenager and reluctantly offer a flame. The Englishmen muttered disapprovingly, craning their necks to have a good look at us both. The host shrugged his shoulders, evidently accustomed to such a situation. Kryztof began to seethe, not understanding what they were saying. If they were insulting him he was ready to leap across and start a fight, so I drew his attention away by congratulating him on the splendid meal.

Mollified by my genuine gratitude he suggested plans for the evening. Did I like women? What kind of club might I want to visit? These questions lead inevitably to the purpose of the evening. Did I want him? There were places we could go together. The thought of my journey next day made me reticent. How to let him down gently? He became agitated at losing his grip over me. ‘I can do anything! Everything! I don’t mind!’ he shouted in English, flinging his arms into the air. Fortunately the people had left the next table. In other circumstances he might have tempted me, but the prospect of Auschwitz next day removed all my desire and I asked him to be just a guide for the evening. He did however look relieved at not having to endure sex with me, but disappointed at missing out on payment.

The bill arrived coming to just twelve pounds for the whole feast including many bottles of beer. He glanced nervously at me in case I thought he had brought me to an expensive place. He then stretched himself to his full height and under the proud maternal gaze of the waitress marched out of the restaurant as though he were its proprietor.

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Just as we approached the hotel entrance Kryztof demanded money. I gave him more than enough for a taxi home. Then Kryztof surprised me with a complete change of mood. His anxiety and manic excitability vanished. The freckled lanky boy turned into a man. Relieved of a burden he could behave as an equal without trying to gratify me. In a quiet, friendly tone he talked about the future, his plans for study and work, and the reality of his insecure circumstances which did not actually worry him unduly. 'My life is good,' he declared. He had plenty to occupy him: a girlfriend, skiing trips to the mountains in the southern provinces of Poland and the theatre. On my next visit he would borrow his father's car and take me on a tour of the country. 'Bring your girlfriend along,' I suggested. 'Oh no,' he responded. 'This is man's business.'

The young man then brought our encounter to a gracious close. Far from being disappointed at not getting more money and behaving offhandedly, he insisted on the usual exchange of addresses and phone numbers. On leaving he gave me a memento: an American dime.

The offer of sex and his reaction to my refusal reminded me of an incident in the Vienna sauna two days earlier. The appearance of four teenage rent boys - underage, small, skinny and with tiny smudges of pubic hair - disturbed the sedate atmosphere. Their pimp, an overweight middle-aged man, greasy and with heavy stubble on his chin, plied them with cola and advice before sending them downstairs to attract custom. The prettiest boy had immediate success and disappeared with a gigantically obese man while the others lolled around, yawning and chatting in Hungarian. They showed little inclination for business, assuming no one had need of their services and making no effort to trade. Business did not seem to matter. For Kryztof too my friendship had meant more than a transaction.

But my conscience began to bite me after saying goodbye. He had hoped for more. The small amount of money left in my pocket would not be missed and he needed it. I would be sorry for my meanness afterwards.

We embraced. The boy could have been my son. Then he vanished quickly into the dark. Like a ghost.

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HEARTBEATS

I woke with the noise of a clanking train in my ears. The same oppressive sound had accompanied my grandparents to their deaths. Now, inside my head, I heard it all the time.

Lying snugly in bed covered with several blankets, my head propped on large pillows I stared into the darkness, wondering about people who carry out genocide. They exist anywhere in the world, seething with self-righteous resentment against fellow humans. These are indeed frightening people. But what about those who turn a blind eye, who should know better: intelligent, privileged members of a society who allow it to happen, who administer and supervise the process of genocide, or who look on indifferently?

I kept hearing the clunk-clank of trains and bleak cries of their whistle over flat Polish countryside with its isolated farms and tall, dark churches; the sound of rails crossing and changing, getting slower, slower and slower, like a heartbeat eventually stopping.

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Before we parted last night, Kryztof had taken me to a coffee bar on our way back to the Hotel Pollera. A girl sat perched on a high stool by the entrance, her mini-skirt hitched up to the waist, blouse cut low and dyed-blond hair teased into long wisps like spun sugar. She spoke a few words politely in Polish to Kryztof who gave her a sullen look and turned his back. She had simply wanted us to close the door. He refused, perhaps resentful at recognising himself in her, another hustler: a commodity for sale.

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KRAKOW-PLASCHOV

Regular trains do not go to Auschwitz from the main station in Krakow, but from the suburb of Plaschov, some distance from the city centre.

The ticket staff had no need to guess why I was there. Foreigners come here only to catch this train.

The women at the ticket office were sombre and unfriendly. Perhaps they resented being perpetually reminded that a colossal atrocity once took place on their doorstep.

The benches in the empty waiting room had been painted brown, the colour of shit. Plaster peeled on the walls. Sounds echoed in the cavernous tunnels and hallways.

Thoughts about Auschwitz clashed with my impressions of Krakow, the elegance and graceful proportions of its city centre. Elegant town houses fan out from the main square along a web of streets. The city-centre appears to have remained unchanged since the last century. Chopin probably saw what I looked at a hundred and fifty years ago. Once carriages rattled along the cobbles and now people still stroll around, owning the city, relaxed and confident that this is the way urban life should be.

Drab industrial estates common to all cities the world over sprawl along the way to Plaschov, row on row of tenement blocks, roads crammed with traffic, people reduced to inconsequential smudges.

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For a while I sat alone on the train. The sun broke through cold morning mists and shone warmly into the compartment. Now began the completion of the journey which

started one day, also in bright sunshine, on a road outside a town in Lancashire where what my parents told me ended my childhood.

My father's parents had been by all accounts decent and generous, raising him and his younger sister Jutti in a cocoon of affection. Even when their businesses had been taken away and they survived on the charity of relatives who themselves had difficulty surviving in Nazi Germany, they kept open house for friends. They sent my father to safety in England and hoped to save Jutti as well, but too late, war broke out. She was soon taken to Auschwitz and survived. The parents were forbidden to work and compelled to stay indoors. Those friends still faithful to the memory of former kindnesses, sneaked in provisions. The final letters describe how they stretched rations and always had coffee for guests who dared to call. Meanwhile they waited for the knock at the door, the police coming to take them away. The letters describe how they sat close together in a cramped room and occasionally moved onto a narrow balcony to catch a few rays of sun, savouring memories, constantly and fervently thinking about their absent children, in particular the favoured child, their son, my father, safe but far away in England. The painfully effusive outpouring of affection indicated that they feared and knew there would never be another meeting.

They could have saved themselves. A former nurse to their children, in more prosperous days, kept in touch and desperately tried to persuade them to move in with her where she could hide and protect them. My grandparents were the kind of people who naturally would not have dreamed of putting her in such danger. They called her Ammi and she became a legend in my family. The name suggests 'soul'. There were indeed other such souls in Germany at that time, but too few and helpless to prevent the holocaust.

Suddenly I missed the grandparents I had never known.



The clunk-clank of trains started up again. Trains form a recurring theme in Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*. In the film a train moves slowly to and fro at Auschwitz station. The scene is a device which separates and links the memories of different survivors.

Here in Poland its significance is made clear. The sound connects over half a century with those who heard it on their way to death.

The enormity of the holocaust began to frighten me again. I looked at my St Nicholas icon, perpetually stroking and kissing it. How is it possible to experience Auschwitz fully without shutting out the realisation of what happened there, to keep mind and heart open?

A father and young son joined me in the compartment. The father fell asleep reading a newspaper. The child played along the gangway and stared at me in amazement. Why were tears streaming down this man's face?

After a long delay the train stirred into motion. It could take as long as it liked. No hurry to reach this destination.

The train moved slowly. Not only did it stop every hundred yards, but occasionally for minutes at a time. The driver at one point saw an elderly woman approach from the distance and waited for her.

At first the countryside looked uninteresting: back-ends of towns, empty fields and winter trees. The train clanked and the whistle moaned bleakly. The sun continued to pour through the grimy windows.

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The train driver in *Shoah* leans out of the engine and looks straight at the camera. He gives a smile and makes a slicing movement at his throat - a slight but chilling gesture.

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The landscape became more attractive. Fruit trees scattered in wide fields; pretty villages appeared; hens and geese pecked at the black winter soil in back gardens.

Birch trees everywhere.

Birkenau, part of Auschwitz, is the German for birch meadow.

Farmhouses grew larger and more prosperous in the now undulating countryside.

At a small town, Spytkowice, several cattle trucks, the kind which transported my grandparents to Auschwitz, stood on a remote siding. Could they have been the same ones?

At this nondescript place the train stopped for over half an hour. Nothing happened. It hummed noisily and stood as it were for eternity. The driver had his lunch in the station then returned at a leisurely stroll back to his engine and we trundled off again, slower than ever.

Each station became more overgrown, more deserted.

The father and son had left the train at Spytkowice. The solitude aggravated a sense of choking oppression.

Here and there church spires pierced the sky. These same churches witnessed the cattle trucks transporting Jews and others to their deaths.

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The first survivor to recount his memories in *Shoah* has the unruffled countenance of an angel. As a boy he possessed such a beautiful voice that the German guards used to beg him to sing for them. That probably saved his life. In the film he stands in front of one of the churches I saw from the train. Priests carry out their ritual duties without showing a trace of emotion, barely casting a sidelong glance at him. He stands calm and passive with a look of infinite sorrow, surrounded by a crowd of churchgoers. Their faces are distorted into grimaces as they argue the justification for

killing Jews. ‘They murdered Christ, didn’t they?’ cries one woman, ‘It is only what they deserved.’

The scene bears a startling resemblance to those religious paintings which depict the flagellation of Christ.

Who is the Christ now?

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ES IST VOLLBRACHT - IT IS FINISHED

A similar train carried me numb with shock and exhaustion back to Krakow.

History had barely any visible or tangible presence in Auschwitz. Outside the museum a makeshift platform remained intact after half a century. Above it hung a large claw-like hook. There they had executed the Camp Commandant. Apart from this gruesome memorial everything was nondescript: walls, buildings, concrete rooms, barbed wire, rubble and the deserted acreage of Birkenau.

Books, films and documentaries were meagre preparation. The huge expanse of Birkenau and the claustrophobia of the barracks at Auschwitz needed to be seen and experienced. In themselves they showed little, yet what happened there, though now virtually invisible, had been a historic event of immense significance which defined the world in the middle of the 20th century.

The gate house and rail-track provided the main landmarks: familiar images from books and documentary films. Yet both are relatively banal and uninteresting features: a modest archway and an overgrown railway line. The barracks were like any other group of redbrick buildings. Beyond and around lay a wasteland, rubble here and there, a few low-lying sheds spread over Birkenau, the crumbling remains of

a few chimneystacks, barbed wire fencing and the occasional warning sign of a skull still propped up against the fencing as a reminder that this had once been electrified.

This place looked like urban wasteland anywhere in Europe. It's anonymity itself a reminder that the atrocities committed here could have happened anywhere. Yet the holocaust did take place here and where my feet trod, ashes of inconceivable numbers of murdered people recently blew across the flat expanse of rubble and grass. Among them those of my grandparents.

PICKING UP MY PIECES

On the Sobieski Express returning to Vienna, a tall, lean and strikingly handsome young Pole sat opposite me. A trickle of tinny music leaked perpetually from ear-phones attached to his blonde curls. He drank beer from bottles stashed in a travelling sack and sprawled his long legs across the gangway between us. It was impossible not to admire his perfectly proportioned features, sky-blue eyes and flawless skin but he avoided any communication: 'Hands off and don't bother me.'

Next to him, in complete contrast, sat a wretched-looking man from the Ukraine, fat, unwashed and bristling with stubble. The beautiful young man radiated self-confidence whereas the mournful gaze of the other said: 'I expect the worst'.



Victims had packed the train from Krakow to Katowice. Dressed in old jeans, cheap jackets and sneakers they carried heavy sacks. They all wore the same expression of despair and fatigue. Eyes moist and bloodshot from little sleep and excessive stress stared out from pallid complexions. They chased prospects of work in the West, hoping to sell enough of some unidentified commodity in their sacks to pay for the journey. Meanwhile I sat wondering how to dispose of twenty pounds worth of Polish currency still left in my pockets.

Not all the young men who crossed my path were poor. A smooth-faced young Pole, dressed smartly in a brand-new grey suit, white shirt and silk tie, sat alone at the next table at breakfast that morning in the Hotel Pollera. His casual manner indicated he felt at ease in the place, accustomed to living well. He ordered drinks and consumed a hearty breakfast then ostentatiously handed a large tip to the eager boy waiter who immediately ran out to buy him a newspaper. The man looked at me with a conspiratorial smile, acknowledging my curiosity as much as to say: 'I'd be happy to talk, answer your questions and perhaps surprise you!' But I had a train to catch and could only guess at what kind of an entrepreneur he might be, a man barely in his twenties.



The train to Vienna passed quickly through the border with Slovakia. The Ukrainian left at Prerov. The flat bleak landscape of Poland gave way to rolling hills, stretching farmlands freshly tilled, towns and villages with people crowding the streets, children returning in crowds from school, mothers wheeling home the shopping and old people completing winter pruning of fruit trees in back gardens.

At the Austrian border, customs officers took their time in my compartment. They regarded the handsome blonde Pole with suspicion. 'Take your bag down,' they ordered, keeping a distance as though it might be packed with plutonium. 'It's only beer,' he sighed impatiently and opened the sack full of bottles.

They examined his ticket.

'To Venice?!' they asked incredulously. He gave another sigh, this time expressing bliss as though he were on his way to heaven.

After the bustle of Slovakia followed the immaculately groomed Austrian landscape with the smooth-surfaced roads, the freshly painted houses and hedged-in gardens.

As the train approached Vienna's Sudbahnhof I plucked up courage to break the ice with the handsome man. 'Have a good journey to Venice,' I said.

Suddenly an ecstatic glow suffused his sullen features, his eyes glistened and he smiled radiantly at me, brimming with goodwill. 'VENETZIA!' he almost shouted

On arrival at Vienna he positioned himself in the middle of the station, sat on his sack of beer bottles, gazed fixedly at the central notice board and waited for his connection. Crouching in his cheap jacket and sneakers, while smartly dressed Viennese passed by ignoring him, his self-confidence evaporated and suddenly his Adonis beauty had faded. He looked like just another refugee.

Outside the station, neon signs flashed and dazzled; billboards, advertising gigantically blown-up faces of models, reared up dwarfing people. Shops filled with expensive luxury items lined the main streets.

Memories of my day in Auschwitz drew up in their net an oppressive weight. Numbness gave way to exhaustion.

Ordering a small sandwich and coffee I sat at one of the polished tables of a smart Viennese Konditorei, stared into the middle distance, and began that walk again, along the track to where my grandparents were killed.

WHERE THE TRACK ENDS

Oswiecim is the Polish name of the town known outside Poland as Auschwitz.

Moving ever slower through a deserted countryside, past embankments and derelict station platforms overgrown with weeds, the train from Krakow almost came to a complete halt when suddenly the rail tracks multiplied, dozens of them, and we had arrived.

The town beyond the station looked like any other with office buildings several storeys high, buses queuing alongside a parade of shops, people waiting and strolling around.

Further down, the train turned out to have been crowded. Large groups of people dismounted and immediately dispersed into the town. Just one man hesitated at the other end of the platform, looking as lost as myself: my doppelganger.

No directions to be seen. No signs anywhere.

A woman in a booth selling bus tickets had not heard of Birkenau. My heart missed a beat. Perhaps the place really did not exist or had been forgotten. The Polish name is Brzezinka. On my pronouncing it she said, 'O yes,' as though there had been a minor slip of the memory, and without another word, pointed to the right and jabbing her finger indicated straight on. Then realisation dawned - of course! Just follow the multitude of rail tracks leading into the flat distance. My doppelganger had already asked at the same booth and was striding ahead. His jacket blew in the wind.

The weather had changed. Yesterday's bitter and bone-numbing winter had lifted with the morning mists and turned into warm spring.

The dusty road stretched ahead.

Half a mile along appeared the first sign which pointed to the Birkenau Museum.

The road led along the back of factories and warehouses. Then it turned sharply round a corner. A sign pointed to the Auschwitz Museum on the left. The road to Birkenau curved to the right over a bridge.

My doppelganger, walking swiftly, disappeared in the distance. On either side of the road lay flat wasteland, like a desert.

Suddenly a housing estate came into view. Back gardens had been dug over in readiness for spring sowing, hens scratched, cocks crowed and dogs barked. Then,

still some distance away, appeared the familiar gatehouse and entrance to Birkenau with the rail track leading up to and through it.

Several children cycled past, pedalling leisurely, sun warming their bare legs.

So this place really existed, it was not just a picture in a book, on a screen

My doppelganger had vanished.

A tour bus arrived as I walked up to the entrance. A few cars stood in the car park outside the gatehouse, but no people could be seen.

I entered through the arch under the gatehouse on my own.

This was the place I had travelled across Europe to see, no doubt about it, and yet it felt like nowhere.

On the outside children's cries sounded, dogs barked. A cock crowed in the distant housing estate.

On the inside: absolute stillness.

There is a saying that no birds sing in places where atrocities have been committed.

A plain notice on the wall in the entrance gatehouse showed a plan of Birkenau. The notice, written in four languages, included Russian, a reminder of how recently Poland had still been part of the Soviet empire. How close Russia is. It described the enormity of the tragedy and the unimaginable suffering which took place there, stating that millions were killed and their memory must be respected.

The ground here has remained unchanged since the days when guards and dogs waited for the cattle trucks to arrive. On either side of the central way along which runs the rail track, rows of low huts were set well back, flat and long like battery-hen sheds. Where huts are no longer standing, chimney stacks stick up, marking the spot.

The area is vast; larger than expected. Of course it had to be, in order to accommodate hundreds of thousands of inmates at a time.

This was indeed the place where my grandparents were brought and killed along with millions of others.

The place offers no clue as to its history.

The place needs to be 'read', interpreted.

Questions have to be asked. What are those guard posts on stilts? What are those chimney-stacks? Why does the rail track end? What is the barbed wire for and why are there warnings not to come close?

Suddenly two girls appeared. They might have been seven or eight years old. They looked at me as though they had been caught being naughty, giggled and ran off to play hide and seek in the sheds. I peered in through a broken window, but could not see the girls. There were the concrete shelves familiar from old photographs and newsreels. Skeletal bodies used to lie tight packed, indecently close, in these cramped spaces which now looked like storage shelves. The girls had vanished. Were they a figment of my imagination?

In the distance where the rail track ends abruptly, a family group appeared. A husband and wife with their two children were taking a Sunday stroll in the peace and fine weather. The mother and elder daughter walked behind, arms locked and chatting intently. The father played with the younger daughter, a five year old girl who kept running back and forth.

The girl eventually came towards me and skipped about on a large mass of rubble. A light flickered in a dark corner. A tiny candle had been left there. A small sign warned not to step on these ruins which were dangerously unstable. Another sign explained that here once stood the women's crematorium.

I peered into the long pit. It looked like a deep ditch with broken bricks and some large tree stumps.

My grandmother perished here.

Beyond the crematorium two women sat on a boulder talking earnestly and quietly together.

To the right of the women's crematorium was the wide central platform where the rail track came to its abrupt end. A wreath and several more candles had been placed in front of some concrete sculptures. These abstract shapes marked the centre of Birkenau. Here men and women were separated and herded to their deaths on either side. On this spot my grandparents had been torn apart for the first and last time.

Beyond the platform lay another long, deep and large pit where the men's crematorium used to be. I peered into the pit and saw twisted bits of metal, tree stumps, rocks and concrete lumps. My grandfather perished here.

Beyond the men's crematorium stood a copse of birch trees, leaning against the wind. These trees gave the place its name.

Looking back towards the entrance it became evident how the large arena constituted a simple design for maximum efficiency. Long low huts extended on either side for a long distance. Barbed wire separated them from the central space where the trainloads of victims could be met and sorted. Sentry posts stood at even distances. Standing between the two large pits I could look at the solitary rail track stretching back to the entrance where it splits to allow full trains to arrive and empty trains to leave.

Some historians have said that Auschwitz will soon be a footnote in history. Looking at the place now it felt like one already.

