

**Cold Blood**  
**Chris Kraus**

Sample translation: Ruth Martin 2016

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I can easily recognise her in the old photos – I just have to find my own profile in hers: both of us have the same right-tilting, slightly unfortunate Roman nose – but I can't imagine her, my mother, as a young woman.

But she was still very young and already responsible for the pathos in our family when she came up with the red apple ritual.

It was all because of nineteen-five and the teetering Russian Empire in which we grew up. My mother always said: *annus mirabilis*. That's what nineteen-five was for her, and we never called it nineteen-o-five, because only Reich Germans said that. Time was always an organic thing for Mama, a thing with a will and an aim of its own, which could be good or evil, almost like a person. And in the eleventh year of the reign of His Most Awkward Majesty Tsar Nicholas II, any kind of order we had known went up in flames. Russia burned, from St Petersburg all the way to the most distant provinces.

My parents' home, too – the picturesque Baltic – was torched by the revolutionaries. The Hippy doesn't know what the Baltic is or was, and I say: just imagine a watery Claude Lorraine sky – fine, you won't have heard of the painter, so let's not make it complicated – a beautiful blue sky. Beneath it, a miniature edition of Canada, on the Baltic Sea, with endless wheat fields and large farms, abandoned by their fearful ranchers, who left in calashes and Sunday carriages, chased by the Vietcong. That's exactly what it felt like at the time. The rebellion was raging. The German estates all lay fallow. The Russian troops were off in Japan, busy losing an unlosable war. Latvian peasants marauded through the defenceless provinces, allying themselves with the poorest of the poor, surging onto the aristocracy's land, felling the trees, mowing their hay, storming the abandoned German manor houses and leaving heaps of dung on and under the oriental carpets.

Unlike the other pastors in his region, my grandfather, who was always known as Grandpaping, couldn't decide to flee. He would never have deserted the community entrusted to him by God – for then he would have been deserting God himself. This Grandpaping, Hubert Konstantin Solm (Huko to those who dared) is said to have been blithely working in his fruit garden one warm August evening when a troop of people came marching towards him across the meadow, bellowing and wielding scythes.

This was a familiar sight. For months, his church had been afflicted by demonstrators from Riga almost every weekend. The strangers often forced their way into the house of God carrying red flags, drums and axes, and belted out the Internationale in front of the altar. My Grandpaping thanked them for the lovely song and carried on impassively with his service. The Latvian peasants loved him because he could preach in their language and drove about the frothing province in his bone-shaking carriage and pair, refusing to let worldly imponderables keep him from his burying and mourning, comforting and admonishing, or from the obligatory come-again-soon tot of schnapps.

Once, he calmly removed one of the revolutionaries' edicts from the church door and pinned it to the door of the pigsty, because, he said, that was where it belonged. Grandpaping's portrait,

painted by my father two years before these events, used to hang above our dining table. It was a sombre pastel of an old man with bizarre side-whiskers. The balding head – framed by this snow-white chin curtain – was topped with a little pastor's cap. His features: the pale, arrogant ice-water eyes, the broad cheekbones and the slightly parted, almost sensual lips beneath the clean-shaven upper lip, reminded me of the way Moses was depicted on page 54 of our Schnorr von Carolsfeld Bible: serious, brutish and ready at all times to bring Jericho's walls tumbling down.

Beside the portrait hung the little sword that Grandpaping himself had forged and always wore under his cassock when he ascended the pulpit. He didn't want them to take him alive (for "take" he said *kriech*, in the East-Prussian-Yiddish dialect of my homeland), and he once brandished this rusty home-made article at the revolutionaries when they threatened to test their axes on the crucifix, as you might ward off vampires with self-cut birch stakes.

Grandpaping would certainly not have hesitated to ram the blade, *coram publico*, into the neck of anyone who got too close to him or to the crucified Christ. But pastor's blood in the font wouldn't have been a good advertisement for the revolution at that point, particularly as Grandpaping would have made a *bella figura* as a martyr, of that I am sure. I inherited my dramatic talent from him, but I have always lacked the defiant courage, the lonely elevation, *envers et contre tout*, that has remained so prevalent in our family and to this day still causes infinite misfortune.