The place was disappearing under grass and rubble, leaving no trace of its purpose. The occasional candle, flickering among the stones, indicated how few survivors were

left to tell their story. Without their memories to share, this place had no significance. When these last survivors have died, it will vanish - like old civilisations, under the earth.

Already. So quickly.

The Polish family made their way home at a leisurely pace, enjoying the spring sunshine. The girl swung on the lower rungs of a sentry post. Then she skipped along the railway track, merrily and carefree, followed by her smiling father, mother and daughter still engrossed in conversation.

My feet dragged along the side of the track where guards and dogs had once stood.

More people arrived. A bus had disgorged a crowd of students who now marched towards me at a brisk pace, purposefully as though in a hurry to get somewhere specific, a football match perhaps. They passed by, chattering cheerfully among themselves. They looked neither to the right nor the left. Boys and girls flirted.

Suddenly I felt dizzy and breathless. The place which has become the symbol of the limitless atrocities humans are capable of, where people were shot and gassed was now an area of recreation, afternoon strolls, a playground for children.

Confused and now shaking with rage I staggered along the track, fulminating and ranting like a madman, though no one could hear me. The students were already far away and the family momentarily out of earshot. I shouted sarcastically after them: Why worry? Perhaps it all really had been nothing to get worked up about. A few million Jews, a few hundred thousand gypsies and queers more or less in the world! Who misses them? Undesirables - filthy pests! Forget them!

Meanwhile the place as it existed spoke only of monotony, the earth gradually burying the final traces of evidence that anything untoward ever happened here.

My rage threatened to blow me apart and I bent double over the single rail track, trying to ease my breathing, to calm down.

The blades of grass and dried remnants of last years weeds looked back at me:
Forget, forget, forget...

The place was so dull. So insignificant. Irrelevant. It seemed as though the remains could not disappear fast enough. Survivors still existed. Why couldn't they shut up and die? Why make such a big deal of it? It was the past, gone, finished.
Let them leave the world in peace, so everyone can forget.

Sacred spaces like churches, temples and mosques have traditional, unspoken rules and codes of behaviour. Children's games are discouraged, people hesitate to indulge in idle chatter, though churches do provide a safe space for children to be themselves and people ought to feel free to gather and talk there. BUT NOT HERE! Not on this stained ground. Here of all places there should be the strictest code of conduct.

Churches have no need of rules. Their imposing proportions are sufficient guide to how we behave in them. The wasteland of Birkenau gives no clue as to how people should respond to its history. Demolition and rubble are the only visible signs of its existence. Beauty of church buildings is self-evident. This place needs more than a brief explanation at the entrance. Perhaps it should be kept in a vacuum. Children must not even be permitted to come near. People should be made to walk from afar. And there definitely should be howling, weeping and gnashing of teeth.

My fury continued up to the entrance. The public toilet there was dirty and neglected. 'Why not just dig a hole in the ground?' I shouted aloud. Visitors could then experience at a millionth remove what happened, once...once.... not that long ago.

The family were finishing their leisurely walk ahead of me. The little girl skipped delightedly under the entrance, and ran to the car park.

With my lethargy gone I set off briskly for the Auschwitz museum. Like my doppelganger I walked swiftly and never looked back.

•

In the estate with council houses and gardens, dogs still barked and hens scratched around. A girl jumped up and down on a log.

On the way to the town some birds were hiding by the roadside: an unusual sight. A flock of sparrows huddled close together on the ground among a heap of dead branches. They were not alarmed by me and did not fly away when I came to look more closely. They were gazing towards Birkenau as though frozen in terror.

Later two fearless black crows crossed my path. They eyed me beadily as I brushed close by, almost touching them. Then one of them slowly stretched its heavy black wide wings and flew slowly in the direction of the gathering railway lines.

Later still, after leaving the Auschwitz museum to catch the train back to Krakow, I had a third strange encounter: a cyclist drove too fast over the flyover from Birkenau, screeched brakes on the sharp corner and fell off his bike on the road just a few yards in front of me. At first I thought: 'Serves you bloody right!' Then I moved to check whether he had hurt himself. The bulky youth picked himself up and - in English - politely thanked me for my concern before remounting and cycling on.

•

Factories, businesses, schools and houses surround the Auschwitz museum. It was situated near to a military barracks where I observed heavily armed soldiers marching on exercises.

The cafe next to the museum offered refreshment. A surly waitress dished out unappetising meat and mashed potato. The grey minced ball contained suspicious looking ingredients. Remembering how this would have been paradise food for my grandparents all those years ago, I dutifully munched through the dry texture with its rancid flavour. Apart from me only two elderly people sat in the dining area. They were the waitress's parents keeping her company, looking tired and unfriendly.

Being Sunday the museum was closed. A caretaker opened the door for me. A jovial man with twinkling eyes, he reminded me of the porter in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. In the play this comic character is oblivious of the crimes taking place, and his witticisms only accentuate the horror. The caretaker invited me to watch a documentary film in English for the Polish equivalent of six pounds. Dollars would do nicely though. Still angry I refused the offer and walked around the deserted area outside.

The enclosed yards made me feel claustrophobic. The dark-red bricks of the barracks were the colour of dried blood. Barbed wire with skull signs warning of danger from high-voltage electricity looked threatening. Standing in front of the wall where executions had taken place I now arrived at the place of my recently recurring nightmare. In contrast to Birkenau this spot reeked with a terrible atmosphere, as though the surrounding buildings prevented the memories of past atrocities from escaping.

The gas chamber's door, slightly ajar, opened into a dank room. The concrete was scratched not only by the fingernails of victims struggling to escape the poison gas but also with the signatures of visitors and tourists. These more recent marks were beginning to obliterate the other indentations. I shuddered and for a moment feared that the heavy door might clank shut behind me.

A woman in a fur coat and two men in smart suits arrived in a taxi outside the museum. They carefully examined the platform and hook where the Camp Commandant had been executed. Of all the people killed in Auschwitz and Birkenau, his individual fate had been given special prominence.

Beyond the museum walls, town life carried on. Office windows overlooked the yards where people once waited to be executed. Schools and homes stood not far away.

Suddenly I had to get away as fast as possible.

In my haste I bumped into a couple of young mothers pushing prams past the entrance to the museum. They complained and looked indignant as I glared at them. I then strode off towards the station, passing the two black crows and the boy falling off his bicycle.

The train left for Krakow. The rusty derelict machine squeaked, shrieked and rattled all the way for over two hours while I huddled in a corner. The cacophony expressed my feelings.

•

That morning the hotel had warned me the taxi fare to Plaschov station would cost about two pounds. The driver was a kindly fellow. Everybody knows why people go to Plaschov station. He charged me just one pound and fifty pence.

The driver taking me back to the hotel in the evening judged that I would be in no mood to question the fare and charged me double.

As I got out of the taxi, he said: 'Auschwitz?'

And smiled.

THE ROAD TO CHARTRES - PART TWO

THE DARK FOREST

Sound my song, clear the Danube long
Moravian folksong

The train from Vienna to Germany glides westward along the Danube valley. Cropped and naked vines curve in parallel lines up the gentle slopes of hills on either side. Beyond them lie thick forests. Where the river bends, castle ruins from the time of the Crusades perch on sheer rock faces. At one of these castles, Dürnstein, the English king, Richard I was taken captive on his return home from Jerusalem and held for a state ransom. His faithful minstrel Blondel trekked across Europe to keep him company, singing familiar songs outside the castle walls. This romance is now commemorated in the town where the small Blondel guest house stands modestly in the shadow of the grander four-star Richard the Lionheart hotel. The castle ruin is a steep walk up a narrow stony path through a wood. The scant remains are crumbling; they give an impression of history happening so long ago that barely a trace is left behind. My grandmother used to take visitors to the hotel for coffee, cream torte and the view of the Danube which flows in a broad sweep round a bend. Long barges move sedately up and down the river. Centuries of dramatic history have passed this particular spot: the Romans expanding their empire, then various tribes from the North including Goths and Huns pushing them south again; the Christian Crusaders gathering armies on their way to the Holy Land to fight Muslim Saracens, then straggling back, beaten, bloodied, occasionally triumphant and laden with booty including fine examples of Islamic artwork; and now tourists from as far as America and China. Throughout these invasions and movements of people, the vines have been cultivated, year after year, and boats have traded east and west from Germany across Central Europe through the Balkans to the Black Sea.

Thuringia is my next destination. There I will prepare for *The Dark Forest*.

This region of mountains (nicknamed the German Switzerland), forests and valleys lies surrounded by a number of the most important cultural capitals of Europe: Leipzig, where Johann Sebastian Bach composed, Weimar, where the poet Johann Wolfgang Goethe and his circle wrote novels, poetry and drama, Dresden, centre of music, architecture and porcelain, Bayreuth, Richard Wagner's home and within easy reach of the capital cities of Berlin and Prague. The most celebrated thinkers and artists from every part of Europe gathered here, influenced and inspired each other.

Auschwitz is not far away, and Buchenwald, another notorious concentration camp, is situated just outside Weimar.

In earlier times the mystic philosopher Meister Eckart taught in Erfurt. Earlier still the castle of Wartburg hosted medieval song contests. The whole region nourished a thriving tradition of folklore, which inspired the Brothers Grimm to compile their collection of fairytales.

•

Music sounds constantly in my head. Inevitably Chopin's *Funeral March* trudges in an oppressive loop, regularly reaching its baleful climax as through gritted teeth and it needs all my effort to recall the wistful melody in the middle whose heart aching rise and fall yearns to recall a fading memory of happiness long ago. The *Funeral March* is part of a piano sonata which starts with a rhetorical flourish before plunging agitatedly into extremes of emotion, anger and sorrow then throws caution to the winds in the manically defiant dance of the second movement before being cowed by contemplation of mortality. The last movement provides no resurrection or resolution. It has been described as a chill wind blowing through a graveyard. On the page it looks like an exercise in finger dexterity. When performed precisely as written, without the wash of pedal and quietly throughout, it sounds like the scamper of rats' feet in a derelict warehouse. Now the whispered scurrying of notes in my head does indeed sound like a bleak winter wind, the one that souged through the birch trees, leaning mournfully beyond the crematoria at Birkenau.

•

The train glides on, emerging from the woods and steep gorges of the Danube valley. We pass the monastery of Melk rearing above the river like a baroque palace, a residence fitting for eighteenth century monarchs stopping by on their journeys across Europe. Inside the lavishly decorated halls and well-stocked libraries monks would have administered their extensive properties and studied leather-bound tomes.

The train compartment is now full. An elderly man sits opposite me. He keeps sucking and smacking his lips. An attractive young woman travelling on her own ignores the attentions of several silent burly men who can't keep their eyes off her.

•

Now Chopin's *Fantasia in F minor* runs through my head and I focus with relief on a moment of serenity, a calm so protracted that the music almost ceases, hangs in the air and time stands still. The passage comes towards the end of another agitated work that expresses extremes of emotion. The *Fantasia* begins with a slow march, not funereal, but of a distant army approaching. Another rhetorical gesture, a long downward scale ending in a massive sforzando triggers a storm which does however permit brief bursts of light, as though skies were breaking to show the sun shining brightly. Eventually the passion subsides into tranquillity, a hymn-like plea for peace, but the storm builds up once more and eventually reaches a climax when the whole world seems to crash to smithereens. Then suddenly everything stops as the din is erased by a sudden diminuendo. The effect is of a huge vista opening up. Three distinct echoes sound in the distance, recalling the hymn of peace. They are like horn calls vanishing beyond the horizon over forests, hills and fields. The wash of pedal on the piano creates an effect where the harmonies blur mysteriously and wistfully. Chopin indicates that the passage be played very slowly indeed. With the additional pauses marked after each echo, he clearly intends these few bars to sound like eternity. Then the music reluctantly moves on from this celestial vista. The storm returns in a whirlwind, rages swiftly into the distance and then this compact vision of heaven and hell ends with a brutally abrupt fortissimo, like a sarcastic laugh from God.

However for me those few moments of stillness keep chaos at bay.

•

What does it mean 'to feel at home' anywhere? On my last evening at the Pollera Hotel in Krakow a group of noisy, unkempt children aged between 10 and 12 suddenly shattered the ambience of hushed gentility in the restaurant. They burst in, shouting, arguing and jostling for places round several tables. The leaders clutched thick piles of notes, crumpled as though snatched in haste. Where had the money come from? Gradually the children calmed down, becoming aware of the elegance of the room, the tables neatly decked with white and pink linen cloths, matching napkins and heavy gleaming cutlery.

Their shuffling subsided and round eyes stared from under scruffy tousled hair. The chicly dressed waitress approached them with exactly the same civility she had shown me, and handed each of them a menu.

•

To feel at home implies safety. Our deepest feelings, desires and sorrows can be freely expressed. In an age when ethnic cleansing has become universal practice, the safety of home can no longer be guaranteed. People must forever be on guard, protecting, building fortresses, looking over their shoulder.

When people do not feel at home, if they are travelling or working in a foreign place, music provides a safe space.

Beethoven used to improvise at the piano. Noticing ladies in the audience weep at his slow lyrical passages he made a habit of suddenly slamming his hands down on the keyboard, startling the listeners with cacophony and a loud laugh. 'Fools!' he would shout. Perhaps he meant them to appreciate music as an artifice; not to be taken seriously. More likely, considering how hard he worked on his compositions, he was

alerting his listeners to the dangers of surrendering to sentiment that blinded them momentarily to the harsh realities of life.

This contrast of muscular dynamism contrasted with tender lyricism is a hallmark of Beethoven's compositions. In the piano sonatas a pattern emerges in which he 'protects' moments of sublime feeling with craggy outer movements that can be defiantly aggressive or witty. The adagio of the *Hammerklavier* is long and complex with several instructions to play with great expression. The emotion is so intense that Beethoven constructs an edifice of vigorous and challenging outer movements as a sturdy setting for this outpouring of feeling: the first movement is a dynamo of energy and wit, the second a fleet dance and the whole sonata ends with a fugue, demandingly complex but playful and lyrical by turns. Beethoven calls on all his compositional skills and invention to provide the safest haven for the heart of this purposely monumental work: an adagio where emotions which make human beings vulnerable, grief, fear and loneliness can find expression. Though prefacing it with a mighty introduction the last sonata he composed is therefore especially poignant in that Beethoven allows one of his longest and most beautiful slow movements to end the work. A seraphic hymn-like melody follows with a series of variations, mostly lyrical with one typical Beethovenian outburst, a fierce struggle in stamping syncopated rhythm, surrendering with resolution into an incessant quiet trilling above which Beethoven again floats the hymn-like melody. The intensity of the celestial trilling creates the illusion of endless space. But in stead of disappearing into infinity, the two hands working at either end of the keyboard finally move up from below and down from above to meet in the middle, heaven come to earth

Thinking of Beethoven on my journey from Auschwitz, recalls a newsreel from the Second World War of the German conductor Furtwängler performing the end of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. A choir and soloists join the orchestra in an impassioned plea for the brotherhood of man. Nazi officials in uniform fill the front rows of the audience and are evidently sincerely moved by the music and the incandescent performance. But what relevance did the words, 'all men will be brothers,' and 'be embraced, millions', have on their work and lives outside the concert-hall?

Officials like these ordered the concentration-camp orchestras to perform Strauss waltzes to cover the screams of the people they were killing, those not welcome in the brotherhood of man.

The Strauss waltzes were performed by other concentration-camp inmates, those, whose skills as musicians exempted them from being killed. So music saved their lives.

•

Last night at the Kaiserbründl Turkish Baths in Vienna, a particularly attractive boy caught my eye. His perfectly proportioned, tanned and smooth body with a narrow adolescent waist accentuating the generous curve of his butt made men passing by stop in their tracks and stare. He resembled an Italian Renaissance painting of Eros or Ganymede. He seemed indifferent to sex. Out of curiosity I followed him round the various corridors and cubicles where men watched pornographic videos and felt each other up. Eventually he sat next to me on a bench in the television room. He looked down at his thighs, round, smooth and firm, evidently waiting for me to make a move. But I dared not touch him. He then returned to the corridors leading to the restrooms where people take each other for sex and leaned against a wall where I could approach him.

‘How old are you?’

‘Nineteen.’

He could not have been more than fifteen. Like older men who take years off their age to make themselves more attractive to new partners, boys like this add years to make them legal.

He then began to negotiate a sum, way out of my budget. He listed his prices, depending on the duration and specific nature of the sex, adding: ‘I don’t kiss and I don’t get fucked. I do the fucking.’

He did not seem physically ready for that, his cock not yet developed.

This was all the information he gave, so I thanked him politely saying I was not able to avail myself of his services and walked away. Suddenly he caught up with me, agitated and barred my way.

‘I haven’t eaten all day. Please give me something for a meal,’ he begged, clearly shocked and disappointed at having lost a client.

I assumed he was a refugee from the East, probably living rough and desperate for money. It seemed only decent that I should take him upstairs to the restaurant and buy him lunch.

We sat at a small table partitioned off from the others and he selected the most expensive meal on the menu, looking at me mistrustfully. I stood up, prepared to leave him on his own, thinking he would prefer me not to stay and watch him eat. Not at all, he wanted me to sit and talk with him. Not used to hustling he felt frightened and threatened by the customers. He may not even have been gay. The place confused him and he just wanted to talk.

‘I’m Guido,’ he told me.

‘Where are you from?’ I asked, wondering why a young Italian should be hustling at the Kaiserbründl.

‘I’m Serb,’ he said with pride.

His eyes then flashed with added intensity, expecting me to be hostile since Serbs had become the pariah of Europe.

His truculence and reticence about sex were a show of machismo. That is why he did the fucking. Under no circumstances would he ever allow himself to be fucked.

His silk-smooth skin, compactness of young body, soft curves of his face, the chin without hair and pouting lips would in a few years grow into a fully-formed man,

handsome and terrifying, a soldier proving his masculinity and superiority over others, perhaps even committing atrocities.

We did not talk about sex. But he hinted that he might be prepared to visit me in my hotel. I did not trust him. He might not come alone.

I passed him later sitting next to an elderly man with white hair and he gave me a radiant smile, which made him look even more heartrendingly beautiful. He seemed to be thanking me for having showed him kindness without demanding any return.

•

The train continued along the Danube from Linz to Passau, the countryside consisting of rolling hills, woods and farmland.

More music in my head: an orchestral song by the Jewish composer Gustav Mahler playing insistently. A particular recording by the English contralto, Kathleen Ferrier, keeps repeating the climax of *Um Mitternacht At Midnight*. The intensity of this performance creates a sense of foreboding, of a cataclysm about to happen. The singer sounds stretched to the limit as the orchestral accompaniment threatens to drown her voice which calls through the brass and percussion in despair and supplication.

Mahler set words by the German poet Friedrich Rückert whose poem could be considered a prayer. The last lines call on God to take over the watch at a moment when we no longer have the strength to deal with the world's conflicts.

At midnight
I fought the battle,
Oh humanity, of your sufferings;
My strength
Could not resolve them
At midnight.

At midnight
I put my strength
In your hands:
Lord over death and life,
You took the watch
At midnight.

The Jewish conductor, Bruno Walter, builds this passage to a shattering climax. The words find resolution in God, but this historic performance, made only a few years after the end of the Second World War, leaves no doubt that the catastrophe is happening and that there is indeed a justified terror for the future.

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MR AND MRS HITLER

Schärding is an attractive little tourist town, standing along the southern shore of the River Inn, which at this point flows broad and majestically, replete with the alpine waters from dozens of tributaries, on its way north to join the Danube. Germany lies on the other side of the river.

A few miles to the South is Braunau, Adolf Hitler's birthplace.

The little man with the moustache represented the manners and opinions of his generation. My Viennese grandfather shared a number of his character traits: the opinionated bullying and hectoring, the certainty of his rightness. Even Hitler's extreme views were widespread and popular, particularly his hatred of the Jews and a conviction of the cultural and physical superiority of the Teutonic race. The relatively rapid rise within fifteen years from corporal in the First World War, through unemployment and a period on skid row to becoming Reichskanzler and eventually Führer of the German people is evidence of his effective skills as a politician and manipulator of public opinion. As a result he is generally considered to be overall responsible for the Second World War; so the Twentieth Century has heaped all its

guilt, shame and blame for the consequences of that war on to this one man. It is patently absurd to believe still, as many do, that the horrors of the war and its aftermath were the handiwork of one man and a few henchmen. But 'Hitler' is a convenient tag on which to hang blame and exonerate everybody else.