Grandpaping's precaution - preaching the word of God with a sword in his pocket - was both grotesque and sensible. A revolver in his pocket would of course have been even more grotesque, and even more sensible.

But when Grandpaping was standing in the violet glow of his garden on that aforementioned summer evening, beside and beneath the fruit trees, and saw the mob buzzing towards him like a plague of mosquitos, he had no weapon to hand but a basket of freshly picked red apples. *Svaigiaboli* they are called in Latvian, what a lovely word.

Perhaps the situation might have ended differently if my grandfather had used that word, or some other word from this rich, wonderful language, which knows no swearwords, since "black snake" is the worst thing you can say to another person in Latvian. If my grandfather had stayed quiet, humble and modest, if he had acceded to the delegation's demands (which sounded almost like polite requests) with the appearance of simple humility – or at least, in the Latvian manner of speaking, accepted them as his inevitable fate, then who knows, perhaps everything might have been different.

But that was something his temperament did not permit.

He hissed out German psalms that sounded like curses. And when the leader, spattered with the improper parts of the Lutheran gospel, lost his patience and demanded with a tiny pinch of surliness that Hubert Konstantin Solm give him the key to the sacristy, *nekavējoties! nekavējoties!*, the old man hurled an apple at him, a red autumn Calville, from three metres away. Which was really an astonishingly silly gesture. But the lad ducked. The red autumn Calville flew past him and hit the girl standing behind him in the face, like a stone, breaking her little snubbed fifteen-year-old nose. Blood spurted onto her pinafore, or perhaps it was just the pink juice of the mashed fruit flesh.

All the same, one delicate girl's scream later they laid hands on him.

They kicked down Grandpaping's front door, and before his eyes they gathered up the pictures and sculptures of Jesus, the Bohemian crystal and the good English china, as well as the death masks of his two late wives from the parlour and smashed them all to smithereens. Then they pushed the family grand piano, on which my father had first encountered Mozart and Chopin as a little boy, out onto the veranda, demolished it and divided up the ivory keys among themselves. Once everyone had been reduced to gurgling out halleluiahs through the considerable store of Bordeaux that had been discovered in our wine cellar, they fell to contemplating a *Sodišana* for Huko, a very special

*Sodišana*, which was to be less honourable than the ancient Roman suicide that his little sword would have effected.

At that time, my parents were living in Riga, in the heart of the art-deco quarter, and in the brand new Albertstraße – an operetta of architecture, entirely unique in Europe - Papa had rented an area of a studio. The few military units were concentrated quite close by, west of the city pasture, in particular the listless infantry. This meant that the city, but especially Albertstraße, which was guarded only by French butlers and English pugs, was considered relatively safe despite the seething revolution.

Papa took in the relatives who had fled the countryside. Only Grandpapa demurred. He stayed where he was in Neugut, in Courland, stubborn as his fruit trees, the only German for miles around. Humorously illustrated letters, then cajoling and eventually desperate telegrams, delivered by world-weary postilions, begged Grandpapa to see sense and up sticks as soon as possible. But sense, as I have learned, cannot be got by begging, because fashion cannot be got by begging.

The fashion for cowardice, Grandpapa wrote back.

And so the old man not only ignored all calls for demission; he also assumed pastoral care of five abandoned neighbouring communities. The deserting shepherds of these flocks, having crept away to their families in Riga, came to my father at regular intervals, pale with shame, to ask if all was well with Huko. Though asking if all was ill would have been nearer the mark, since this was, to put it mildly, something for which they ardently hoped.

When one of these hypocritical priests eventually told Papa that “*alas, alas, my dearrr man,*” a train had been derailed very close to his father’s parsonage, the telephone masts chopped down and “*you know, I hheard it first hhand,*” the police station attacked, Papa had the carriage brought round. He was determined to go and fetch his stubborn father in person from where the uprisings were taking place, which was only fifty versts away.