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The café where I am having tea and cake is full of Mr and Mrs Hitlers. Two ferocious Mrs Hitlers are at the next table, heavily made-up with deep crimson lipstick and dressed severely in tweed trouser suits, talking loudly as though they own the place. Their dogs sit bolt upright against their chairs. One is a rottweiler in a studded leather collar. I sit as still as possible and plan not to move until they have left.

•

History perpetually repeats itself and people still pursue ruthless vendettas, wage genocide and commit atrocities. So how do we learn from history?

Perhaps, as I have done, by returning to the precise spots where they took place and allowing the memory of these events to breathe and touch us.

A painful impression from my visit to Auschwitz has been disturbing me in particular. It occurred while I walked along the lengthy single rail track towards its final destination, the buffer at the end of the line. According to even the most conservative estimates over a million people arrived there, disgorged from overcrowded, stinking cattle trucks, then divided and summarily sent to their various dismal fates – human beings already reduced to barely living carcasses for disposal. Yet not once did I have the least sense of these people having been there. Only the presence of the guards, officers and dogs made themselves felt. The millions of ghosts of the victims have long since abandoned that place.

But the other ghosts remain. They are almost visible in their heavy uniforms, under caps, grasping weapons. The victims do not haunt the place where they are buried under rubble and ash. But the murderers do.

However, violence and killing are not the ultimate terror.

Suddenly I recall my first impression, walking through the entrance to Birkenau. A host of officers and guards seemed to face me, guns raised. They did not scare me. At one point I actually shouted out aloud to the ghosts thronging along the rail track: 'Go on! Shoot me! Shoot!'

In such a place death does not terrify.

Who would continue to want to live in a world reduced to this hell?

For several minutes I walked alone down the path next to the rail track and appealed to the ghosts on either side to do their worst.

It is easy to be brave decades later with no guards or dogs actually there. Would not the animal instinct to survive at all costs have taken over? How can I possibly imagine what it felt like to arrive at this place in 1943? Survivors have testified that the terrors they endured there were indeed worse than staring down the barrel of a gun where an ending was at least assured. People committed suicide by hurling themselves at the electric fence.

Here in a snug Schärding café, surrounded by people, some of whom lived through that period of history, another terror begins to grip the pit of my stomach: the indifference of the world outside and beyond the place of atrocity. This indifference forces me to acknowledge that all are complicit. 'Judge not unless you be judged.' We survive and live as best we can in times of violence. The horror is allowed to happen, shrugged off, ignored and perhaps even condoned.

Local farmers carried on working and harvesting crops while the screams and smoke rose above the birch trees beyond their fields.

In Lanzmann's *Shoah* one of the witnesses recalls surviving the Warsaw ghetto on the day the last Jews there were herded off to Auschwitz and the place razed to the

ground. He had been a resourceful boy, crawling in and out of the ghetto through a secret hole in the wall. On that day he had also slipped out and returned to find himself 'the last Jew in the world'. He contrasts the conditions inside the ghetto with the world outside. Inside, people had been dying slowly from starvation and illness. But on the other side of the wall life went on as normal. The boy observed people drinking in cafes, laughing, gossiping, strolling and shopping, going to the cinema and catching buses home. And these same people knew exactly what was going on in the ghetto.

•

The rottweiler watches me with friendly eyes and looks quite harmless. But the elderly couple at another table is doubtful and remain stock still while new arrivals choose to sit as far away as possible.

The Mrs Hitlers, loudly exchanging opinions and jabbing the air with their heavily ringed fingers do not look as though they are in need of such a dog. They seem not only capable of protecting themselves, but prepared to do so on the least provocation.

•

The Dark Forest commission begins to take shape in my mind. Thinking about Thuringia, its central position in Europe, geographically, historically and culturally and its close proximity to concentration camps a significant connection between Chartres and Auschwitz, places that could not be more unrelated, reveals itself. It has to do with religion.

The Protestant ethic took shape in Thuringia. Here Martin Luther brought Christian teaching into a new era. He translated the bible into German, wrote voluminously and influenced politics, the arts as well as theology for generations. Luther described Jews as 'the piss pot', the dregs and cesspit of humanity. This 'piss pot' turns up prominently in a painting by Luther's contemporary, Mathias Grünewald. In the *Nativity*, a radiant portion of his *Isenheim Altarpiece*, heaven and earth appear to rejoice at the birth of Jesus, angels play instruments and sing, Mary the mother laughs

with pride and joy, rays of the rising sun burst through clouds and the surrounding landscape stretches into the distance with fertile meadows, rivers and forests. The chamber pot in the centre of the foreground looks an innocent enough detail, something domestic and even comical. However, in Lutheran symbolism, it represents the victory of Christianity over Judaism, the birth of Jesus heralding a new age when the Jews would be vilified and persecuted. These attitudes to the Jews have echoed down the centuries and I heard Luther's curses hurled at me in the playground of my primary school in Bolton, Lancashire: 'dirty Jew!'

One of the undisputed fathers of classical music, Bach, worked in the Lutheran tradition. Two of his major compositions, the *St John* and *St Matthew Passions*, reflect this influence. In the *St John Passion*, the earlier of the two, the choruses whip up a frenzy of hatred against Jews. The Evangelist, who narrates the story, describes the crowds demanding the Crucifixion of Christ with mounting hysteria. The crowds are specifically Jews: 'and the Jews screamed even louder'. Bach wrote this *Passion* Oratorio to please his new employers at the Leipzig Thomanerkirche. However in the *St Matthew Passion*, what he himself considered his masterpiece, there is a marked absence of anti-Semitic sentiment. Instead of 'the Jews' baying for Christ's blood we hear 'the people', in German: 'das Volk', which has an altogether different resonance.

Was Bach consciously anti-Semitic, or did his compositions innocently reflect traditional attitudes? The later *Passion* has a warmer, more spacious and spiritual dimension, not lean, pungent and ferocious as the earlier work. A halo of string sound accompanies all the utterances of Christ in the *St Matthew Passion*, his humanity contrasted with the betrayal, denial and desertion by his friends, the scourging and hounding by 'das Volk' and finally his inevitable crucifixion. At the climactic moment, just as Christ breathes his last on the cross, Bach delivers a gut-wrenching masterstroke. He allows the same chorus, who only minutes earlier have been shrieking for Christ's death, to sing this 'halo' of sound. The effect is all the more powerful because Bach's exceptional musical skills reveal blindingly a simple but paradoxical insight: all of us even though we are vindictive and cruel are capable of being stirred by a common humanity.

The emotional content of Bach's *Passion* disturbed his Lutheran contemporaries. It remained unperformed again for almost a century, when the Jewish composer Mendelssohn, like Pimen in Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*, brushed the decades of dust off the manuscript.

The *St Matthew Passion* plays a part in a popular German film from the Hitler years, *Heimat*. A celebrated singer returns to her hometown years after an affair with a bank owner led to her becoming pregnant and leaving in disgrace. Her need to confront the town with its hypocrisy in censuring her while the father of her child continued to be a pillar of the community is complicated by a need for acceptance, to return to the bosom of family, homeland, 'Heimat'. At the end of the film Zarah Leander, a star of the war years in Germany, takes part in a performance of the *St Matthew Passion* in a church concert attended by her father who had rejected his wayward daughter all those years ago. She joins in the famous passion chorale O Sacred Head and her little daughter touches him and points up, saying, 'Mummy'. The father relents, tears streaming down his face, as he embraces his grandchild. In cinemas up and down the country Germans were also weeping. Outside at the same time synagogues and Jewish businesses were being torched, windows smashed in what became known as Kristallnacht, night of crystal, night of broken glass, the start of the holocaust.

•

The houses in the centre of Schärding are painted various pastel shades of pink, yellow, blue and grey; the streets clean and tidy in this prosperous tourist resort. An organ sounded from the baroque church with its tall yellow tower. Inside, a monstrous hulk of industrial equipment squatted over several rows of pews like a gigantic insect from a horror movie. Workmen in a hydraulic lift operated from this machine were cleaning and restoring the carvings of angels and saints. The organist wrapped in a great coat continued to practice high up in the organ loft. The workers, freezing in the bitter cold, balanced on their tiny platform suspended below the distant ornate ceiling.

•

Five elderly men, retired soldiers from the Second World War are drinking beer in the restaurant where I am being served soup and pork schnitzel. Ruche curtains, kitsch statues of cupids among the polished long-leaved indoor plants and ornate gilt mirrors surround me. A surly waiter stands behind the bar with its sparkling array of bottles and glasses. Muzak trickles from concealed speakers while dazzling lights flicker from the prominent control panel.

The men speak in an impenetrable dialect but regularly I hear the phrase: 'In Russia in '45.' They are reliving war adventures.

I drink a toast to my Berlin grandparents. If only they could see me here...

•

Auschwitz. Chartres. The juxtaposition creates a frisson. But the connection is not new. A common truism about good and evil existing side by side is often expressed as: 'One day we build a cathedral; the next – Auschwitz.'

This glibness of the observation is intended to discourage unravelling the matter it conceals. The truth might be unbearable. The purpose of this journey is to explore these two extremes of my culture, to stand in each place and discover the link between them.

Among the people at breakfast a Japanese businessman sits on his own accustoming himself to the unfamiliar cuisine. He wipes his hands frequently and carefully on a linen napkin. Two local salesmen are loudly discussing money: 'It will cost them 900DM.' A young man, Boris Becker's double, embarrassed at my stare, hurriedly finishes his ham with hardboiled eggs and leaves.

Last night the five elderly soldiers had spent most of the evening reminiscing. Two leaders dominated the pecking order among these grizzled cocks. Each one capped the other's anecdotes with an even louder one. At the end of the table sat a grotesque

who remained silent. The others could play the hero, but he presented a perpetual reminder of the ruin and failure of war, so they ignored him. He had no teeth; his face and body were twisted as though after a terrible accident and one glass eye glittered in sharp contrast to the faded rheumy eye in the other socket. The glitter turned now and then in my direction as a warning not to stare.

When the time came to leave they had trouble paying. Though having drunk only one glass of beer each, these pensioners could not afford the prices in the expensive place their town had become. They laid schillings carefully on the table and counted them with shaking hands, noisily adding them up and questioning the accuracy of the bill. The surly young waiter became impatient, longing to grab what lay on the cloth but having to wait until the men had carried out the transaction to their satisfaction.

‘Till tomorrow!’ they shouted to one another, pulling on heavy coats and seizing their walking sticks. They then proceeded to leave the restaurant in slow procession, acknowledging everybody on the way, even lifting a hat to me, smiling and wishing us all a good night. The waiter effaced himself behind the glittering bar. For a few moments these ancient warriors took possession of the space and it suddenly felt like their home.

•

THE SHADOW OF AN AEROPLANE

The train from Nuremberg to Berlin will shortly be passing through Thuringia. Most of the seats are occupied by the now familiar host of young men, each travelling on his own, sacks jamming every corner and available space.

Nuremberg at night was a strikingly brighter city than Krakow. Brilliantly illuminated superstores lined the streets and pedestrian precincts everywhere. Beggars and unemployed people gathered there: exhausted faces, unwashed and shabby clothes in stark contrast to the affluence on display around them. Many of them lurched to and fro, drunk or drugged, so tourists and shoppers paid extra attention not to bump into them. Apart from these poor wretches who congregated

noisily and aggressively together, other people scrupulously avoided eye contact. Only beggars knew one another, otherwise it was a city of strangers. In Poland I could at least occasionally elicit a response or even a smile.

One such smile keeps coming back to me like a blessing.

On the ramshackle train returning me to Krakow from Auschwitz a young man sat at the far end of the compartment. In no mood for socializing I huddled in myself, depressed and furious at the day's experience. Shy and reserved he kept glancing at me curiously then turning away in embarrassment whenever our eyes met. As the train approached Spitzkowitz, half way to Krakow, he stood up and seemed to hesitate before leaving. At the door he looked back at me. Perhaps he saw my tear smudged face. A gleam of pity shone in his eyes. It touched me and I managed a small smile, acknowledging the kind thought. His whole face lit up with a radiant smile, gentle brown eyes sparkling, teeth stretched across a smooth and handsome face. Then, reluctantly, he stepped out into the pitch-black night. The smile beamed like the flash of a lighthouse beacon.

•

Walking around Nuremberg I lost my sense of direction. Crossing a ring road and several traffic-clogged highways, an area hostile to pedestrians, I eventually came across people on a high street where stores sold motorbikes, spare parts for cars and machinery, computers and cheap clothes. When I asked for directions these people shrugged their shoulders sadly and muttered some words in an unfamiliar language, perhaps Turkish, Greek or Serbo-Croat. They lived and worked here but had no knowledge of the layout of their city. The shop owners too only spoke a pigeon German. I had suddenly and unexpectedly arrived as a foreigner in a place of other foreigners.

From the other side of the ring road Nuremberg now looks like a Disneyland recreation of a medieval town. Timbered turrets rise at equal intervals from the city walls, everything designed to be pretty, neat and tidy. This city bears no resemblance to the one recorded in *Triumph of the Will* Leni Riefenstahl's film of Hitler's

Nuremberg Rally. In it tall wooden houses lean crookedly across winding narrow streets. The population wave and welcome the Führer. Happy, animated faces cram the many windows.

The reconstruction of Nuremberg sounds a distant echo of its former urban bustle and splendour. People no longer live in the centre, now occupied exclusively by businesses, banks and shops. The River Pegnitz flows under little bridges where tourists cross, taking snaps. From the city walls, rearing up at the top of a steep hill beyond the centre, the panorama of what used to be a mass of gabled town houses, interspersed with towers and churches, seems fake, made of cardboard, the windows blank and closed as though nothing exists behind. The view is dominated by the high rise flats and office blocks beyond, all bathed in a mist of traffic pollution.

Surveying the attempt to rebuild Nuremberg as it used to be led me to contemplate the ravages of war. Not only populations and cities perished, but with them centuries-old traditions of community. This city inspired Wagner to write *The Mastersingers*, an opera which celebrates the life and art of a specific community. Dark shadows of intolerance sour the lyricism of the musical score. A poet cobbler relinquishes his own desire for a girl and helps a much younger suitor to win her, but in the process another unwelcome suitor is mocked and eventually pushed out of the harmonious picture. The opera concludes with a blunt warning that the community should beware foreign influences. However it is an outsider who wins the prize and the failed suitor happens to be a respected town official. Wagner lavishes such attention on this reviled character he almost steals the show, and a good performance can attract an audience's sympathy. However there is a lurking suspicion, made explicit by Nazi interpretation of the opera, that the enemy has embedded himself in our community, appears to be part of it, and has to be eliminated.

A lilac tree dominates the street where the poet cobbler Hans Sachs, the Mastersingers' and Nuremberg's hero, hammers his leather through the night, giving advice and composing songs. The scent of the blossoms reminds him of his youth, the way art and love inspire each other. After he observes a jealous row precipitating a midnight riot, the scent again leads the poet cobbler to meditate on the fragility of civilized values. Chaos constantly threatens to undermine communal harmony. In

Triumph of the Will thousands of faces smile and arms wave from the masses of windows in Nuremberg's houses crammed together barely separated by the narrow crooked streets. Newsreel films after Germany's defeat show Nuremberg in ruins: crumbling walls and rubble in a desolate landscape without people.

After the war and at the end of a long and successful composing life Richard Strauss composed *Metamorphosen* for thirteen stringed instruments in memory of the opera houses he had loved and which now lay in ruins. There exist a number of tellingly different performances by conductors who lived through the same period. Like Richard Strauss the conductor Herbert von Karajan had been accused of enjoying professional advantage by supporting Hitler. My grandmother's wagging finger reminds me not to make easy judgments. Karajan honestly admitted he would have done anything to further his career. Strauss on the other hand used his fame and influence to save fellow Jewish musicians. Karajan's interpretation of *Metamorphosen* turns it into a lament for a broken people. In contrast, the Jewish conductor Otto Klemperer whose career had nose-dived because of Hitler made a recording of *Metamorphosen* which emphasizes its dense scoring: not suggesting bleak devastation but rather depicting the resilience of nature and its capacity for regeneration. As when after a forest fire myriads of seedlings sprout and replace the burnt old stumps, so the music suggests green shoots twining over ruins, reaching upward and outward.

Looking over Nuremberg from the city walls two destructions haunted me: of places and people.

In the opening sequence of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, the shadow of Hitler's plane passes over the houses and streets of the beautiful old city. To the strains of Wagner's *Lohengrin*, telling of a medieval knight arriving magically to vanquish evil and restore justice and order, Hitler's plane descends through the clouds. The film did not foresee that shadows of different planes would be passing over the same city ten years later with a different mission.

To celebrate the centenary of Wagner's Bayreuth opera house, EMI brought out a comprehensive collection of past singers on record. They had all been celebrated

interpreters of his music, some of them having performed there in his lifetime. The record notes give brief biographies. Many of them contain the final sentence: 'Date of death unknown, probably killed in concentration camp.' Their testament to the glory of Wagner's music did not save these Jewish gods and valkyries from the final journey along that single track.

•

WALTER

While losing my bearings in Nuremberg I found myself walking down a seemingly deserted street by the southern ramparts. Two shamefaced men were loitering at its entrance.

Suddenly the windows of the little houses were full of women. Dozens of them – all the way down the street. Every shape and size. Large bosoms flowed over low cut petticoats, slim bodies stretched. The men took fright and disappeared. I picked up speed in embarrassment. Blonde heads peered expectantly out of rows of rabbit hutch windows. Lowering my eyes I began to run. This agitated the women to a frenzy of mockery. They banged on their windows to attract my attention, screamed, catcalled and made wild gestures inviting me to a variety of sexual activities. The fuss grew louder the further I ran. Like the crowds welcoming Hitler, these Nuremberg houses once again were packed with people leaning out, shouting and waving.

After negotiating the street of brothels I finally found sanctuary in a sauna where for some hours my only companions were a thin young man with one arm and a man so hugely fat that it seemed he had eaten everyone else. The young man kept visiting the hot cabin, looking at me expectantly. The other sat slumped on a sofa in the porn-video room, watching one hardcore movie after the other.

As the afternoon progressed more men arrived, friendly regulars chatting animatedly and gathering in the video room to check out newcomers. I passed a handsome young man who looked at me with dark melancholy eyes which implored me to take him.

We lay in a cubicle on an old and much used mattress and engaged in the kind of passionate, sweaty sex which happens between strangers who experience simultaneously the urgent need for affection and desire. We wrestled silently on the stale mattress, kissing and holding each other almost with desperation. He wrapped his smooth muscular legs round my waist, pushed his tongue to the back of my throat and couldn't get close enough as though he wanted to be inside my skin, urgently handling my cock and getting me to penetrate him as far as it could go. Eventually we reached a noisy climax which inspired two men in the next cubicle to an equally intense encounter. The partition wall shook as they banged against it, their groans and sighs increasing in pace and volume.

Afterwards we lay face to face; legs wrapped together, exchanged names and looked long and intently at each other. Walter had a close crop and sensitive thin lips under a small moustache. In the half-light we stroked each other and began a long and intimate conversation. For several hours we spoke about our lives, plans and the importance of love and friendship, of history and the present state of Germany.

In response to my comments on Nuremberg's reconstruction Walter gently reminded me: 'You English bombed us.'

Talking more about the war his ignorance about how it started shocked me. So many friends younger than me know little about these events, and few have even heard of Auschwitz. Until recently the facts were not taught in schools. They have become a footnote in history.

Walter, athletic, his ivory skin glistening with youth and health, might once have been a storm-trooper, carrying out orders with conviction and enthusiasm. Would a strapping young man like him have burst into my grandparents' flat in Berlin and ordered them into a truck to Auschwitz? His beseeching eyes craving companionship indicated a man who might find confidence in a mass rally.

He spoke about being a computer engineer, the boredom of provincial life, fears about a lonely future without purpose. He expressed dismay and puzzlement at my plans to

roam round Thuringia. Why would anyone want to waste a second in the countryside when they could take a train to Berlin or Hamburg and ‘have a good time’? Walter works to earn money and spends free time on gratification: a pattern of life familiar to many. He carries with him a bottle of poppers, condoms and various bits of leather clothing to enhance these leisure hours. But the melancholy in his eyes expresses an awareness that there has to be more to life than this. And if there is no other meaning to life, then what point is there to anything?

As our conversation progressed he became ever more pensive and unwilling to let me go. Talking became a consolation. He spoke about possibilities of changing his life, moving on, taking risks. He suggested my journey might be a flight from these issues, that I should perhaps take a risk with him. In front of me sat a young man, offering what made him special, his beauty and his desire to love and be loved. All he wanted was my commitment and companionship. The encounter tugged at my heart strings. In this dark and intimate space Walter fumbled with a key to one of those doors in Paradise. How could I not be tempted to stay with such a desirable man? I hesitated to leave, touching his silken skin, stroking the curve of his body.

‘Let’s go to the hot room,’ he suggested, wanting to prolong our encounter.

But I showered and got dressed, ready to return to my hotel.

Meanwhile I overheard Walter talking in a low voice to his friends. One of them said: ‘So you’ve found someone nice then?’ and smiled at me warmly as much as to thank me for existing.

‘Yes, I have,’ Walter sighed, ‘but he wants to go exploring in Thuringia...’

The rain poured outside. I sheltered in the entrance hoping he would join me and perhaps take me home. The longer I waited the more I regretted having left him. If he appeared I promised myself to delay the journey and stay with him.

Eventually Walter's friends came out first and both of them embraced me with exceptional warmth as though to thank me for a good deed. Walter had decided to stay and wait for someone else. They took me to a bus and embraced me again.

In the bus no one spoke German. Two women from Turkey, a mother and daughter, used sign language with much laughter, to indicate where I should get off.

The bus then emptied itself of most of the passengers who dispersed so quickly that they appeared to have vanished into the pavements. Bright neon lights glared through the heavy rain.

In the underpass to Nuremberg central station all the shops and boutiques were shut up and barred with iron grilles. The homeless street people were settling down for the night, hunched against the walls under ragged blankets. The corridors resembled the Minotaur's labyrinth, echoing to the yells of a party of passing skinheads. Escalators purred quietly, no one going up or down.

In the main hall of the station people wandered around silently, sunk in their own thoughts.

•

OUTLAWS

Germany may have become a united country but a few years after unification an invisible border still exists between East and West. Before entering Thuringia, the train stops for many minutes changing engine and guards as between two foreign lands. The landscape changes and becomes wilder. Till recently this area was one of the least accessible corners of Germany. No one came in or out here. The hills close tightly, their steep slopes thickly covered with dark pine forests.

At Saalfeld I have left the train to Berlin and am waiting in the station café for a local connection to the small town of Leutenberg.

The atmosphere is thick with steam from the large urn on the counter, cigarette smoke and the perspiration from the many bodies of men, women and teenagers crowding the café. This seems to be a popular place to hang out, because evidently only few of the people are waiting for a train. Most are unemployed and alleviating the long hours of boredom drinking, smoking and socializing in a warm communal space. A stranger like me excites their curiosity and they make friendly attempts at conversation but are already too drunk on beer to string words together. The men at the next table smile at me with red, exhausted faces and lift their hands in hopeless gestures to indicate they would like to talk but can't. It is still only afternoon.

An elderly woman in a maroon headscarf and frayed black coat sits with them slowly drinking beer. She seems to be the only sober person and occasionally scolds them. Turning to me she says: 'I knew them when they were kids, just so high and running under the tables! Now look at them!'

At one end of the café a group of Saalfeld teenagers are monopolizing several fruit machines. All afternoon they argue, push and laugh as the machines clatter. At the other end of the café three young men take charge of one of two pool tables, silently focused on their game.

A radio above the counter pipes old pop music through the fug of smoke, steam and hum of chatter. On the walls hang reproductions of paintings by Franz Marc: red and blue horses dancing in circles on abstract fields.

Suddenly I am aware of a handsome young man in new jeans and clean white sneakers staring intently at me. He looks at me questioningly and I assume he is for rent. He drinks one beer after the other, looking hurt and disappointed, and waits. Will this Westerner take the bait? Since there is no response, the stare of invitation becomes proud and defiant.

I am thinking about *The Dark Forest*.

•

The countryside across the invisible border became so beautiful in its untouched wildness that I immediately decided to halt my rush to Chartres and stay in the region for a few days.

The forests look impenetrable. The meadows along the river valleys are unfenced, inviting me to jump from the train and roam everywhere at leisure. Villages made up of ancient timbered houses follow one after the other in quick succession. Dung heaps steam in the entrance yards of farmhouses where poultry run free. Here is a landscape where people appear to have been at home since the beginning of time. Families live within walking distance of the next community. And all round the cultivated plots of domesticity, with their livestock, orchards, vegetable gardens and homesteads festooned with flowers, stands the dense forest, stretching over the horizon, with wood for fire, wild mushrooms, berries and game. The scene reminds me of those Breughel paintings where clusters of tiny figures plough fields, heads bowed with concentration and fatigue. They drive cattle, go hunting, light bonfires, return home with the harvest, relief on their exhausted faces, and strive to create a home in a nature that overwhelms them with looming mountain ranges, encroaching forests and wide rivers flowing into distant oceans. Such a life involves a covenant with nature demanding perpetual negotiation and labour.

In one of these valleys, not far from Saalfeld, stands the town of Leutenberg, my next destination. Gabi, the woman who has commissioned *The Dark Forest*, spent her childhood there. While waiting for the train to Leutenberg I ponder her story in the noisy steam filled café of Saalfeld station.

•

GABI

Towards the end of the 19th century a celebrated opera soprano fell in love and wooed her future husband by buying him a magnificent house in the most beautiful part of Germany she could find. This turned out to be Leutenberg in Thuringia. Their

daughter and her child Gabi grew up in a cultured household surrounded by music, art, literature and nature.

Gabi remembers summer holidays with her grandparents as a long idyll.

A poem by the German Joseph von Eichendorff conjures up this memory:

*It was as though heaven
Had silently kissed the earth
That in a shimmer of blossom
Could dream only of him.*

*A breeze passed over meadows
The wheat surged softly
The woods rustled quietly
So star clear was the night.*

*And my soul spread
Wide its wings;
Flew through the silent land
As though flying home.*

The composer Robert Schumann set these words to music and together they express the heart of German romanticism: the beauty of nature releasing our soul so we find home there. At the close of the song Schumann subtly suggests far flung vistas in the echo of a distant horn call subsiding into the landscape.

As the English poet John Milton observed, paradise has its serpent. Envious of Gabi's Jewish family and their splendid house, neighbours took advantage of Nazi anti-Semitic legislation, and drove them out. The idyll came to an abrupt end. Gabi and her mother survived the holocaust. As a refugee Gabi wandered across the world, first to England where she married Peter and met my parents. Peter and Gabi became my godparents. They taught English in Uganda and eventually ended up in New

Zealand where Peter lectured on the English metaphysical poets, trying to explain their complex literary and theological allusions to baffled students.

Gabi could never forget her childhood in Leutenberg, and returned half a century after leaving, when the fall of the Berlin Wall made travel there possible. She even managed to trace the neighbours who denounced her family, but received no explanations or apologies from them.

The Dark Forest should be about memory, nature, music, history, art and poetry... and loss. Is the forest a place only of terror and dark deeds? Can it be a place of forgiveness and healing?

We discussed these themes on her previous visit to London. 70 year old Gabi padded about a friend's flat in dressing gown and long woollen socks, chewing on a mixture of cold porridge, seeds and nuts. She then unpacked family photos and letters for me. Her mother used to have an admirer, a poet and artist, who wrote to her regularly over many years; each letter headed with a tiny exquisite drawing of a landscape: trees, a path leading through meadows. When Hitler came to power the letters suddenly stopped and she never heard from him again. Unanswered questions about trust, betrayal and the nature of friendship continue to disturb Gabi. The picture has to express this darkness too.

The family photos were faded black and white images of tiny figures strolling along dusty paths surrounded by fields, hills and woods. Gabi spoke trance-like about this magical place being a landscape of fairytales. In Pushkin's words:

Wonders are there! Spirits roam.

Mermaids sit on tree branches.

On mysterious paths

Footprints of invisible beasts...

... There, woods and valleys are full of visions....

•

OUTLAWS

A long barely audible murmur opens the overture to Carl Maria von Weber's opera, *Der Freischütz* (*The Magic Bullet*). The sound conjures the forest of fairytales, dark and mysterious, where witches live and people get lost, far from the security of home and society.

Outlaws are at home in the dark forest, where they can plan and commit crimes. Today this forest is not necessarily separate from places of social intercourse. It exists at the heart of our cities. It is best not to flaunt possessions there, and to avoid eye contact. Law-abiding people protect themselves or even dress down so as not to draw attention.

We dread and also have a sneaking admiration for outlaws, bandits and pirates who operate without fear in dangerous places.

The murmur at the start of the overture to *Der Freischütz* is not just the representation of rustling leaves or even the swaying of forests which builds to such an awe-inspiring climax in Sibelius' *Tapiola*. The murmur is a shudder in front of the unknown.

In *Der Freischütz* Kaspar the outlaw controls events, converses with the devil, and terrorizes Max the hero. Strict rules, hierarchy and traditions attempt to impose order on a community of farmers and huntsmen at the edge of a dark forest where supernatural forces menace. Max vacillates and succumbs to temptation when he cannot live up to these rules and traditions. Kaspar defies them with a mocking laugh and dies unrepentant with a curse, killed by the magic bullet he forged. A significant part of the opera takes place in the part of the forest known to be haunted by the devil, the Wolfs Glen, where Kaspar and Max forge this magic bullet. Max approaches the place in terror; but Kaspar feels at home among the devils and apparitions. With authority he instructs Max how to deal with the chaos that will overwhelm them at the moment they forge the magic bullet when all the forces of hell will be unleashed by the Wild Huntsman and his pack.

Hermits who renounce materialism and society are also at home in the dark forest. Two such hermits appear in Matthias Grunewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*. Surrounded by moss covered trees and wild animals, these shaggy-haired naked elderly men converse cheerfully and animatedly together.

Another such hermit brings *Der Freischütz* to its ambiguous conclusion. The hero does not yet win his prize. He has to endure penance first.

Outlaws can be our friends. In Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen*, the robber girl protects and helps Gerda. The story tells of Gerda negotiating and surviving the perils of adulthood to find her brother Kay and thaw his frozen heart. People impede her quest until she finds herself in a dark forest where the person she most fears turns out to be her best friend and guide.

The forest is also setting for a confrontation between the forces of light and dark in Richard Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelungs*. At a climactic moment of this cycle of operas Siegfried slays a dragon. In the moments before his victory other older adversaries confront each other outside the dragon's cave.

This encounter is emotionally and intellectually one of the pivotal moments in the *Ring Cycle*. Wotan, king of the Gods, meets his implacable foe, Alberich the Nibelung. Each has stolen and cheated in a vain attempt to take control of the world. Their rivalry drives the narrative and leads to the twilight of the Gods, *Götterdämmerung*. However throughout this atmospheric scene in the middle of a dark forest outside a dragon's cave they talk amicably and discuss ruefully the absurdity of their destructive conflict. They tease the dragon about the approach of his next adversary. 'Let him come,' says the dragon, 'I am hungry!' They laugh. The forest is a free zone, where no one person is in charge and even adversaries can converse. Wotan pointedly calls himself 'Licht Albe' (Light Spirit) and Alberich 'Schwarz Albe' (Black Spirit). But their discussion indicates how light and dark are intermixed. Wotan is not all goodness and light. His crimes and broken promises have ignited a conflict that will destroy him and everything he built up. Alberich, humiliated, robbed and defeated becomes a figure of pathos: the lynchpin of the saga. His curse drives the narrative.

He survives when the gods do not. In another poignant scene before the opera's final denouement he haunts Hagen his son and burdens him with the incessant vain obsession: power over and control of the world.

For a few lyrically extended moments in Wagner's monumental work the dark forest is celebrated as a place where opposites meet, good and evil reach a truce. Here human beings are capable of becoming invincible, receiving the gift of seeing through lies and deception, and understanding the language of nature.

Ironically this ability to speak with birds leads Siegfried out of the forest where he falls in love, then goes on adventures in a world ruled by men and ends up being manipulated, deceived and finally murdered. Danger was not in the forest, but in the society of people.

•

Bandits are on the point of killing Gerda in *The Snow Queen* when the robber girl takes a passionate fancy to her and saves her life. They go to bed and the robber girl holds a knife to Gerda's throat so she cannot escape. But this is love. Gerda is safe. The robber girl then helps her on the most difficult stretch of the journey into the kingdom of the Snow Queen. At the end of the story when brother and sister return home, no longer children, they meet the robber girl once again. She has become an independent woman, striding out into the world on new adventures.

Saalfeld station now feels like a robber's den. The hubbub is deafening. A radio plays loud background music. People shout drunkenly across the tables. Fruit machines clatter and chime repetitive jingles while the teenagers bash them. Air has become thick with smoke and steam.

The rent boy has been joined by a friend. 'How's business?'

A shrug of the shoulders. 'So, so...'

•

Gabi loved the song *Mondnacht*, which is one of an intended thousand Lieder (art songs) recorded in Berlin during the last year of the war by Michael Raucheisen, a celebrated accompanist and enthusiastic supporter of Hitler. The country faced defeat and its cities were being fire-bombed into ruins. While their Jewish colleagues were being murdered the remaining best singers permitted to perform in Germany stood in freezing studios and committed one song after the other to tape. The walls shook from bombs which can be heard exploding outside, equipment kept breaking down and they expected to die at any moment. They persevered because they wanted to leave a legacy of the best of German art, excluding of course the music of Mendelssohn and the poetry of Heine. Amid the roar of destruction they sang about birds, trees, flowers and running streams, about human desire, disappointment, pain and hope.

•

AN ENCHANTED PLACE

Tam chudyesa!

(There be wonders!)

Pushkin

In the late afternoon I sit by a tearoom window in Leutenberg, looking out over a valley.

The rows of old houses, timbered in traditional medieval style are interspersed with elegant nineteenth century buildings. This town had once been a spa. Thickly wooded hills encircle the valley. Meadows stretch between the forests. A dusty narrow road makes a wide curve before disappearing into the distance, inviting me to walk there. This landscape frames a large town church with its characteristic Thuringian dark onion dome, tall spire and black slate roof. Behind the church an old castle keeps guard on a hill overlooking the town.

Now I understand why Gabi continues to be drawn back to this enchanting spot and is unable to forget the trauma of being expelled from paradise.

Gabi talked to me about the fields where she played as a girl and the woods where she walked.

She also told me about her subsequent life, its measureless problems and disappointments. Her daughter committed suicide after years in a mental home. Gabi's son is a Seventh Day Adventist who consigns his parents to eternal damnation. Gabi's husband has affairs. 'I can never get used to the fact that I was not his only love,' the seventy year old woman confesses to me in despair.

Ending her days in New Zealand Gabi is sustained on a remote antipodean shore with memories of a childhood paradise, and ponders its fairytales and folksongs with biblical intensity.

'Paint me the dark forest,' she commands me and adds: 'Show that there is not only terror and despair, but also good things: hope, healing...'

•

Sun streams through the bay window of the tearoom in Leutenberg. Plastic doilies decorate the check patterned table cloths and joke knickknacks clutter the window sills: plaster frogs and rabbits. A bowl of dusty cloth flowers stands in the middle of the table.

I am the only guest but the place is noisy. The cook, a manageress and another person are engaged in a loud conversation outside. A radio plays incessantly. An alarmingly large and fierce German shepherd dog is trying to enter the room and there is a considerable commotion to prevent him.

Gabi recommended I stay in a guest house on the other side of Leutenberg. Better furnished than this tea place, the Gute Quelle (the Good Source) has been recently renovated. My en-suite room is decorated with paintings, lamps and a coffee table.

Display cases in the corridors are full of rocks, quartz crystals, local pottery and wooden sculptures. The proprietors are making a statement of faith in the future of their business and town.

No expense had been spared so it would compare favourably with similar guest houses in the West. However rusticity inhibited any pretensions: when I arrived, a large box full of kitchen peelings and eggshells destined for the compost heap stood in the middle of the reception area. Hearing my call a boy emerged from the kitchen and looked shocked to find an unexpected guest. He ran up and down stairs, into the yard behind the guesthouse and eventually returned with the owner, a man in overalls who was also surprised. 'Don't worry about paying now,' he assured me, with a friendliness in marked contrast to all the other places I had been in the former West Germany where I had been met with suspicion in case I turned out to be an unwanted refugee.

A cobbled street to the town centre passed an old-fashioned grocer shop, shelves stacked with necessities and no advertisements or any attempt at creating an attractive display. In the town square a fountain on one side faces the church on the other. The church rears up on a steep hillside and can be reached by a double flight of stone steps. Around the square stand a variety of shops: butchers, grocers, haberdashers, ironmongers and a garage workshop selling farm equipment.

Beyond the church narrow paths pass neatly cultivated gardens. Beyond them stand large old houses where the windows were flung open to let in the early spring sun. With difficulty I chose just one path, all of them leading in every direction to woods, meadows and hills. I followed this path uphill and along a meadow towards a tearoom.

Standing by a steeply sloping meadow covered in harebells, daisies and buttercups I looked over the peaceful valley, old farmsteads, forests and hills and thought of young Gabi running through the grass, plaits flying in the wind as she grasped at flowers and tall grass.

Many centuries ago the poet philosopher Meister Eckart walked in these hills and valleys pondering the best of human nature in a divine and cosmic order. A few miles to the north stands the castle of Wartburg where the medieval troubadour Tannhäuser sang of his experiences in pagan Venusberg, revealing to his dismayed listeners that their regulated society stood on the foundations of undisciplined orgiastic earth forces. The Brothers Grimm collected their fairytales in this region, the countryside of Mary's Child, of fools and princes, witches and abused lost children, knights and brothers riding out on quests.

Gabi had been a native here. Like Jews in villages and towns all over central Europe she had one day been visible, the next erased, as though she and they had never existed. A desolate wind blows through the empty spaces these spirits once occupied.

In *Shoah*, a Polish family lives in the house once occupied by Jews. The old mother recollects with bitterness the beauty of the Jewish girls with their slender hands unblemished by hard work. The men had always preferred them. The old father expresses sorrow at their absence. He had claimed the house for his own; however his uneasiness at talking about the past indicates a feeling of complicity in a crime. The empty spaces remain. Daily life goes on for this Polish family but something important is missing, the place feels deserted, as though waiting for a return that will never happen.

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The proprietor of the Leutenberg tearoom is a mechanic in overalls who tells me I am the first Englishman ever to visit the place. He rummages in drawers for brochures. He dreams of hosting a convention of Harley Davison enthusiasts from all over Europe – solemn processions of Hell's Angels converging on Leutenberg along the narrow roads and valleys.

The evening shadows are lengthening and only the church remains in full sunlight as it rises above the surrounding houses. Last rays also fall on part of the road winding its way through a distant meadow into the forest and overlooking Leutenberg the castle, now a research institute for allergies. In another Eichendorff poem a stone

knight looks down from a castle ruin on to a river in the valley below where the woods stir mysteriously and a wedding party sails past. An orchestra on board plays merrily, but the bride is weeping.

A passing train reminded me of the poetry covering the walls of Saalfeld station's toilets: dozens of gay messages, written neatly with elaborate calligraphic flourishes, lyrical flights of fancy. These are not crude graffiti. The messages seem to go back over the years, when subterfuge used to be a necessity. Desires and biographies cover the dirty grey walls.

'Please meet me....'

'I came, but you weren't there.'