But in the end my mother forbade it. Or rather, her condition forbade it. That summer she was nine months pregnant, and her swelling body made a great impression when Mama laid it across the street. And of course her husband did not dare storm such a barricade.

It was not that Mama would have felt defenceless without Papa; no, she was worried that without her supervision he might get into terrible trouble on such a dangerous journey. He was in fact – and I suspect this was a side-effect of his artistic talent – a veritable magnet for debacles, fiascos, catastrophes and incredible complications (of which Mama herself was certainly the most incredible), although at the end of the day he was still favoured by fortune, which is in no way a contradiction.

Every day, Mama took her globe of a belly on a walk to the market, past the socialists’ public rallies, spooky, oily figures whose eyes wiped her and her spawn off the face of the earth: Anna Marie Sybille Delphine Baroness von Schilling was born into the aristocracy, a m’lady who blossomed into her dominion as an infant on a floating moated castle near Reval. She was certainly no stranger to fear, but she was not accustomed to showing it. She could get extremely cross when someone didn’t know how to behave. But I never saw her in a state of panic. Panic simply was not proper.

She saw the Russian Revolution of nineteen-five as a lapse of human decency. She had the same degree of respect for radical political views as she had for rape or child murder. And so even as an embryo my brother was imprinted with his mother’s rage against communist overthrows, which will not be dispelled by any hippy movement in the world, my dear pacifist roommate.

I know how interested you are in births of all kinds. But my brother’s birth was marked out by taking place in the midst of chaos and hysteria. It was really more of an emanation than a birth, since it happened on the same evening and even at the same hour that our grandfather was lost to this world. Buddhists like you would call such a thing reincarnation, and perhaps, as my brother was pushed

along the birth canal, he really did take on the torment of his shining Grandpaping, who at the same time, half a day's ride away, was awaiting his fate.

They kept the German preacher locked up in his own church for two hours so that, champing with rage, he could watch from the sacristy as the parsonage that had survived four generations went up in flames. Then they gave him that treatment reserved for the priesthood, which requires nothing more than a nearby pond, an empty potato sack and an expectant audience. All these were present, and so they fetched the bellowing Huko out of his church, cut off his beard and forced him to eat the red autumn Caville with which he had committed his outrage. In disgust, he spat the raspberry-coloured flesh, a pomological curiosity, at the red flag which had been thrust into his land and was now fluttering just a step away.

Then his hands were tied, and they pulled the sack over his head and bound his ankles fast. Finally a local farrier, who would be hanged for it a year later, lifted the helpless, struggling bundle into the air and threw it into the parsonage pond. The Latvian onlookers applauded as the absence of God's aid became so tangibly clear. Particularly unexpected was the sound of the sharp screams that could be heard from the floundering sack, which continued for some time as the drowning process kept being interrupted so that no one would miss anything.

It was only the next morning that the body was recovered.

Anna Ivanovna, my grandfather's Russian housekeeper with whom he had lived in a much-discussed way since the death of his second wife, took off her outer clothes, swam out to him in the dawn light and pulled the dead man, on whom apparently a frog was sitting, back to the bank by his bare foot, which was just protruding from the water. Later she became our Mary Poppins, our childhood governess, and she told us how the villagers gathered silently around the wet, jute-wrapped body, as around a stranded whale, and wept bitterly over it. For half a century, Hubert Konstantin Solm had been responsible for baptisms and weddings, births and deaths, the first prayer and the last rites in his village. Even to those who had hollered for it the previous evening, his fate was an incomprehensible thing.

For my brother and me, his end marked the beginning, the Archimedean point of our experience of the world. Nothing that would happen in later years can be weighed up or even considered without the apple thrown in rage, the house in flames, the red flag spat upon and the corpse drying beside the pond.

The whole world changed for my parents, becoming an Armageddon of pain and guilt. Even when my father was on his death bed (tolerating the life around him, but unable to participate in it), he was still reproaching himself. Why didn't I go, why didn't I go, he whimpered. She wouldn't have gone on lying there, not her! I'm a miserable coward, I'm under the thumb!