•

THE WIND

Debate animated the guests at the Gute Quelle guesthouse that evening as to whether I really was the first Englishman ever to visit Leutenberg. Frau Klingsporn, a friendly and elegantly dressed woman who runs the guest house with her husband, recalled an elderly woman from across the world, New Zealand of all places. She brought out the registration book and found Gabi's name. My godmother I told them. The room suddenly filled with emotion. Frau Klingsporn had tears in her eyes. 'Isn't it wonderful,' she kept repeating. 'There is still human contact in the world!'

A beer rep sharing my table told me about his family and expressed fears about what union with the west would do to the east, how the free market economy threatened to destroy a way of life of close-knit communities, family and friendship.

'We must not lose the human touch,' said Frau Klingsporn, surrounded by her family and guests, all eyes shining with beer, goodwill and emotion. 'Whatever happens we must remember that we are all people.'

A young man who had been leaning against the bar all evening followed me out, as I went to my room, threw his arms round my neck, kissed me and scratched my face with his stubbly chin. 'Enjoy your stay with us!' he whispered in my ear before disappearing into the darkness.

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Fortified by a substantial breakfast of fresh-baked rolls, several kinds of bread, a flask of coffee, eggs, local honey, homemade preserves and a platter of traditional smoked meats, sausage and hams, I walked several miles out of Leutenberg to explore the countryside.

A sharp wind warned that the previous days' spring sun had been premature.

In the hollow of a hill a village nestled, the only sound being the flap of laundry and rattle of loose tiles on roofs and walls. On a dilapidated church, its onion tower slightly askew, a weathervane squeaked with the rust of centuries. In Schubert's *Winterreise* a similar weather vane is buffeted by a stormy winter wind, an image of directionless alienation. The church doors were locked. Through dusty windows I could see an unadorned interior, deteriorating from neglect. As I left the untended churchyard a cracked bell suddenly chimed, like a death rattle.

In the village where laundry lines stretched between houses a girl on a swing watched two labourers fix tiles on a wall. Hens scratched in the gardens.

In a café, the only one in the village, light music from a radio carried on remorselessly. Men played a noisy game of dice.

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My path from Leutenberg crossed a river and railway line before entering a forest.

Rivers gushed down the hillsides, swollen with recently thawed snow. The path divided on a hillside. On the right it led to a small barn and beyond to a dilapidated farmhouse. Wild waters thundered past the gate.

Joseph von Eichendorff's novella, *Pages from the Diary of a Good for Nothing*, opens with just such a sound of spring awakening: water bubbling, frothing and rushing everywhere, filling the young man with a desire to leave home, see the world and have adventures. He takes his violin, earns a living gardening, falls in love with a mysterious woman disguised as a young man and follows her to Italy. Music is his passport. Wherever he plays he is welcome, things happen, he achieves his goal and gets the girl.

The dilapidated farmhouse reminded me suddenly of the story of my mother's father.

My grandfather was born to a poor peasant family in a remote Moravian village. His mother disapproved of him reading in the barn when he should have been digging, so burnt his books. He ran away from home and arrived in Vienna just like so many Eastern Europeans today, with no money and looking for work. A civil servant picked the handsome young man up, looked after and educated him. By the time he met my grandmother he was working in an insurance office.

Her family disapproved of the marriage. His background did not worry them, but they saw that he beat his wife and that they were temperamentally unsuited. She had jealous rages, with good cause, as my grandfather was a womanizer to the end of his life. In the end she could bear it no more, took poison and put her head in the gas oven. Her ten year old daughter found the lifeless body.

My grandfather then married another Jewish woman, a pharmacist, with whom he had been having an affair. This woman I always knew as grandmother, a strong-willed hard working woman from L'vov in the Western Ukraine, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

He continued to have affairs, and regularly entered his daughter's bedroom where she shared a bed with the house servant. Blighted by this memory my mother could never

speak about it. He threatened her with his fists if she dared report him and it seems as though he sexually abused her as well.

What made women fall for him? Apart from his good looks and muscular build, he loved books and poetry. He knew pages of Goethe and Schiller from memory. He had a short temper and regularly flew into frightening rages. I remember his mood swings. One moment he smilingly recited poetry to me, the next his eyes blazed with fury, he roared and slammed doors. My grandmother would rush up in alarm and force me to make an apology, although I did not understand what I had done wrong.

During the First World War he suffered injuries after being crushed by a gun carriage. These caused uncontrollable nervous twitches for the rest of his life. He could not work and my grandmother became the breadwinner, nursing and adoring him right to the end, despite the fact that he beat her regularly. Age did not calm him. Neighbours and friends were often called to pick my grandmother off the floor and take her to casualty. The more affairs he had the more my grandmother tried to possess him. She was proud of being married to a man everyone wanted. He sat like a patriarch at the head of the table and terrorized family and guests, shouting opinions and letting his hands shake if anyone dared to contradict: a little Hitler.

One day, as they walked passed a gallery a painting for sale in the window transfixed him. The picture showed a spring landscape, white blossom trees, a stream and a road leading to a distant village under a clear blue sky. Having bought the painting he felt a sudden urge to see his childhood home again. They made the journey and found just wretched poverty and bad memories. My grandmother expressed dismay that he should want to revisit such a miserable place. The picture had been an idealized version, a childhood as it should have been.

Not being a Jew my grandfather stayed in Vienna throughout the war while his wife fled to England. He enjoyed several affairs. One of them became friends with my grandmother on her return. This mistress I remembered as a cheerful working class woman, blousy with peroxide hair and wearing brightly patterned frocks. When she fell ill my grandmother would take her food and medicine. 'She looked after my

husband during the war,' explained my grandmother, her eyes telling me she remained fully aware of the facts. 'I was not there to do so.'

My grandmother survived them all. Just before her own death she confided to me her greatest sorrow. Sufferings as a refugee, the murder of most of her family by the Nazis and the upheavals of the world were tolerable compared to this single most painful heart ache. Not injustice, persecution, not all the beatings and infidelities hurt so much as the first words my grandfather uttered when she returned to the ruins of post-war Vienna to find him and start life together again:

'Why did you come back?'

•

The scene with a tree in early white blossom standing by the foaming racing stream under a clear blue sky reminded me of my grandfather and his favourite picture. In such a dilapidated barn he would have read his books in secret and resisted parental disapproval.

At our final meeting we sat in a restaurant on a hill overlooking Vienna and my 80 year old grandfather challenged me to a bout of arm-wrestling so he could show off his still impressive biceps. My grandmother winced. He then flirted with the teenage waitress. My grandmother acknowledged the farce with a bored smile and paid the bill.

•

Silence everywhere; not even the sound of cars or chainsaws disturbed the peace. A light wind stirred in the trees. The path led up the hill where a view over Leutenberg castle below panned over seven valleys curling in all directions. On all sides stretched hills, forests and meadows.

On my walk I had met just one person, a man with an axe over his shoulder making his way into the forest. We exchanged a few words. His weather-beaten face

displayed jutting cheekbones, aquiline nose, deep set eyes and a strong chin. He directed me to the summit of the hill and spoke in a dialect as chiselled as his features.

As I looked over the seven valleys a wind came and blew through the pine trees behind me. They swayed violently as a sudden whirlwind created a commotion. For several moments the tall slender trees shook alarmingly in different directions, the wind rushing in their top branches. Then, just as suddenly, the wind ceased and all was still again.

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Back in the village pub the dice players left one by one, scrutinizing me and offering a friendly greeting.

On the radio they played: ‘She has kisses sweeter than wine.’

•

THE GREEN OAK

Back in Leutenberg the café radio played: ‘Passionate kisses from...’

Chartres now beckons. A connection exists between the cathedral and the rubble of Birkenau. The truism about people being capable of the extremes of good and evil fails to explain how fundamental these are to the way we organize our lives.

A millennia ago people imagined the creation of Chartres Cathedral – an astounding vision, preposterous even, given the squalor and struggle of everyday life. The notion of Auschwitz also takes the breath away.

There is a physical connection between both places. The rail track runs along the equivalent of a cathedral nave. Trains arrive and deliver. On either side, where pews are in a church, lie ranks of low sheds to house the victims. In the equivalent of the sanctuary where priests distribute communion to the congregation the track ends

abruptly. Officers supervised the procedure of separating the sexes and the rituals of killing. Birkenau resembles a gigantic roofless cathedral. On the now desolate sanctuary floor stand roughly hewn sculptures where wreaths can be laid and candles lit. In the ruin of the transepts lies the rubble of the crematoria, candles still flickering in places. Cathedral and killing camp share the same design.

The order at Birkenau startles. A place of brutal murder should look like chaos. But then, such a scale of killing required discipline and simple solutions. It had after all been planned to wipe out a sizable portion of the world's population in a few years.

The order itself creates a rational framework for extermination, making it routine. Perhaps the design reminiscent of a cathedral subconsciously reminded the killers of a more hallowed place, and therefore bestowed a grotesque blessing to what they were doing. Such an observation is not absurd. These people considered their task a sacred duty. Churches were also regularly used for the collection of Jews to be transported to the killing camps.

In Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Andrei Roublev*, dealing with the life and times of an icon painter in 16th century Russia, a church has been sacked and all the people trying to find sanctuary there have been slaughtered by Tartar invaders. The film shows only the aftermath. The artist and his companion, a deaf mute girl, step over corpses and rubble, numb with shock, as we are. Though this was a medieval massacre Tarkovsky is drawing parallels with what happened in his own century and life time.

However these atrocities were committed by barbarians – not us. We can blame them. But who acknowledges and accepts responsibility and guilt for the barbarism done in our name? Our conditioning prevents us taking the blame: it would be a sign of weakness. So there can be no blame and therefore no justice for the victims. These ghosts cannot be laid to rest, and we seem to wait in perpetual fear of the truth being told: that we are all indeed capable of such violence and brutality. We cannot act. We are apathetic and depressed when confronted with this dark memory.

In his *St John Passion* Bach pierces to the heart of this issue, an insight all the more effective for being framed by the work's unrelenting anti-Semitism. At the start of his

trial before Pontius Pilate, Jesus declares himself to be the Son of God. A man strikes him. Immediately the same people who had just been buying for his blood sing a hymn:

‘Who struck you?...

It is I who struck you...’

This tiny gesture of repentance catches us unawares. The voices are also those of killers and priests.

In the sanctuary of the cathedral of Birkenau the camp commandant stood like a bishop, omnipotent with his curates and lieutenants, judging and supervising.

It is I, I and my sins, countless as the sands on the sea bed,

That have caused the misery and host of torments

Which now engulf you.

•

Pictures of emaciated death camp survivors, staring exhausted through barbed wire at their liberators became icons of the holocaust. They reappear. I witnessed the dying of my friend Christopher. Illness had eaten his still young body so that only a skeleton remained; skin transparent and eyes hollow. Clinging to his drip stand he shuffled like an old man to the hospital window that overlooked Hampstead Heath and commented wryly on the irony of his fate: ‘That’s where it happened; and here I am now.’

We shared memories of a mysterious warm seductive summer night when some years earlier he took me on a tour of the heath. Shadows moved among the bushes, touching each other, surrendering to invisible strangers and passionate encounters. Skin, clothes, lips, stiff impatient cocks, arms, legs, breath, sweat and semen mingled with grass, trees, bushes and all happening as the moon ‘patrolled the vault of the night sky’ – followed by disengagement, moving on to other collisions spiced with the thrill of danger in case police and homophobic muggers might crash the dream, lay waste desire and life.

But an unsuspected murderer was already there: a virus that would conveniently dispose of undesirable people. Some people even proposed building gas ovens to speed the killing process to save expense and protect the rest of the world for ‘decent, normal and worthy people’.

Entangled in his drip Chris extricated himself slowly, painstakingly and with irritation before unexpectedly launching into a furious attack on religion. He fulminated at hypocrisy and bigotry, the damage they do to people. The TV dramatist Dennis Potter shortly before his own death from leukaemia referred to religion as being the wound itself, not the bandage.

After this storm we sat together listening to spluttering noises from the neighbouring beds; moans, all-consuming coughing fits, groans and other familiar hospital sounds.

Suddenly Chris started to shake. Not with anger, but with laughter. His emaciated face stretched into a death’s head grimace. Despite fear, pain and regret he saw the absurdity of it all.

While other friends arrived, speechless with shock, he continued to convulse with laughter, looking at us with fury, despair and mockery as though wanting to say: ‘You don’t know the half of it!’

•

Above the town of Leutenberg I sat on a bench that fits snugly under a large spreading beech tree. Warmed by late afternoon rays of afternoon sunshine I looked across to the castle with its turrets and curving walls.

A graveyard lies below me, beyond a sloping meadow. Here a small section has been set aside for a group of Russians. Two neat rows of headstones bear the names of men, women and children who perished here in the last war. The script being in Cyrillic, for a few moments I had arrived in Russia after all. On many the first name alone is carved, frequently just an affectionate diminutive. These must be children.

What were they doing here so far from home? Why so many women? Were they wives of the young soldiers? Was this the scene of an atrocity or a terrible accident?

Until recently this tiny patch of homeland had been kept tidy. A path runs between the headstones which face each other. At the top stands a headstone to the leader, a captain. The trees round the graves are now so overgrown that they have knitted together keeping the space dark and mysterious, separating it from the rest of the cemetery. Elsewhere there is light and air, but here it remains murky. A sense of infinite sadness is intensified by the elegant carving of the children's names: Misha, Alyosha, Sasha, Tolya, with dates indicating that they died at the age of five or six. A few years ago in the formerly communist East Germany these graves would not have seemed out of place. Now they look abandoned.

On this journey I had wanted to reach Russia, land of my adopted grandmother and Pushkin's green oak tree. Unexpectedly in a Thuringian graveyard I had arrived there.

The leaves rustled sadly in a forest far away.

The coffin is buried.

It glistened in the moonlight.

Quietly and without tears they buried it and went away.

Only the leaves bend over the grave, rustling through the night.

Moussorgsky/Plesteev

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Wild rose bushes entwine in front of the bench where I sit. They still bear last autumn's hips. Birds whistle in the branches above me. Smoke from fires burning in the town below curls up the forested hillsides. People walk by. A dog barks from a nearby garden. Behind me above another steep sloping meadow a family sits in front of a small wooden summer-house. A train passes in the distance. The church bells chime a peel over the valley. Children shout and scamper down the hill.

All seems as though it has been so for ever; and I a passing stranger.

THE ROAD TO CHARTRES – PART THREE

THE TREE OF LIFE

IRON BANDS

Outside Strasbourg a shed painted dull blue mocks the sparkling cerulean of the sky above. A large refuse sack spills rubbish by the railway line which passes warehouses with broken window panes, graffiti covering the walls, bits of old machinery and rusting cars piling high outside.

I feel sad coming to the end of my journey with its chance meetings and surprises. The train has become a womb - a sanctuary - carrying me from one experience to the other.

It reminds me of journeys in fiction and film: Prince Mishkin making a significant friendship on the Moscow/St Petersburg train in the opening chapter of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, Tolstoy's Anna Karenina travelling the same route between husband and lover before ending her restless life under the engine wheels, Hitchcock's ride through Central Europe at war in *The Lady Vanishes*, Preston Sturges' Lady Eve telling her husband on their honeymoon about the men in her life, at each name the phallic train plunging into yet another tunnel, James Bond vanquishing and ejecting his icily implacable adversary from the Orient Express as it roars through the Balkans in *From Russia with Love*, the convict Jon Voigt defiantly hurtling towards his death on *Runaway Train*... For readers and audiences such train rides offer vicarious pleasures of life changing meetings, adventures, tragedies and excitement from the safety of a comfortable seat.

Before trains there were horses and carriages, such as the troika in Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*. The story takes place in Russia at a time when the majority of its citizens were serfs. Gogol's anti-hero Chichikov has concocted a scam which takes him cross country buying from gullible landowners serfs deceased after the last census but not yet registered in the new census. These 'dead souls' allow him the pretence of being a landowner 'living in style'. His character anticipates a modern obsession with wealth

and 'respect' in a world where the rich have access to anything they want and others struggle, turn to crime or go under. In the last part of *Dead Souls* Gogol wanted to redeem Chichikov, but finally, in despair, burned most of the manuscript and committed suicide. When Pushkin read what remained of the novel, a satiric farce packed with deluded, vain and greedy grotesques, he did not laugh, but wept: 'This is the truth. Life as it is.'

What survives of *Dead Souls* is a journey. The troika of three horses and their laconic driver carries the little man dreaming of success across Russia: a sardonic reminder of Cervantes' Don Quixote pursuing another altogether more noble illusion and constantly suffering from painful collisions with those who resent his interference, his doubting but doggedly faithful servant Sancho Panza providing reassurance between each catastrophe. In *Dead Souls* the troika rescues Chichikov from unpleasant confrontations, disappointment and failure.

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My own journey started in frost and snow. Now white star blossoms cover prickly dark blackthorn twigs and splashes of golden forsythia proclaim the arrival of spring. More people seem to be on the move. The large numbers of single young men with sports bags packed to bursting are now joined by young women with rucksacks, elderly couples and mothers travelling alone with their children.

Today an exhausted mother with her mixed race son sat next to me. The boy settled in the window seat and stared at the passing landscape with a solemn absorbed expression. Birches everywhere: the tips of their resilient slender branches, spreading like outstretched fingers, are turning a deep wine-red, the sap feeding fresh leaf buds. They remind me of the dismal copse at Birkenau standing beyond the men's crematorium.

At Karlsruhe I lost myself on the network of main roads hemming in the town centre like bands which made me think of Iron Henry in the Grimm's fairytale about the Frog Prince. Iron Henry had bound three iron bands round his chest to prevent his heart from bursting with grief.

After wandering the mainly deserted streets past grand office buildings, exclusive hotels, business complexes and monuments, boulevards clogged with traffic stretching for miles, but few people walking along them, I sat on the double bed in my room and thought:

Why the Jews?

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Recently a neighbour where I live complained about a family who had just moved nearby: ‘They’re Jewish!’ she hissed, her features contorted with disgust.

‘Don’t say that!’ I cried. ‘I’m Jewish.’

‘I never knew you was!’ she exclaimed, surprised I could be anything so repulsive.

Until this moment in Karlsruhe I had believed the concentration camps to be about removing Jews from Europe. But long after this holocaust a significant legacy remains: the suppression of Jewishness.

Jewishness has been all pervasive in every part of Western life and culture for centuries. It has often been remarked that the intimacy of this influence may even have exacerbated the animosity of host nations. The burning of books, destruction of artefacts and rewriting history, all indicate that killing people is not enough to erase their memory and influence.

What is it about Jewishness that made my neighbour contort her face and my classmates sneer?

I felt myself to be a person no different from them.

This revulsion goes deeper than politics, nation states’ fear of ‘alien’ influences and present political anxieties about Israel’s role in the Middle East.

Jewish Abraham fathered three of the world's major faiths which share the same basic laws of humanity: respect for each other and God's creation. Yet history chronicles perpetual and often bloody disputes between the faiths and Christians became the chief persecutors of Jews.

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WANDERING JEWS

Blind Samson pulling down the pillars of the temple in one desperate attempt to regain his physical strength that Delilah sapped from him when she cut his hair, the boy David felling the giant warrior Goliath with a child's catapult, angst-ridden Saul summoning up the spirit of the prophet Samuel whose words he fatefully did not heed, Jonah fleeing his prophetic mission and cowering in the belly of the whale, Job covered in sores sitting on his dung heap and doubting God, Jeremiah lamenting the Jewish exile in Babylon but buying a plot of land back home as a gesture of faith in the future, coruscating imprecations about the present and tantalizing promises for the future from prophets, the Psalms of David rattling God's cage, the passionate erotic poetry of young Solomon, the same king's wisdom as an older man, representing the glory of Ancient Israel when illustrious guests like the Queen of Sheba came to visit, Moses talking with the Burning Bush before leading his people out of slavery in Egypt across the Red Sea towards a promised land he only lived to see from a distance, open-hearted Abraham offering hospitality to strangers who turn out to be angels and then in a disturbing image of domestic violence prepared to sacrifice his only son Isaac to prove his love of God which had to take precedence over all other relationships, Noah surviving the flood in his ark full of creatures saved for posterity, Jacob wrestling in vain with a stranger who turns out to be a divine emissary, an angel who then reveals to him the ladder leading to heaven, Joseph the favourite son sold by his jealous brothers into slavery, but his beauty, charm and intelligence win him advancement and freedom so when they come impoverished to beg for sustenance, he weeps and forgives them, Adam and Eve tempted by a snake into eating the forbidden fruit of knowledge which leads them to being thrown out of paradise and at the beginning of it all: the creation of the world by a God who saw everything in it as good... these are just some of the universally known stories, all Jewish.

Despite modern discoveries about our evolution and on the nature of the universe, the imagination of Jewish poets and prophets who created the Old Testament continues to influence all areas of our lives and to inspire every field of the arts.

So what changed? How did respect lead to playground taunts and the sneers of my neighbour? Why am I less human than others? What is the reason for the revulsion which led to violent pogroms down the centuries culminating in the holocaust?

History gives only part of the answer. The Roman crushing of the Jewish rebellion led to a diaspora which drove Jews to wander and settle in other countries. In Europe they functioned as second class citizens, refugees, asylum seekers, grudgingly allowed to carry on their business in places where this foreign dark-skinned hook-nosed race looked markedly different from indigenous people with paler skins and blonder hair.

Exile and returning home are constant themes in the Old Testament, reflecting the vulnerabilities of this particular Middle Eastern tribe. The politics of constant struggles to keep their identity and settle in a land of their own dominate the Old Testament, but we remember best the personal experience of individuals who inspire generations of wandering Jews. Ruth, standing in a field of 'alien corn', is suddenly overwhelmed with home-sickness. At such moments hope transcends painful reality. The Old Testament is constantly aware of the ambiguous nature of homeland: historically fraught with conflict, then as today. Yet God promised Abraham that his 'seed' (which includes Christians and Muslims) would cover the whole world, not just one country, and be as numberless as the grains of sand on the sea shore.

The Old Testament stories raise questions about the relationship between Jews and their land. How can we keep our home and live in peace with neighbours and enemies? But the central theme of the Jewish bible concerns the relationship between Jews and their God. The contract between people and the father of creation is never clear cut, always fluid and constantly in need of reappraisal, sometimes harsh and unyielding when it comes to laws and morality. But God can never be pinned down, described and understood, he is a mysterious constantly changing figure, sometimes an autocratic father figure, Adonai, but more often invisible, an essence revealing

itself but also concealed in every element of nature, the fire of Moses' burning bush, the waters of the ocean where Job's Leviathan is testament to God's glory, and significantly for generations of Jews wandering over the whole world, the breath of wind, Jahweh, Jehovah, blowing everywhere, never still, always moving on.

Solomon governing a stable and prosperous nation encourages respect, but the same people moving and settling uninvited in other lands, races and cultures creates unease and suspicion. The brew of suspicion is thickened to fear and hatred by a mythology of secret ceremonies and child sacrifice. The Jews either assimilated successfully, some becoming immensely rich or remained ghettoized: poor second class citizens. They were envied or despised. The Jew could not win. The Russian composer Moussorgksy created a musical portrait of this duality in one of his series of piano pieces, *Pictures at an Exhibition*: the arrogant rich Jew being petitioned by a poor Jew, pleading in persistently whining tones. Jews were depicted on the one hand as rich grasping ultra capitalists planning world domination, and on the other as a poor sub-human species, vermin contaminating the community. Such caricatures, added to the accusation perpetuated by Christians that Jews were Christ murderers, and encouraged pogroms in remoter and less developed parts of Eastern Europe. Anti-Semitism also flourished in Western European cities, where Jewishness was seen by the local intelligentsia as polluting national culture. It is hard to understand this attitude listening to the music of German Felix Mendelssohn and French Jacques Offenbach or reading the poetry of German Heinrich Heine, among many others, all of whom seem so successfully to express the culture they were part of.

Jewish artists, especially musicians, brought a particular intensity of emotion to everything they created. Experience the vibrancy of prime colours as used in the paintings by Marc Chagall and Mark Rothko and the uniquely expressive vibrato, bold, assertive as well as delicate and varied in the violin playing of Jascha Heifetz, Nathan Milstein, Isaac Stern, Maxim Vengerov... the list goes on.

The nakedness of this emotion is both attractive and disturbing, hinting at uncontrollable desires and extreme, even immoderate, expression of grief or joy. In this Jewish art there seem to be no boundaries. This Dionysian excess that takes possession and grips the heart, body and soul in an all consuming frenzy threatens the

more measured aesthetics of Apollonian proportions where beauty is refined, controlled, sublime but unapproachable. Artists have always known that it is Dionysius who brings the divine Apollo within reach of all mortals. In the myth of Orpheus the artist is punished by Dionysian maenads because he refuses to play his music. His decapitated head floats down the river ceaselessly singing. That arch anti-Semite Wagner as a musician had to admit to the importance of this particularly Jewish gift of interpretation, and conceded that only a Jewish conductor, Herman Levi, was capable of interpreting his final opera *Parsifal*. Wagner even joked about converting Levi, although he well knew that religion does not define Jewishness. The transparent layers of melody and harmony which propel the score of *Parsifal* from the opening bar to its radiant conclusion require a heightened intensity of emotion to elevate the notes from the page into the religious experience Wagner intended.

Possession is the theme of one of Jewish cultures most enduring myths: the dybbuk, which is the spirit of a rejected or disappointed lover who enters and takes over the body of his beloved. The myth tries to deal with the consequences of unconsummated love, the emotional havoc wreaked and loss of identity that threatens the whole community as well as the individual. In the classic folk-lore Yiddish film drama, *The Dybbuk*, a poor itinerant apprentice falls hopelessly in love with his rich master's daughter, who loves him in return. The father forbids marriage. The film now weaves new elements into the familiar traditional story. The young man dabbles in sorcery to win the girl. This unleashes uncontrollable demonic powers which kill him. Ghosts begin to move disturbingly in and out of the story. The girl becomes possessed by the spirit of the young man and this invasion of her body threatens the carefully laid plans of her father. Only by laying his spirit to rest, which demands a sacrifice from the girl, can the story find resolution.

Artists of every kind have always been fascinated by the way human passions cause havoc in a carefully structured society. A young Asian prince's adulterous affair with the beautiful wife of a European king led to the Trojan War which inspired the first epic poem in European literature.

Another Greek, Euripides, dealt specifically with this matter in *The Bacchae*. From his experience of a turbulent period in Greek history, which led to a brief flowering of

all the arts, he understood the fragility of peace and order: the best laid plans of decent and honourable people suddenly fractured and destroyed by irrational violence. *The Bacchae* shows how society suppressing and denying human passions makes them chaotically destructive. When the ruler accepts the challenge of Dionysius, portrayed in the play as a disreputable if charismatic outsider, the king's minor act of prurient curiosity – 'to see what the women are up to' – unleashes a catastrophe that kills him in a particularly gruesome manner. The morality that of necessity binds a stable society is seen to be a thin veneer.

Euripides offers no solution; the issue is laid bare starkly. Written towards the end of the golden age of Ancient Greek cultural life, the play shoots a warning across the centuries, one that the world clearly still does not know how to heed.

Other artists have explored the same issue time and again, each for their own time and circumstances. In 19th century America where a libertarian but strictly puritanical ethos was in the process of successfully establishing an affluent new society, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote a short story, *Goodman Brown*, which scratched the veneer of civilized behaviour to reveal disturbingly uncontrollable sexual forces and the way people resist and repress them at cost to their humanity. Young Goodman Brown walking through a forest comes across a witches Sabbath at which he is shocked to recognize his neighbours and townspeople whom he had always looked up to and respected taking part enthusiastically in an orgy. The effect of this experience, which might only have been a dream, turns him into a silent, unforgiving and rigidly moralistic pillar of the community.

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On the night streets of Karlsruhe homeless people shelter from the cold in the underpass leading to the station. A gypsy plays the violin in a corner. He reminds me of Chagall's *Fiddler on the Roof*.

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In Mariahilf, a small town in the Alps of Eastern Austria, a large baroque cathedral stands on top of a hill. Over the centuries local people have reported visions of the Virgin Mary. Pilgrimages were made there and the cathedral prospered. A special room, known as the Schatzkammer (Treasure Cabinet), is devoted to a priceless collection of jewels, gold and silver gifts. Emperors and Pope John Paul have made the journey and paid their respects at Mariahilf.

The interior of the cathedral is elaborately decorated in baroque style with massive carved and gilded altarpieces and larger than life size marble statues of saints lining the aisles.

What makes the cathedral strikingly different from others is what has been relegated to the annexes and staircases leading up to and around the balconies: a collection of hundreds of folk paintings painted in primitive style by local artists, mostly peasants, who have worshipped at the cathedral ever since the miraculous appearances began.

The paintings depict the Virgin Mary as she appeared to these poor people at times of crisis, distress, accident and illness, saving them from death and harm. Within their limited techniques the artists painted the scenes as accurately as possible. Sick people sit in bedsteads in dark sparsely furnished rooms. The pictures portray grinding poverty, ill health and daily struggle, despair and also stoic acceptance.

The contrast with the glittering reredos inside the cathedral, the healthily muscled saints in flowing robes, and the silver and jewelled ornaments in the Schatzkammer only emphasizes the grim reality of ordinary people's lives outside the place of worship.

What connects them is the Virgin Mary. Placed at the centre of the cathedral's densely ornate altarpiece, her image is dressed in a thick robe encrusted with pearls and precious stones. In the paintings she appears not as a creature of the artists' and people's imagination but as a replica of this 'dolly', a sumptuously embroidered tea cosy suspended like an extra-terrestrial in a halo of light in the background or corner of each picture. In many pictures a pale sick figure in night cap and shirt rises up in bed arms stretching into the darkness towards this bizarre vision; in others, figures in

a gloomy landscape escaping an accident, a broken bridge, a rock fall, or an overturned carriage, point to the same ethereal but comfortingly familiar image floating distantly in a cloudy sky.

The discrepancy between the faithfully observed details of everyday life depicting the cramping meanness of poverty in pictures relegated to the walls outside the area of worship and the vision of the Virgin Mary, borrowed from the intimidating grandeur of the cathedral interior, turns the excessive glamour and glory of the cathedral into a disturbing sham. The pictures are a reproach to an all-powerful institution which can offer no substantial solution to the people's needs. The pomp on show in Mariahilf Cathedral looks hollow in the presence of these chronicles of indigent lives.

When my grandmother took me with one of her elderly friends on a daytrip to Mariahilf, they were enthralled by the wealth on display in the Schatzkammer, and examined approvingly the herbal brandies on sale, black and nasty-looking concoctions that purported to cure a variety of complaints. But they were ashamed of the pictures; their presence in the side spaces of the cathedral like a disreputable tramp lurching into a posh restaurant and upsetting the diners.

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THE TOWER OF BABEL

The city of Paris interrupted these thoughts about the suppression of emotion and the oppression of people, all to make and preserve the stability of a society. People in Paris are not over-awed by the scale of their city. Crowds swarm along the boulevards, over squares and parks, past acres of monumental buildings. People stroll, run, squeeze, shove, sit and even lie down; they teem in every shape and colour. Underground in the labyrinthine metro they crush together looking boldly into each other's eyes.

The passage from the metro to the main station at Gare Montparnasse turns into a gigantic man-built space, miles of corridors branching in every direction leading to

escalators and further corridors where the crowds become an army of insects flowing in perpetual movement.

The scene reminds me of the Tower of Babel. In both of his paintings of this Old Testament parable about the overweening vanity and ambition of man attempting to match God, the 16th century Flemish artist Pieter Breughel depicted an intimidating colossal structure ascending ever higher into the clouds, never to be completed, while at its base, already decaying, the foundations start to crumble and rot. A sinister mystery broods over Breughel's tower: what goes on inside? Behind the massive façade lurks a cavernous space or perhaps thousands of corridors, stairs and rooms. What are people doing in there? Could Breughel be describing the oppressive bureaucracy of empire at a time when Spain was crushing Flanders? His pictures are prophetic about future bureaucracies, complex administrations that like Franz Kafka's *Castle*, create their own immutable laws where human beings are diminished into insignificance, the structure of society taking over.

Ant-like people move over the surface of the tower, lifting scaffolding to the next storey, building, repairing and devoting their lives to the never-ending construction. Ships bring materials from overseas to support the economy dependent on the tower. In its shadow stand the workers' homes, falling into neglect because the colossus sucks all labour to itself.

In the foreground the King deigns to make an appearance, in crown and robes, looking over the heads of his menial subjects, the architects who kneel humbly before him and seem to be saying: 'It is an honour, your majesty, to sacrifice our lives and offer you our skills, obeying your orders to build this huge tower whose purpose is not clear, where no one can live and with its heart of darkness.'

Is the tower meant to intimidate enemies and neighbours? At present it subdues the people who are so preoccupied with its structure that they have no time to realize it has taken over their lives. In the original Jewish story God destroys the tower to punish man's vaulting ambition and teach him not to take God's place in creation. But the story's insight that speaks to us in more secular times warns that if we allow the systems and structures of authority to take charge, they will crush and obliterate

humanity. The end of the story has another warning. In destroying the tower, God also disperses the community who built it, scattering the people over the world. They then speak different languages and are unable to communicate with each other.

In the New Testament Jesus takes further some of the insights that lie at the core of the Old Testament story, concerning the Jew's relation with his God, a covenant that has to be continuously negotiated and frequently comes to grief when we demand too much. He declares in one parable after the other that if we forget our humanity, our lives become meaningless. 'The Kingdom of God is like...' he invariably starts a story, describing not a never-land beyond the skies but a reality within reach where people can live in harmony with each other and the world.

Breughel's picture roots the story in solid ground. The tower looms and crushes. We realize, numb with the chill of recognition, that we have been living in it all our lives.

A celebrated fairytale from the Brothers Grimm collection, *The Fisherman and his Wife*, offers a stark version of the Tower of Babel's warning about human ambition, but the simplicity of its telling and domestic context leave a perplexingly ambiguous conclusion. A poor fisherman catches a magic fish which grants wishes. The man has no wish of his own, content with his existence, but his wife has ambitions. The fish grants her one wish after the other. They get richer and go up in the world. First she becomes a middleclass woman with pretensions, then rises to the aristocracy, is crowned king and eventually pope. Not satisfied with being the most powerful person on earth she wants to be God. At this point the magic fish tells the husband: 'Go home, her wish has been granted.' They are back where they started, sitting in poverty. Beyond its disturbing misogyny ('women are never satisfied') and the story's sour take on ambition crossing class barriers there is an ambiguous insight about the nature of the creator of the universe. On the one hand we have a morality tale: overweening ambition is punished. The fisherman and his wife could have had plenty, and lived in comfort for the rest of their lives, if the wife had not been so greedy and dissatisfied. But there is another way of reading the story. Kings and popes may enjoy earthly power, but the creator of the universe is different. God sits with us in our primeval state long before we have begun to lay the foundations for the Tower of Babel.

This fairytale in its original version, taken down verbatim in its pungent North German dialect by the Brothers Grimm, has the incantatory power of a spell. The epic journey from rags to riches to rags is told briefly with no elaboration or detail.

It ends:

‘And there they sit to this day.’

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OPENING THE FORBIDDEN DOOR

As the train to Chartres glides out of Paris, again I notice birches everywhere, but now the tips of twigs an intense crimson as though the trees had blood instead of sap. Early fruit blossom and willow catkins sprinkle over the suburban sprawl.

Versailles suddenly appears like a fairytale vision settled temporarily on the landscape: blink an eyelid and it may vanish.

Mistletoe hangs in heavy clumps on bare trees. Once upon a time pagan ceremonies took place here, the mistletoe being a sacred plant in the worship.

Two lively young Japanese men are leaping up and down the compartment. They are also on the way to Chartres and appoint me their guide.

Their animation is down to high spirits, but it expresses my own excitement, a sense of drawing the threads of my journey together at last, the end station of my pilgrimage.

As an artist I know only too well the chasm between the ‘idea’ and its ‘execution’. The difficulties can be insurmountable and the achievement always falls far short of the original vision. Chartres Cathedral represents a victory over impossible odds. People once dreamed up the idea of this colossal monument, a representation of God’s

heaven on earth, and then set out with a supreme effort of architectural and building skills and dogged human labour to make the dream real.

I thought of this moment throughout my journey, drawing on memory and reading, now I need to experience the building, to feel the stone and see the colours.

Auschwitz has left too little visible evidence to help bear sufficient witness to the magnitude of that atrocity, and what remains is disappearing. What filled the gaps and empty spaces has to be learned and imagined. In Chartres, on the other hand, there will be too much to see. But in both places I need to read between the contours to understand better what these places signify for humanity.

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Chartres appears in the distance, the cathedral squatting like a broody hen over the town. It overlooks the wide flat plains all round and can be seen from miles away.

I lead the Japanese men through the town with its main street named after Jean Moulin, a famous leader of the Resistance in World War Two. The road curves as it ascends the hill and the cathedral appears three times, each time closer: a dramatic approach as finally it suddenly rears up in front of one, the walls, buttresses and towers straining and lifting off into the sky. The cathedral at Köln on the Rhine crushes black and heavy on the ground, its colossal mass earthbound. Chartres, though equally large and heavy, gives the impression of floating, the buttresses like wings unfurled and soaring, the light grey stone seeming insubstantial.

The Japanese men stay only a short while in the cathedral. Perhaps they find it too intimidating, dark and cluttered inside, a shock after the airy lightness outside where the elaborate carvings in the porches emerge mysteriously but organically out of the blankness of the surrounding walls, like stone coming to life. The interior of the cathedral is so full of accretions, late gothic, baroque and romantic additions that it is difficult to experience the space as it was originally intended: a vast emptiness surrounded by tier on tier of jewel-like windows.

After gazing admiringly at the stained glass for a while as they would an exquisite gown adorning a fashion model, the Japanese men leave.

Meanwhile a teacher is painstakingly explaining the cathedral to a group of silently gaping schoolchildren. She sits with her back to one of the windows and slowly recreates a story illustrated by the myriad panes of glittering glass behind her, one she knows intimately from years of pilgrimage here. She does not even need to look, and the children lift their heads, stop chewing their gum and follow the story spellbound. Like a seasoned actress, her arms gesture, her grey head wags and shakes. The cathedral radiates from her like the sunlight pouring through the window as though it had waited all these centuries for her alone to take possession.

‘What do you see Joseph doing now?’ she asks the children, her eyes closed and finger pointing directly behind her to a tiny detail in the upper portion of the window. ‘The brothers have come, do you see them? They do not recognize him, once the favoured son with a beautiful multi-coloured coat. Years of famine have brought them to this humiliation. He has them now in his power...’

I look up and can barely make out in the distant heights a tableau of several medieval figures standing in a group. It could mean anything: a meeting, a discourse. Listening to her enactment I begin to notice the colours, gestures and purpose of this little scene within the larger scheme of the whole window.

‘He feels anger, indignant at what they had done to him. He could demand anything from them, and they would have had to give, they would have given gladly, so desperate were they...’

All eyes but hers are fixed on the distant splashes of colour.

‘He forgives them. He embraces them! He showers them with gifts. But how do they really feel?’

After about an hour the teacher suddenly slaps the stone floor with her hands and asks the still attentive children: ‘Have you had enough? Shall we take a break, go outside,

breath some fresh air? Shall we go up the tower, or do you want to look at another window?’

‘Another window!’ they cry out as one.

My own limbs are feeling the need of exercise, but the group move to a different part of the cathedral, settle in a relaxed heap and make their indefatigable teacher continue entralling them.

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Outside, gardeners race motor-mowers over the fresh spring green lawns and rake soil preparing it for summer bedding plants. The sun shines warmly on the cathedral square which now teems with school children. Some are attempting to sketch the West Front. Tourists sun themselves. A family of doves are making a nest in one of the gargoyles.