The words whistled through his teeth, his crippled mouth.

It could not have been otherwise. My brother was given the best of all names: that of the grandfather so magnificently reincarnated in him.

Hubert.

I was given the second best.

Konstantin.

And thus our relationship was determined for a long time.

Which is not to say that he was the first and I was the second. Let me rephrase that: he was the first and I the last; he the good luck and I the bad; he cosseted by fortune and I struck down by fate; he loved by Mama and I dropped on the marble floor by Mama three days after my birth (leaving me with a slightly damaged hip that is not exactly making my current learning-to-walk-again situation

any easier). No, it's nothing, I'm just moaning or being silly. But one thing is true: Hubert and Konstantin, even when they were Hubsu and Kojas, were quite differently numbered solar systems. I was born neither on the day of grandfather's death, nor on his birthday. My birthday was not a Sunday or holiday, or any day that was of some significance to my family. I was not even an August or December Solm like two thirds of my relations, who came into the world almost exclusively in these two months.

When we were small, my brother always needled me about the irrelevance of my arrival time. Yes, we even came to blows once, and I lost of course, four years weaker than he was.

And yet there was not the slightest reason to be glad at having been born in the *annus mirabilis*, that devil of a year. Is it really a desirable thing always to have to celebrate your birthday on the day when, as soon as the presents have been opened, everyone has to go to the graveyard and weep bitterly? And then every other year, there was also the martyrs' memorial service in St Petri, to remember all the priests of Latvia's Evangelical Church who died at the hands of the Bolsheviks. Hub would have to stand at the front by the altar for hours holding a fat, white candle, symbolising the life-light of Grandpaping.

When I was once allowed to take over this honour, I accidentally blew the flame out, then got a desperate fit of the giggles because the bishop had a love bite on his neck, at least according to Baron Hase (known to us for obvious reasons as Spotty Hase), who was standing beside me with his candle, quaking with hiccups. No, I really did not want to have been born on such a day.

I was actually very glad that my inevitable anniversary belonged to me alone: it was the 9<sup>th</sup> of November when a storm caused my mother's waters to break two weeks early and I became the second-born son. And on the calendar, the 9<sup>th</sup> of November was a very insignificant day, quite suited to my needs. Grey. Underestimated. Possible to interpret in many different ways.

That did not change until 1918. At the end of that year that was so significant for Europe's fortune, Riga was already (or perhaps one should say: still) occupied by the Reichswehr and in effect no longer Russian territory. In the evening, as we were running sack races - sack-racing was another thing strictly prohibited on Hubsu's birthday because of its dreadful potato-sack associations, and we could hardly go swimming on such a day, either - in any case, as we were hopping around the living room like kangaroos, Papa's cousin who worked for the Riga Rundschau hurried over to tell us that the German Kaiser Wilhelm had abdicated early that morning and a republic had been declared in Berlin. Hubsu latched onto this straight away: "A great man died on my birthday," he whispered to me as we lay in our beds. "But a whole country kicked the bucket on yours."

I wept a great deal, for by this time we were avowed Germans. We had long since stopped loving Russia. Though after the Revolution was defeated, from nineteen-six onwards, Mama and Papa had lived a very grand life. My early memories: overloaded interiors, rooms stuffed full of cushions, a silver Russian samovar, with which I once only half accidentally scalded our cocker spaniel Puppi, one of my many mishaps. We were coddled by three serving Annas: Kibi-Anna (our nursery maid), Kocka-Anna (a fat cook), and our beloved Anna Ivanovna. She was always eulogising our Grandpaping, the tragic saint with whom she had apparently had a dissolute arrangement, though Mama became furious when Papa hinted as much, with a wink that said it wasn't really so bad.

Mama did think it was bad - but then, she thirsted for panegyric, for ceremonial idealisation. And so the red autumn Calville became the family sacrament, the mystery of my early childhood. Mama instructed Anna Ivanovna that we were to treat the red autumn Calville as the Catholics treat their host. My father, however, refused to eat the body of Grandpaping, and did not appreciate Mama's papist leanings (though please, I certainly don't mean to, how shall I put it, denigrate the beliefs of your Chiemgau home, my dear Hippy).

There was a fixed ritual for the way we sons had to consume an apple – no, each and every apple that we ate. It would be cut down the middle, and whilst this cut was being made it was important that we stood in absolute, respectful silence, thinking very hard about Grandpaping – for which reason I often used to cry as a small child when the apartment smelled of baked apples. Afterwards the two halves were ceremoniously handed to Hubsy and me. We were never allowed to throw away the core; we had to polish off every last bit, even the stalk and each little marzipan-flavoured seed, in honour and remembrance of Grandpaping. Before we were allowed to bite into the apple, we had to cross ourselves, although Mama wouldn't let us call it "crossing ourselves" (Protestants don't cross themselves, they make the sign of the cross). At the bottom of her heart, Mama was a good Lutheran, but just as Luther believed you could chase away the devil by farting, she too had her superstitious side. We were not allowed to tell Papa, but before the eating of the apple she made us murmur "Hosanna in the highest", which in later years was reduced to nothing more than a garbled "Anna", much to Anna Ivanovna's delight.

One crucial precondition for the sanctuarial meal was high moral integrity; anyone who had told fibs, stolen something or dilly-dallied, lost his apple right. Mama was unyielding on this matter.

Since the red autumn Calville ritual was carried over not only onto every kind of apple known to man, but also to the products they were used to make, we had to treat apple cake, apple compote, apple juice, apple wine, and even the apple-scented hand soap that Mama so loved to buy with the same religious reverence. We even had to make the sign of the cross before our first Calvados. And as Mama felt close to the French cultural milieu, she even considered giving the same ceremonial treatment to potatoes, which of course were *pommes de terre*, and were also known as "earth apples" in our Baltic German. This consecration would have made potato soup, roast potatoes, the still unknown pommes frites, croquettes and of course potato pancakes (with sacrosanct apple compote) into liturgical fare as well. It would also have elevated potato-starch products like ethanol or paper into the ranks of devotional objects – to take the process to its logical conclusion, every newspaper contained a bit of red autumn Calville.

Papa found all this terribly fanciful and accused Mama of using this semi-Catholic circus simply to try and compensate for her bad conscience at having thwarted Grandpaping's rescue so theatrically.

Doors were often slammed.

But then, we had plenty of them.

All the same, for Hubsy and me the apple always remained the symbol of our unwavering intimacy. When we finally became inseparable – he the strong, dauntless hero of my childhood, who always managed to rescue me; I his rather chubby Sancho Panza – we got into the habit, after winning a playground fight or dancing with girls at a school rub, of slaughtering an apple together, as we called it. The apple of honour and loyalty and of time and eternity.

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A few days later, Hubsy and I were out with a sledge, hoping to scavenge some cabbages that we had heard were in a cellar somewhere, when we ran into a gang of Red cavalry. They came from the direction of the racecourse, an ice-grey bank of cloud arching over them, beneath which they trotted towards us on their shaggy little horses, their weapons the only thing that identified them as soldiers. One grey pony had a rug slung over its back, but as it came swaying towards us the whole thing was revealed to be a corpse wrapped in a green tarpaulin, of which all that was to be seen were the

dangling boots. One of the boots was torn open, and I saw blood dripping out onto the snow, writing a thin line that froze instantly.

One of the riders grinned and waved at us, and I raised my hand as well, a reflex for which my brother punished me with a week of silent treatment.

The death mill began to grind that same day. In the blink of an eye, Mama and Papa and Hubsy and I, and Anna Ivanovna and almost all our friends and acquaintances became satanic vermin, insects to be wiped off the face of the earth.

Baron Hase, the mischievous Spotty Hase, was one of the first to demonstrate this, when he made an overly loud joke in school – not about the Bishop's love bite this time, but about the visage of our Comrade Headmaster. The authorities decided to spare the fourteen-and-a-half-year-old this unedifying sight in future by considerately executing him. Revolutionary tribunals were working hard, firing squads too, proscription lists were going around, and it seemed only a matter of time before they knocked on our door.