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In *Mary's Child*, opening the forbidden door is an act of disobedience. However the girl for a moment does see the glory of God. This glimpse leaves a mark; her finger is covered in gold, evidence that contradicts her lie, and she is thrown out of heaven. The experience transfigures her, a momentary vision which changes her life. Adam and Eve, original man and woman, also experienced the harmony and beauty of the Garden of Eden. As they struggled afterwards to create an earthly existence, their memory of the perfect balance of human beings and nature would inspire generations of people for ever after. The moral behind the most memorable stories in the Old Testament implies that life with all its suffering, injustice and perpetual conflict is the result of insubordination, defiance of divine will, and that ever since, the main desire of all people is to recover that perfect harmony: what we call happiness. However, the need for knowledge is an essential part of human nature, even at the cost of losing paradise. The vision of heaven remains and provides our ultimate consolation that one day we will return, even if only after death.

Meanwhile the substantial splendour of Chartres Cathedral, the mysterious lightness of the Sulejmanija Mosque, the austere beautiful Zen gardens of Buddhist Japan and richly carved Hindu temples try to recapture the memory of paradise.

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Suddenly the ghost of Victor, my Russian visitor, haunted me again, burdening my conscience.

Victor came from Ekaterinenburg in Russia, on the edge of the Urals at the far Eastern border of Europe. Communists assassinated the last Tsar's family there and renamed the town Sverdlovsk after a General of the Russian Revolution. At the collapse of the Soviet Union Victor began working for a firm selling insurance to people with limited resources who were frightened about their future. Panicked by the country's and his own economic insecurity he established contact with a number of older correspondents in England with the intention of visiting as soon as possible to find help and support. His letters which ended in perfunctory expressions of affection and teasing promises seethed with bitter frustration at the corruption in Russia where people like himself could not compete with gangsters and former Communist and KGB officers who were ruthlessly creating new positions of influence for themselves. Victor hissed at their inordinate wealth while the majority of other Russians struggled to survive and many were even starving and dying. He wrote with heavy sarcasm about those newly prosperous businessmen who took their loot abroad, to live extravagantly on the Cote d'Azur, in Paris and London.

Despite misgivings but curious about meeting a Russian and ashamed at hesitating to help someone in need, his various contacts in England invited him to stay. He went from one to the other, repelled at having to sleep with them and when he came to me shut himself in the guest room, smoked several packets of cigarettes, listened to pop music on his small radio and leafed through piles of gay magazines while consuming one orange after the other.

He showed no interest in culture. Museums and history were irrelevant to him. He insisted on me taking him to the Motor Show in Earls Court and spent all day

wandering knowledgeably among the BMWs ('every Russian's dream car,' he said), Rolls and Mercedes. He joined the multitudes gazing at what few of them could ever afford. This was art they understood and appreciated. Victor sat in various cars, pretending to be driving and looking into my camera with a haughty expression to give the impression of owning them. The rest of the time we spent gathering stacks of glossy leaflets and brochures to take back home. 'I get good money for these in Russia,' he whispered hoarsely, 'Grab as many as you can.' I imagined men like him in shabby jackets and old jeans poring over the sleek images of perfection, stroking the shiny paper as though it too were an unattainable luxury.

'You can keep your museums,' he said dismissively. 'I prefer the smell of money. I want to breathe the air of business and success.' He wandered spellbound through the City of London, staring at the monumental buildings, the heavy plate glass and glittering chrome. He returned from his pilgrimage, eyes shining as at a revelation, like mine do after visiting Chartres. For a while he walked on air, feeling himself to be a man of consequence. Then the reality of his life dragged him down to the vain attempt at squeezing into his travel sack the bumph he had collected. His face crimson with frustration he had to discard valuable material and personal effects. Staggering under the weight and choking with rage and disappointment he leaned exhausted against the wall of Piccadilly Underground, resisting assistance and advice. The discrepancy between his poverty and the dream he experienced in the City intensified his distress.

'What do you want of me?' he cried out, not only to me but to all the people passing.

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'This is one of the best things we ever did,' I found myself inadequately describing Chartres to the Japanese hairdresser brothers earlier as we approached the city. They scampered around the train carriage, taking photographs and smiling enthusiastically at everybody. The elder one put his arm around me and the younger one took pictures. On their first visit to Europe they wanted to see the most important places.

But neither of them spoke or understood much English, far less any language other than their own. So my words flowed over them meaninglessly, and they responded only to my emotions, gestures, tone of voice and the tears in my eyes.

Perhaps like me they should have gone to Auschwitz as well. It might not have helped them comprehend the cathedral any better, but they might have learned about a European culture that planned and executed acts of unimaginable cruelty and mass murder on the one hand and on the other created works of such beauty they seem to exceed way beyond all bounds of human ability.

I explained how the cathedral had been built many centuries ago at a time when none of the other elegant houses now surrounding it existed: people lived then in wooden or mud huts. The huge structure must have seemed even more extraordinary than it does now. A wave of cathedral building like this passed over all of Europe throughout that period of the Middle to Late Middle Ages. I talked about Crusades, the wars with the East, the brute violence, the attempt to recapture Jerusalem and the forging of European identity as a Christian continent, protecting it for centuries from conquest by Islam. I described how the Crusaders brought home booty, the knowledge, skills and inspiration to build these cathedrals which celebrated both the victories and the influence of the culture they were fighting. The Japanese brothers listened and their inscrutable eyes glazed over. They understood nothing.

We looked for a while at the two towers that dominate the cathedral and the town, one plain and modest, the other encrusted with detailed decoration. It could be that money ran out for completion of the second tower, but the contrast between the two gives the cathedral its particular character, the austere and the flamboyant in permanent tension. The building inside and out vibrates with dialogue and tension, dark and light, sober and ebullient, earthy and sublime.

I pointed out the tumult of carvings over the porches as we entered the cathedral, the minutely observed details, variety of facial expression, flowing gestures and robes, animals and mythical beasts, reflecting both the world of what the artists saw and that of the imagination. I told the Japanese brothers about the pagan site and sacred well on which the cathedral was raised, how therefore the building celebrated its original

pagan source as well as including ideas from all known beliefs and cultures in a cosmic embrace. The zodiac and other non-Christian mysteries are woven into the familiar images of saints, prophets, the nativity and crucifixion.

Covering a large area of floor in the cathedral a labyrinth coils like a massive snake beneath the soaring vault of the interior. Pilgrims on arrival would have followed the priest in a sacred dance, stepping from one polished stone to the next, slowly leading to the centre of the labyrinth.

Above in the murky darkness warriors and bishops look down from ranks of stained glass windows. Leaning on heavy swords stained with blood, clad in muddied armour and robes, their wide open eyes blaze directly at us with the manic intensity of battles won and lost. Perhaps it is the grime of centuries that make these figures look as though they had dragged a continent back home with them. Some look half-crazed from the experience: slaughtering and looting having turned these scions of medieval chivalry into psychopaths. They instil terror and are a disturbing reminder of a particularly violent history: the period when the cathedral was built.

Below these fearsome portraits and dominating the interior of the cathedral, the celebrated windows hang suspended in darkness, immense areas of intensely coloured light, solid yet fragile. The proportion of glass to surrounding stone had been planned with care to allow the basic simplicity of the building's structure to allow for a seemingly infinite variety of detail and embellishment. Set well apart each window can display its individuality without encroaching on the aura surrounding its neighbours.

The Japanese brothers listened to me talking about the shape and order of the windows, the circular and spiral patterns which are the dominating structural feature and framework for the numerous narratives and scenes. I led their eyes from the lower images of everyday activity, workers carrying out their daily tasks, up to the exalted regions where the saints congregate. I wanted the brothers to appreciate the subtlety of the links between the ordinary and the sublime, connected by circles and spirals. There is no differentiation between the dimensions of real life and the imagination. Earth and heaven are linked.

The brothers may not have understood or been interested. Before they left, Osamu, the elder brother, pointed at the Rose Window above the West Porch. At that moment the sun was blazing through so the magnificent expanse of glass seemed to float in the blackness like a gigantic cluster of jewels. They stood momentarily transfixed; then left to catch the next train to Paris, on to other sights and experiences.

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Blue permeates the cathedral dedicated to Mary the mother of Jesus. Occasional flashes of crimson and scarlet startle and draw attention to a particular story or event. The blue and the uncomplicated proportions of the building - pillars soaring to a distant carved ceiling, wide arches between them balancing their phallic thrust with large circular shapes. Together with the artfully judged spaces between the windows they create a unity in which the details are allowed to proliferate and the artists and craftsmen are free to express themselves without restriction. This epic minimalism combined with a firework display of unfettered imagination gives the impression of a perpetually renewing creative process expanding like the universe itself.

The monumental simplicity finds its most sublime expression in the labyrinth. The original concept of the cathedral filled with light and colour would have taken into account each person experiencing the space like a baby in the mother's womb. Standing one after the other at the end of the labyrinth these worshippers would have momentarily felt themselves to be at the centre of the universe. Far from being diminished by the staggering scale of the cathedral, they would have felt empowered. At that spot heaven and earth, the human and the divine meet and flow through us.

Chairs now cover the nave and conceal the labyrinth. Baroque additions clutter the interior. In its original state the cathedral would have been an exceptionally awe inspiring empty space with two storeys of large stained glass windows leading to and away from three boldly conceived and executed rose windows to the North, South and West. Around the sanctuary in the East End the windows group closer together, tall and slim. The effect of this steady accumulation of light in the most sacred part of the cathedral can only be guessed at now, since the accretions of centuries block out this

essential ingredient of the original design. The additions darken the building and oppress. It requires an individual act of the imagination to experience and assimilate the cathedral in its original state.

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There is an exhibition of sculptures in a small room above the sanctuary. Here it is possible to examine closely the delicacy of skill and imagination. The mother touches her baby in the manger with outstretched fingers, reassuringly and tenderly. Meanwhile the animals munch the hay from the same manger and keep a nervous watchful eye on the unexpected interloper lying there. Nearby three kings share a bed, lying one on top of the other in an abstract perspective that links them as companions and allows each their own personality. An angel greets them with a warning gesture not to return to Herod. Dream and reality are expressed in a single image.

All the sculptures have been mutilated, heads missing, limbs chopped. I asked the concierge why.

‘La révolution!’ she said.

This work of imagination is on the one hand indestructible: we can still understand and appreciate its meaning even in mutilated form. On the other hand the cathedral’s history gives a terrifying example of how years of patient labour and skilful rendering can be demolished in one instant by a single stroke of an axe, a stick of dynamite and a lighted match.

I sat in Chartres Cathedral and thought about Auschwitz.

A painful strand of my journey finds itself connected here.

From cathedrals like this priests and bishops blessed crusaders on their way to distant foreign countries where they made the streets run with blood. The vision of the cathedral existed, then as now, hand in hand with atrocity.

There is nothing new in the fact that religious institutions have produced the extremes of both bigotry and beauty. Looking at the building and the windows of Chartres I began to see how the two are inter-related.

Crusaders went to fight a people whose culture had reached a peak at a time traditionally described as our European Dark Ages. The sublime works of Islamic art and science inspired these same crusaders. The knowledge, skills and imagination of the enemy culture found its way back across Europe into the design of cathedrals.

Not only Islam. My eyes opened to the inclusiveness of Chartres. Jewish stories and pagan mysteries accompany the Christian themes. From the time of the cathedral's creation people experienced themselves framed and embraced by a blend of sturdy and delicate patterns in the windows, their own lives celebrated in depictions of artisans working, peasants tending vines and driving carts, all part of a cosmic setting for a multitude of narratives. Far from being out of place in the predominantly Christian drama of birth, life and death, of miracles and healing, crucifixion and resurrection, these portraits of ordinary people, mostly at eye level, ground the metaphysical teachings. We recognize ourselves and become part of a universal story that is both true to recognizable life as lived and also expressed in a spiritual dimension. Our eyes look up through so many stories and events being depicted, to the distant heights of the cathedral where we can barely make out what is happening between the angels, God, Jesus, Mary his mother and the Holy Spirit.

In the cathedral's West End a tree of life dominates the Jesse window, which traces the genealogy of Jesus back through generations of the Old Testament. The vigorously flowing decorative lines gather into the massive artery of a sturdy tree, burgeoning into foliage, branches twining and stretching, blood coursing like sap.

The intricate convolutions reminded me of decorative motifs in Muslim architecture. The exuberantly sweeping, curving and dancing lines at first mesmerized then suddenly agitated me. I thought of Auschwitz and the ferocity of hatred. It seems not enough for people to hate what they fear and can not understand and tolerate. They need to express this in a rapture of violence that knows no bounds. There is no limit

to the variety and extent of torture and killing, as refined and exhilarating to the perpetrators as the patterns, images and colours in these Chartres windows were to the artists who created them.

The outstretched naked figure of Jesus, tortured, suffering and vulnerable, the image that defines Christianity and permeates Christian art, appears in a number of windows. However it is the nurturing image of Mary the Mother who dominates the place. Jesus is represented in miniature; Mary is depicted larger than any other figure. She owns the building and dictates its significance. The celebrated Chartres blue of her robes washes across all the windows spreading her touch throughout the cathedral. She gathers and releases from these folds pagan symbols, stories from the Jewish Old Testament and Christian New Testament, all linked and framed within a ceaseless flow of extravagantly varied patterns.

These decorative framings reminded me of the sinuous lines in Islamic art. This reached a peak at the time of the Crusaders. Muslims then were feared for their courage and military prowess, but also famed for their civilization and tolerance. They assimilated and treasured the science and philosophy of lands they had conquered, preserving and developing the newly acquired knowledge and carrying it into the future. Then what seemed to them barbarians from the West invaded their empire. Vandals from Europe rampaged through sacred places, wave after wave laying waste, but taking home with them new skills and inspiration.

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GOOD AND EVIL AND THE TREE OF LIFE

The fake preacher in Charles Laughton's film *Night of the Hunter* has the words 'good' and 'evil' tattooed on his knuckles. Knocking his fists together he explains to his step-children how good and evil are engaged in a perpetual struggle, one gaining dominance over the other. The preacher words issuing from the mouth of a vicious rapacious psychopath make the familiar biblical homilies sound hollow. Criminals, charlatans and politicians perpetually use them to justify their actions, simplifying arguments to black and white, right and wrong. The preacher's congregation is persuaded, and politicians who claim to be honest with the best interests of the

country at heart win votes by forcing people to take sides, choosing right over wrong. So hypocrisy and deception rob these concepts of their meaning and the words need constantly to be reclaimed. The psychopath masquerading as a preacher can only understand the relationship between good and evil, two sides of human nature, in terms of a violent battle. He comes up against a deceptively tough, strong-minded but frail looking woman who expresses a softer approach of tolerance, understanding and nurture to life. When one of her children allows herself to be seduced and dumped, the woman instead of castigating her, showers her with even more love and attention, because she understands the orphaned girl's emotional needs. These protagonists, the strong man and the frail woman, confront each other over two children, a boy and a girl. He just wants money hidden in the girl's doll; she wants to protect them. They use the same biblical language. At the final battle of wills he begins to chant the Southern Baptist hymn: *Leaning, leaning, safe and secure from all alarms. Leaning, leaning, leaning on the everlasting arms.* After a pause the woman joins in. However the words have a different resonance for each of them. He is trying to lull the children into defenceless trust so he can seize the doll. By determinedly joining in the hymn, the woman is reclaiming its meaning. Finally the woman has to take a rifle and calls the police. However, just as the officers wrestle the man to the ground the boy remembers the brutal arrest of his own father at the start of the film; he breaks down and bursts into tears for the first time. He rushes over to protect the man he had been fleeing shouting: 'Stop! Stop! Let him go!' He demands an end to violence and is prepared to save the enemy who would have killed him. Humanity trumps deceit, hypocrisy and greed.

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Looking at the branches spreading through the Jesse Window in the West End of Chartres I was reminded of another tree in a story which attempts to reconcile the aggressive destructive and the vulnerable peaceful sides of human nature.

This story comes towards the end of a scrupulously crafted book, the final work of Nizami, a poet who lived in 12th century Iran and is celebrated in his home country chiefly for the classic love story of *Layla and Majnun*. The *Khamsa*, the posthumous edition of his complete writings, illustrated by some of the most exquisite examples of

Persian miniature painting, is revered as a national art treasure and the unique insights of his poetry and story-telling have not found the universal recognition he deserves. This masterpiece of world literature, distils the wisdom of the cultures Nizami knew, from all corners of the world which then converged on the Middle East, the crossroads between East and West, North and South. He shunned fame, living a modest life away from the court, despite lavish blandishments, and described his work as a life-time's experience, 'swallowed whole like a snake, digested slowly and then given words.'

The *Seven Stories* deal with the main things we want and need to know about ourselves: our desire for sex, money, survival and control of our lives, and how our attempts to achieve what we want frequently come at a cost to our better nature. Nizami offers no glib moral conclusions; he sees no easy solutions to perennial human dilemmas but his deceptively simple carefully crafted narratives reveal sharp insights into the way we behave and express unfaltering sympathy for the human condition, a compassion that provides hope in a world he perceives as a tragic scenario we ourselves created.

The *Seven Stories* lead up to the penultimate one (the last one being a sunny and witty romp to round off the collection with a smile). The penultimate story deals with good and evil.

Some are Born to sweet delight

Some are Born to endless night.

William Blake's words from his poem *Auguries of Innocence* could describe the two characters in Nizami's sixth story, named simply *Good and Evil*.

Good and Evil, two merchants, embark on a long and dangerous trek across a desert. Evil has prepared well for the journey and conceals provisions while taking advantage of Good's generosity, accepting his food and water until the provisions are used up. Evil then allows Good to starve and die slowly of thirst. Good realizes too late Evil's duplicity, noticing Evil taking furtive sips from a hidden flask.

The harrowing description of what follows addresses the ferocity of what men can do to each other. Good offers money and all his possessions, jewels, for one sip of Evil's water. Evil laughs at the bargain and mocking Good's stupid trustfulness declares that the only jewels he desires are the eyes in Good's face. Good in desperation agrees. 'Scarcely were the words out of his mouth than Evil had pulled out a knife and like a tornado, leapt upon the unfortunate man and in a flash stabbed him in both eyes.' He then robs him of everything without giving him the agreed refreshment, runs off and leaves Good to die.

As he is about to give up the ghost Kurd nomads appear and rescue him. A healing tree grows in the desert, and only they know of its whereabouts. The leaves made into a poultice gradually bring back Good's sight. There is a particular poignancy concerning the part played by Kurds in the story. Nizami's mother was a Kurd. The race has always been a persecuted minority in the countries where they live.

Good nurtured back to health has become part of the community, but he feels unworthy, having lost all his wealth, become a man of no consequence and unable to repay the generosity of his hosts and saviours. He has also fallen in love with the chieftain's daughter, so to avoid the pain of heartbreak he announces his departure. But the Kurds will have none of it. They make him stay. He marries the daughter and using the same leaves of the tree that cured his eyes, becomes a celebrated healer in the region. He is welcome wherever he goes, ends up with several wives and leads a successful existence. There follows one final encounter with Evil.

The outcome has disturbing implications and gives the story its bleak resolution.

Evil has fallen on hard times and in their last meeting Good has Evil in his power. Evil appeals to Good's better nature and easily persuades him that since fate has decreed their natures, it will always be in Good's character to forgive. Evil goes free.

However the Kurd chieftain has overheard their conversation and in a fury that Evil should escape his crimes, pounces on the man and slices him in two with his sword.

John Ford in his film *The Man who shot Liberty Valance* also examines the dilemma of how to contain lawless violence in a society that is attempting to be liberal and humane. The film is a parable about the creation of a civilized society out of the chaos of the Wild West. It is the town vigilante who delivers the crucial shot which kills the source of chaos and prepares the way for civilized order. In Westerns bad people are given a choice. They can be redeemed.

For Nizami however evil is inherent to the natural order. There is no question of redemption. Evil in its ferocity is incapable of transformation. Nizami therefore places particular emphasis on the necessity of healing to preserve the best of human nature in the face of implacable destructive forces. He describes this crucial process in the epilogue to the story.

Each of the seven stories is framed by a prologue and epilogue, setting the scene within a framework of cosmic significance. A woman from seven corners of the world, each representative of a different culture and tradition, tells a story on a different day of the week under the sway of its guardian stars and specific colour. Nothing is arbitrary. Nizami takes care to match the moods and qualities of each story so the whole book reflects a universal order.