Papa almost fainted when Mama then also forced him to hide some of her aristocratic relatives in the apartment – the ones for whom arrest warrants had been issued, of all people – as they had to grow their beards in order to pass through the Front unrecognised. Beards take time. If they are discovered here, said Papa, then *finita la commedia*.

The Cheka had set up their office in nearby Schützenstraße, and in its cellar resourceful Mongols flayed the skin of imprisoned aristocrats from their wrists down to the nail of their little finger, to give the interrogations a distinctive character.

The immediate terror was joined by hunger, as the food supply lines had broken down. Every day I saw snow-covered human bundles lying on the streets and in entryways, starved or newly frozen, fingers clutching at their final dreams. The extremely cold winter ripped through the country. In order to survive, Papa claimed to be a medical orderly, though he couldn't stand the sight of blood. He was permitted to work for a doctor friend of his in a Red Army field hospital, where he fainted all the time, but still brought home a few roubles now and then. Otherwise we lived off stolen potatoes and potato peelings, and Mama was very glad that the consumption of potatoes did not require any official considerations with regard to Grandpaping.

When our neighbours were arrested and then hanged a few days later, Hubsy and I broke into their flat via the balcony and found a barrel of salted mushrooms in the kitchen. It became the main source of our sparse protein intake, and without a doubt saved our own lives and those of the leisurely growing beards.

Then the shortages took on unbearable forms.

On one of those days, which to us as children seemed colourful and strange, and also unpleasant because of the constant hunger and the many corpses – but not truly threatening, because we would never die – Anna Ivanovna appeared, accompanied by a visibly distressed, bearded Russian named Vladimir, who was leading a child by the hand. Anna Ivanovna, tears running down her cheeks, talked insistently to Mama while Papa sat in the armchair, recovering from having accidentally amputated a completely healthy leg. It was a Bolshevik leg of course, and, as the beards clustered in the kitchen assured him, this act had to be regarded and judged as a godly one, since the leg might have gone on to do even greater injury to civilised humanity.

That evening, Mama swept into our room and told us there was a new member of the household. It was the child I had seen that morning, a little girl, thin, with watchful, coal-black eyes, which never seemed to blink and sized up everything around her with frightening concentration and at the same time a remarkable ease.

Hubsy had to move out of the bed that we shared now that all the other beds, sofas and day beds had been claimed by our aristocratic guests. Mama decided that it would not be improper to let

me and *la petite* “bunk” together, since my young age, my girlish features, my frequently evidenced courtesy and above all my lack of self-assertion would not allow me to sink to the sort of improprieties she already expected from Hubsi – particularly since his tongue was similar to Grandpapi’s, as Anna Ivanovna had incautiously remarked. He was banished to the hallway, where the general snoring made sleep almost impossible.

*La petite* slipped into bed with me. I marvelled at how similar the volume of her body was to that of Puppi, our tiny spaniel who now ate only rats. She received a goodnight kiss from Mama and then lay beside me, not even stiffly. I could feel the warmth of her skin under the covers. Her hair smelled of camomile.

“You have a lovely bed.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Who are you then?”

“Eva. But you can call me Ev.”

“I’m Koja.”

“May I pee in your pot please, Koja?”

Her foot tapped quickly and brushed against mine.

“You can use the toilet if you like,” I suggested. “It’s still early.”

“But then I have to walk past all these people I don’t know.”

“Oh, I see.”

“I think you’re nice.”

“Thank you.”

“So can I pee in your pot?”

“Yes, of course.”

She got up and sat on the pot in front of me - I had no idea you *could* sit on it. I sucked in my cheeks, studied the pattern on the wallpaper and wondered where she might be looking. When she had finished, she slid the pot next to the bed.

“You have to put it under the bed,” I explained.

“Yes, in a minute,” she said, “but it’s your turn now.”

“But I don’t need to go.”

“Nor did I. I just wanted to see if you could be trusted.”

I was incapable of saying anything. She smelled like a chemist’s, and not just because of the camomile in which her hair had obviously been washed, but also because of the fresh, astringent scent of urine rising from the floor.

“I think I can trust you. You looked away the whole time. You’re a cavalier.”

“I’m definitely not having a pee.”

“But I did.”

“Yes, but you can sit down, and your night shirt stops anyone seeing anything. I have to hold the pot up, and you’ll be able to see everything.”

“I’ll look the other way, like you did.”

“But you’ll still hear me.”

“I can put my hands over my ears.”

“Then what’s the point?”

“Then we’ll be brother and sister.”

And so Eva, known as Ev, became part of our family, wafted our way by the madness of the moment. Her parents, a German doctor and his sick wife, refugees from Dünaburg, had been arrested by the Cheka without any stated reason, and were hanged the following day. Her father had hidden

little Eva along with two sausages in a secret cubby hole, just in time, before the Cheka's henchmen broke down his front door.

A while later she was found by their Russian man-servant, a cousin of Anna Ivanovna's. He had a second key to the apartment and his heart was in the right place. At first he took the little one home and hid her there, until he learned of his master's death. Then he had to act. A German-speaking child in a Russian servant's family was a life-threatening indication of counter-revolutionary activities. Added to which Vladimir would struggle to feed *la petite* in the midst of the famine. What could have been more obvious than to turn to his resourceful and charitable cousin Anna Ivanovna? And she decided – having wrongly assumed that a baroness like Anna Marie must still possess remnants of her former wealth – to ask us for help.

“The girl is an angelka,” Anna Ivanovna swore to my mother in her heart-melting dialect. “She cared for her Mamushka, her poor Mamushka, as you care for a sick pony – her Mamushka had the nerves and the despair (probably cancer, said my father), and she washed her Mamushka every day, washed away the slime and dried her (cleaned the shit off her, said my father), and instructed she was by her poor Papashka, who was a doctor with a very full sick room always (don't know him, said my father), and then the Cheka came for him – him and his sick, sick Lastatshka – and they brought her out in a wheelchair and for her probably the bullet was a release, but oh God, little Eva heard it all. Isn't she just good enough to eat? And she is a lovely dancer too.”

Ev's relationship to the weedy functions of the body (as Papa disparagingly called them) was shaped by an unusual empathy, perhaps because medicine was in her blood; it certainly wasn't in mine and Hubsi's, to say nothing of Papa. I could well imagine the complete lack of disgust with which she had cared for her mother.

From the very first, people succumbed to her; she simply conquered them, directly and largely fearlessly, with eyes that flew up like ravens. This was her only chance of survival, and she fought for love like a wild beast. We got on from the start, and on her second evening she put an arm around my shoulder and confessed to me that I had diminished her loneliness. We prayed to Our Lord and then always peed together wherever we were, and she decided she didn't want to be an orphan any more, but a real Solm.

She even brought a secret language into my previously colourless life. As we consumed our daily portion of three mushrooms, which tasted of old aspic, and I complained of my ravenous hunger, she pulled a piece of mouldy bread that she had begged from the Red Army soldiers out of her jacket. As she shared it with me she whispered with a smile, so that no one could hear: “*A bisl una bisl – vert a fule shisl!*”

I was shocked. Among genteel Baltic children like us, being able to speak Yiddish was frowned upon. It was the vagrant language of Riga's street urchins, a language that Mama loathed even more than Latvian, just as she loathed the Jews even more than the Latvians, who at least had the decency to leave the beautiful Germanic language family alone.

“*Bistu a yid?*” I exclaimed in my bad street-Yiddish. “*Bistu a goy?*” she laughed brightly, a laugh like the smallest bell of St Petri. I can still hear it today, the way she squeaked a little coloratura into the “*goy*”, using all her charm to soften the question about my idiocy. And then she said, in the best High German of a Düneburg surgeon's daughter: “That's how I used to talk to all my girlfriends when we were alone together. Shall I teach you, Koja?”