At the end of the story of Good and Evil Nizami takes particular pains to elaborate the scene setting for what he seems to have considered the climax of the whole book. For the first time he brings the main character into the cosmic frame. The epilogue recalls the vision from the Jewish Old Testament about the nature of heaven where opposites meet in peace: the lamb lies down with the lion and the child plays near the snake's hole. Nizami also writes paradoxically, stressing a utopian vision – 'utopia' being a place that can never exist. *Thorns became fruit, stones became gold, iron became silver, sackcloth became silk.*

Nizami's final three sentences go: *Good often went on a journey to that place in the desert where he would stand and contemplate, greet and bless each inch of ground in the middle of which stood the tree whose leaves restored his sight. This tree provides the breath of life and gives the spirit peace. Its properties liberate us from fever and aches, and take from the soul its afflictions.*

STONES

The smoke of bombed cities and millions of bodies clouds the ideals which inspired our imagination to create Chartres. These got lost at the end of the single track. But somewhere in the murmuring forests of Thuringia and under the beech tree outside Leutenberg, resounding in gaps once inhabited by souls, I heard the echo of a human sensibility which recognized that there is a home for everyone in this world.

The sad gaps remind me of ruins with their holes and fissures. Then I look at the stones between the various porches with their abundant carvings at Chartres. They cover expanses of empty wall and seem to invite our own addition. Chartres remains a work of art in progress. Nothing can be added, or should be added, but the cathedral encourages our involvement. Its cornucopia of images, forms and colours are nothing without our presence. As the labyrinth makes clear, the original purpose was to bring each individual worshipper and pilgrim in direct communication with the divine inspiration that created the building. Like modern works of conceptual art that gain significance when we open ourselves, communicate and enter them, touch the material, and become actors in their drama, the cathedral comes alive only when we participate.

The contemporary composer Alfred Schnittke composed these gaps and empty spaces. Ruins of Baroque, Classical and Romantic music rear up and crumble in his scores like the rubble of cities after war. His pieces focus on the silences between. On the one hand they mourn for the past and on the other the silences provide a space for new ideas. But the music is also a question mark. Will the future be any better? Can we move from such catastrophic destruction to shaping the world into a more peaceful and fairer place?

My aunt, surviving Auschwitz and the death-march that took her back to a ruined Germany, for a brief moment permitted herself to hope that mankind had learnt its lesson. She persuaded herself for that instant that after the carnage and bombing

everyone would agree to create a new world order without wars and persecution. She felt then that the same disastrous mistakes could not be repeated: all peoples should be free to live in harmony, justice and peace.

She soon realized that nothing had been learnt. In fact the horrors of Auschwitz and the laying waste of cities had only broken new ground, and somehow legitimized genocide and atrocities which would be repeated and perhaps even exceeded in the future. She observed the Cold War's stand off with Communism and the crushing of dissent allowing Germany to forget its past. War criminals were treated with comparative leniency in comparison with the severity of the punishment meted out to members of the Red Army Faction, although their crimes could not be compared in either scale or ferocity. And when the Berlin War came down, the hounding of communist leaders turned out to be more intense and self-righteous than the grudging indictment of Nazi criminals.

My aunt had planned on emigration to Israel but watched in despair how the new Jewish state oppressed and crushed the Palestinians. 'They behave like Nazis,' she exclaimed, and quoted the current joke comparing the Israeli and the Third Reich armies: 'They are the same; one is just blonder and taller than the other.' She hoped to live in the United States but watched the Americans take on the role of world policemen, interfering and crushing wherever they perceived threats to their economic interests. Despised races were no longer being liquidated in concentration camps, but the world had divided between the rich and poor, the more prosperous West keeping everyone else at bay, controlling resources and keeping the poor underprivileged. 'So much for the new world order!' she would exclaim with a sarcastic laugh.

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Bridge over Troubled Waters plays in the Bistro Bonne Nouvelle by Rue de Faubourg de Montmartre where I sit thinking about good and evil, Auschwitz and Chartres. The Simon and Garfunkel song has accompanied me most of my life, usually exacerbating my gloom, but for the first time it sounds optimistic in my ears. Now it has the effect of Bach's passion chorale when played at the end of his *Christmas Oratorio*. The hymn of grief and mourning, known in the English Hymnal as *O Sacred Head Sore*

Wounded, closes the final celebratory cantata not as a song of grief but of triumph in a crown not of thorns but of trumpets. Normally heard in a context of deep mourning this version sounding hope and celebration has the startling effect of subverting grief defiantly: Death has no sting! Good will triumph in spite of the worst that we know will happen.

The journey is finished. My eyes, wide open as a child's, look at the branches and filigree twigs of the city plane trees and follow them above the crowds of every colour and race passing me in a wide flowing unstoppable river. The branches stretch above buildings with decorative balconies no-one can use, up into the sky, blue as blue.

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AN EPILOGUE

THE FEAST

Half way across the British Channel the white cliffs of Dover come into view.

Since the building of the Channel Tunnel, ferries have been converted into floating leisure centres filled with bars, cafes and restaurants.

The boat is relatively empty. I follow an elderly salesman into the main grillroom where for a while we are the only customers.

A feast presents itself. Several joints sit snugly together: pork with crackling, beef still pink inside, lamb with a crisp skin and the juices running and a large stuffed turkey. In front of them stand a number of containers with steaming fresh-cooked vegetables, each with a separate garnish: carrots with butter and shredded orange peel, broccoli with roasted almonds, parsnips pureed with cream, beans with chunks of ham, and roasted, mashed as well as boiled new potatoes with parsley.

To the left of the display two soup tureens bubble appetizingly with mushrooms and cream. Further to the left a large salad bar extends the display, a feast in itself:

prawns in mayonnaise, dressed avocados, marinated shellfish, grated vegetables in contrasted colours, several kinds of beans, spotted, red, white and brown, each in their own dressing and separately garnished, all framed by masses of salad leaves.

To the right of the roast meats stands a large beverage counter and beyond it a display of desserts, so many and varied that the only way to choose is to shut the eyes and take whichever the hand touches first.

The elderly salesman used to crossing the channel in this way frequently serves himself swiftly with deft gestures. A timid couple who enter after us are so overawed by the excess and choice that they eat the smallest portions hurriedly and leave without availing themselves of the complementary dessert and coffee.

Staff members outnumber customers and carry on loud conversations across the dining area into the kitchen, cleaning and polishing untouched plates and glasses, planning weekend rendezvous and cracking rude jokes.

After a substantial meal the elderly salesman heaves himself away from the table and moves in the direction of duty-free.

What will happen to all this food? Over on the dessert counter chocolate mousses gleam under dollops of whipped cream, and tarts stand to attention like a line of beauty queens.

In Breughel's painting, *Land of Cockaigne*, three fat men lie in a stupor under a table. Their mouths gape open to receive food that runs towards them. A roast pig hurries along with a knife conveniently tucked in its crackling, a boiled egg staggers around with a spoon sticking out of its opened shell, tarts slither down a sloping roof and a cask of wine tilts on the edge of the table, trickling its contents into expectant jaws. This allegory on the sin of gluttony is a heavenly dream.

I shift my own stuffed carcass into one of the many lounges on this floating sugar loaf mountain. People seem ill at ease, like council flat tenants unexpectedly finding

themselves in Buckingham Palace. They keep looking over their shoulders, anxiously, in case an official should appear and tell them they ought not to be there.

A couple of elderly ladies settle next to me and rummage in carrier bags clinking with bottles. 'I've no idea why sherry should be so expensive,' grumbles one to the other.

A sweet natured disabled boy sits enthralled at the window, saliva drooling from his open mouth. His exhausted father wakes from a deep sleep while the grandfather dotes protectively on the little boy who points out a distant ship. 'It's a white cliff,' says the father.

A cloud of Japanese girls blows into the cabin. They tread so lightly, giggle and whisper so softly, shedding a delicate fragrance as they pass, they seem to be a dream. The girls surround a group of pensioners who talk in monotones and seem unimpressed by anything. Having admired the white cliffs of Dover and photographed them the girls waft out again.

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The evening before I left Paris I went to a café near my hotel for a nightcap.

The motherly patronne presided with her poodle at the cash-desk, squeezed in a corner, the cubbyhole packed with gitanes, matches, packets of condoms and cards with messages stuck to the glass. There was just one waiter: a taciturn elderly sharp-featured waiter who had probably been there since the last war. He only smiled when passing the poodle, playfully massaging its snout each time.

Customers leaned their elbows on plastic table tops and eyed one another. Two motherly looking sex workers scrutinized me. 'Is he after something, do you think?' said the larger to the slightly less large one.

A couple sat mournfully over empty wine glasses discussing problems. The girl in a faded green wrap over a brightly patterned jersey, cigarette in one hand, deliberated in

choked tones with a young man who listened attentively and held her other hand in sympathy.

A thin young man with a sallow face sat near the toilets. Long wavy hair fell around his cherubic face. He reminded me of Roland who I met in Freiburg at the beginning of my journey. This young man paid frequent visits to the toilet in order to refill a flask with water which he used to dilute the Pernod in his glass. At each return he settled himself in an elegant ritual, folding skinny legs carefully one over the other and smoothing down the folds of his immaculately pressed trousers with an exaggerated gesture of long tapering fingers.

Just as I stood up to leave a young man lurched in from the street and rushed straight to the toilet. A long shabby coat flapped loosely around his ankles. The trouser flies were already undone. Hair dishevelled, face puffy and pale, eyes watery and bloodshot from exhaustion, he glanced at me briefly in passing and with a shock I thought I recognized Victor from Russia.

The patronne and the taciturn waiter waylaid him.

They argued quietly.

Victor stood in a puddle on the dirty floor; his arms stretched out like a crucifixion and said pitifully:

‘I would like to buy something, but...’

THE END

EPILOGUE

THE DARK FOREST – A PAINTING

Four years after taking the road to Chartres I finally painted Gabi's commission.

It came at the end of a long series of other paintings. First a gallery in central London agreed to give me an exhibition: a series of tempera paintings and drawings inspired by Schubert's *Winterreise*. I began to learn the skills of tempera and etching which would enable me to tackle the theme of war, destruction and renewal in my next series of paintings depicting the twelve months of the year, the seasons, which I called the *Sleeping Soldier*.

All these pictures were building up to the *Dark Forest* which turned out to be my last completed painting in tempera.

Basically the picture is a square in a circle.

I had been painting circular pictures since my Stations of the Cross commissioned by St Peter's Church, Morden, a series which belonged to the zeitgeist of the 1960's and 70's and eventually caused a controversy in the 80's, with attacks from the then incumbent backed by criticism from the Tate Gallery, calling them the worst paintings in England, but defended by the people of the parish who understood and appreciated the way I had depicted their lives and experiences, not just illustrating a story from the past without contemporary significance. The roundels were taken down, but the judge

at a consistory court ordered that those paintings I had done directly on to the walls should not be removed.

Seven circles filled with light dominate the closed doors of a triptych commissioned from me by St James's Church, Piccadilly. They depicted the various activities of the community there. These circles were freely painted, and therefore looked more like bubbles than spheres. A wag called it the *Seven Lumps Triptych*. But I had purposely avoided making the shapes too defined; the bubbles, strong in themselves remained vulnerable to being pricked. I stipulated that the triptych be opened only on special days to reveal a view of the world as paradise, the utopian aim of the activities depicted in the circles. The balance was between what could be seen inside, not reality but something hoped for and therefore especially prone to cynical mockery, and outside the triptych, celebrating the work and ambitions of the community of St James's, lights shining in the surrounding darkness.

In the *Winterreise*, I used a variety of sizes of prepared boards, round and rectangular. Up to then I had painted circles within the rectangles, now as shapes in their own right they were liberated and could soar free of straight lines and sharp corners.

The *Sleeping Soldier* paintings turned out to be sharp edged, not circular; flowers floated across the surfaces counter-pointing the violence implicit in the theme, but deliberately only shown as an aftermath of war. This choice of shape was fundamental to the theme of macho masculinity being confined, limiting and vulnerable. The hope is for release, so the climactic pictures are of awakening (April, May and June, period of greatest growth), and in these the flowers and colours, shapes

and perspectives within the hard lines are meant to have an overwhelming effect: the thrill of new possibilities, new ways of being. Most importantly: the images indicate the soldiers are sleeping, not dead.

The twelve paintings followed the seasons of the year, a theme I had wanted to explore ever since seeing and studying the representations of the twelve months in the *Tres Riches Heures of the Duc de Berry*. In these celebrated miniatures the artist depicted human beings carrying out their work and making a home in nature that changes with every season. Most people then lived hard lives in squalor, suffering from frequent wars, diseases and capricious climate. However the paintings celebrate the beauty of nature and man's relationship to the land. Castles and palaces in the background of every picture indicate the importance of the patron who commissioned the artist. This display of wealth and the sumptuous clothes worn by processions of lords and ladies moving across the pictures give the impression of a fairytale barely touching the lives of ordinary people who carry out their daily tasks: ploughing fields, pruning vines and warming their naked legs by hot winter fires. These exquisitely perfect miniatures are ambivalent about class divisions; the artist's meticulous observation of social conditions gives the images an especial poignancy. The prominence given the peasants and their work in the foreground presents the viewer with a question. What is better and more beautiful: the complex manners and rigid hierarchies of aristocratic rituals, people confined by buildings and clothes, however magnificent, or the life of those who put food on our tables and sustain our existence? The pictures celebrate labour and the countryside but also show how the workers are tied to their masters. Everything the peasants do is for the pleasure and nourishment of their owners, elaborately dressed figures leading rarefied existences remote from

the sweat and grime of life on the land. Even in the hunting scene, the large group of lords and ladies in their finery look lost in the forest. The brutality and blood of the chase are kept in the background. The artist treats the peasants as the main players, the ones who have the closest affinity with the rhythms of nature. Before the revolution the 18th century French historian Michelet described how he sat beneath the walls of a chateau, perhaps one depicted in these paintings, and wept. He was thinking of all the peasants who had helped build this great edifice, and yet who would never be allowed to live there.

My own 'season series' is about war and nature, destruction and regeneration, and young men in the prime of their life who can be killed at any moment. The basic theme is the vulnerability of these strong, dangerous and also endangered men while they sleep, resting from battle. Each picture depicts a soldier either sleeping or awakening. Somewhere in the picture is destruction and a soldier in action. Large and vividly coloured flowers or leaves rain down on the bodies of these young men.

While working painstakingly on the *Sleeping Soldiers*, tempora being a slow process, I continued to paint roundels on other themes. Painting on a circle presents problems with perspective and balance since my representational rather than abstract, style of story-telling and illustrating a theme demands a specific standpoint, and everything within the circle must be placed with precision. I hold to a simple traditional truth that a successful picture can be viewed in any position, even upside down. After a number of clumsy attempts I finally got it right in my penultimate picture, *The Sleeping Beauty*, inspired by the Grimm's fairy tale. My self portrait looks out of a square window, prominently placed at the top of the circle, above a dead forest with

sleeping figures wrapped up in roots and branches. The window gives the picture its perspective and balance. But it is a small square. The circle still dominates the structure of the picture.



While working on *The Sleeping Beauty* I completed a commission for the journalist Jeremy Seabrook on *Utopia*, solving the problem of round and square by producing two pictures, the larger circular one above a small painting of two street boys jumping on the smoking ruins of a bombed city, the sharp edges of violence and destruction contrasting with the curves of the dominant roundel suspended above. In the main picture two naked figures with their back to us (perhaps the boys now grown up) reach hands across a meticulously painted tea time table (quoting Psalm 23, The Lord is my Shepherd: 'and he shall lay a table before mine enemies') while they gaze up at

a window whose shape is a reflection of the painting below. Nothing is in the window, no portrait, no outside beyond, just a slip of green to indicate the frail but determined sprig of hope for the future. This indicates expectation, a challenge to us. The carefully painted lovers (deliberately foreign) at the bottom of the circle indicate that we will carry on and reproduce so there is always hope. Utopia means nowhere, but it is an essential ingredient of the imagination which expresses our yearnings for a better world. On the one hand we know it is impossible, and on the other we have to believe, otherwise we just live in despair. This is the thinking behind the old Jewish vision of the lamb lying down with the lion and the child playing with his hand over the serpent's den.



The window in *The Sleeping Beauty* is my attempt to reach the heart of that archetypal tale of childhood's end, adolescent trauma and sexual awakening into adulthood which leads to recreating the world afresh. Here the slip of green has flowered and my face having looked down in sorrow on the sleeping figures stares determinedly out of the picture beyond the viewer.

Now I was ready for my last picture.



In *The Dark Forest* I searched for and found a crucial equilibrium between the square and the circle. The square must not be too big, so turning the circle merely into its frame. Both shapes had to be equal in substance and significance.

The picture is also a contrast of day and night. The square shows night and a simply sketched pair of lovers under a starlit sky with full moon. There is little detail, despite the clarity that a full moon can show, because this is visionary and also backward looking, to my previous work, years ago, when fairytales inspired most of my pictures. It is the past, a moment in most of our lives when we experienced sex and love at the same time; the world and nature observed and became part of our story. At that moment we were the stars, the centre of the universe. Depicting this vaguely as through a mist of time and memory creates a kind of template on which each viewer can impose his or her own story. That was my aim.

Bright sun illuminates the more precisely painted scenes and portraits in the surrounding circle.

These scenes illustrate the lives of my godparents Gabi and her husband Peter who commissioned the painting. It is a 20th century story of uprooted childhood, war, and unexpected journeys and upheavals, being buffeted around the world, from a settled childhood suddenly and emphatically disrupted in Germany to England, Africa and finally to New Zealand. Intellectual Peter always focused positively on the present and future, while Gabi savoured her memories as Eve might have done while spinning and Adam delved after they were ejected from paradise. An indestructible thread bound her to the past, as though uprooted, one of her roots refused to be ripped completely from its spiritual home. Gabi had no time for nostalgia. Curious and outraged about the traumatic events in the middle of the 20th century she remained

determined not to lose the thread of the culture that raised and made her despite having tried to destroy her.

The naked lovers under the night sky could be Peter and Gabi. Enthralled by DH Lawrence they spoke embarrassingly and frequently about making love outdoors.

On the left side of the picture Gabi, always fascinated by wild flowers and nature, caresses a plant. She would send me drawings of small weeds, such as Shepherd's Purse, that no one normally pays attention to and which gardeners curse. On the right side of the night scene Peter at his desk wrestles with literature and philosophy. He specialized in the most difficult texts such as the metaphysical poets, and was a fine poet in his own right. He is looking at a painting I once made illustrating Andersen's *The Shadow*. Like me he admired this alarming and prescient story about the dual nature of man, sexual repression and how sublimating desire feeds our dark side which unchecked destroys us. a theme also explored in RL Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and in Goya's etching, *The Dream of Reason Produces Monsters*. Peter approved of my interpretation: the shadow looms alarmingly over the passive figure so self absorbed in academic work he is unaware of becoming its victim.

Scenes of childhood and aging, including the Wartburg and Leutenberg castle, float around the dark forest tableau and are linked by wreathes of heartsease, poppies, wild rose, camellias, loosestrife, deep blue periwinkle, dancing aquilegia and bellflowers.

Peter and Gabi's two children, Nancy and David, dominate the structure of the painting, creating links between day and night. Nancy controls from above. She

suffered mental breakdown already as a teenager and lived most of her life in care. David converted to an extreme fundamentalist sect and rejected his parents. I depicted Nancy and David as I knew and remembered them, a girl and a boy, attractive, sensitive and lovable. David at the bottom of the picture is painting with the focused concentration of a child. Images on scraps of paper scatter upwards: the Grimm fairy tales I carried with me on my journey, *Mary's Child*, *Cat and Mouse* and the *Frog Prince*, along with Andersen's *Little Match Girl* and snap shots of the gate house at Auschwitz.

Yeshcho odno posledneye skazaniye...

(Just one more story...)

Pushkin – Pimen's Monologue from *Boris Godunov*