And so she taught Koja the language of her girlfriends, and instead of being horrified, I enjoyed stepping into the realm of the forbidden as well as the realm of the feminine with her, and when we were in high spirits, we prayed like street-rats, from the start of Genesis, when *in onheyb hot got bashafn dem himl un di erd. Un di erd is geven vist un leydik, un finsternish is geven ojfn gesihkt fun tehom, un der gayst fun got hot geshvebt ojfn gesihkt fun di vasern.*

If anyone had heard us in those days, if anyone had realised the progress I was making in this joyful carnival language, if one of the beards had believed his ears (for sometimes, as we were whispering, we would attract dull looks), Ev would have had to pack her three or four things (she owned a few clothes and a silver Jesus on a little chain, that was all). For Mama and Papa and Hubsj – who wanted his bed back, rather than having to sleep on the floor with one of the snoring beards – developed considerable resistance to our little guest. They came up with objections and pretexts, of which the material ones of course had the greatest power to convince. I myself pestered my parents to be allowed to keep Ev, the way some children beg for a little dog. Ev seemed to have no blood relations, and Dünaburg, her hometown, was impossible to reach because volunteer corps had formed there to rid the town of the Soviets.

But even after the Baltic Army retook Riga in the bloody battle of May 1919, we were still none the wiser about Ev's background. In all the confusion of that troubled spring, it was not unusual for people to be uprooted and scattered far from all certainties.

After five years of war, Latvia was a picture of destruction. Whole stretches of land were depopulated. The loss of residents took on Carthaginian dimensions, particularly in relation to the size of the country - its small size, that is. Hardly anyone in Europe was familiar with this ravaged Lilliput, in which we Germans felt like a little gang of Gullivers – and I see from your face, my dear cataleptic friend, that you know nothing about it, either. And yet after the war, forces began to develop there that have lasted to this day: because everything you see on television at the moment, Nixon's cowardice, Brezhnev's forward surge, Mao's Cultural Revolution, Ho Chi Minh's survival and so on and so on, to this day all these things are supervised or opposed, steered or undermined, but above all, investigated, by some of these Baltic Gullivers.

We hated this new state, the Latvian Republic. And the Republic hated us. The Lilliputians condemned Gulliver to death (for urinating in public) and then planned to blind him instead and let him slowly languish, and that was exactly how the Latvians treated us. We were to gradually starve and die of thirst.

When the Latvian state took shape in 1920, Mama's family were forcibly dispossessed. Their lands, an area the size of Andorra, were distributed among two thousand delighted Latvian farmers. Opapa-Baron's moated castle became the hall of residence for a rural school. Many Barons and Excellencies emigrated.

Papa ran out of solvent customers for his portraits. My parents were struck down as if by lightning. The Solm family, there is no other way to put it, became desperately poor. "Poor as a church mouse," Papa always said, with a strange satisfaction in his voice, as if a church mouse was still something nice, pious, offering unconditional solidarity. We could no longer afford servants. Mama, who had never washed up a plate or ironed a shirt in her life, doggedly learned the necessary skills, even trying her hand at cooking, when there was anything to cook. But even stinging nettles can be prepared palatably or less palatably. Mama's always tasted freshly picked.

I must say: the war, the revolution, Bolshevism, the founding of the Latvian state and the demise of my class brought very little that was positive for me personally. The only thing in which I wholeheartedly supported the Latvian Republic was its entirely new and very casual rules on adoption. Essentially, any confused child who exuded abandonment could be kidnapped off the street and claimed by a family as their own. The country needed as many workers as it could get. And thus we were permitted – without any bureaucratic complications, since not a single one of Ev's relatives could be found in the devastated town of Dünaburg – to turn our little wartime visitor into a kind of Miss Solm. My brand new sister, with her three summer dresses and her silver Jesus and her fondness for forbidden things and proscribed languages.

It was not only her tragic lot as an orphan that convinced my parents to feed another mouth despite their own misery. Ev also had an instinct for making herself indispensable, was extremely down to earth, and never complained. And she brought with her skills that a little girl from a good family really should not have had. She even knew how to use a sewing machine, and made terrible suits for Hubsy and me out of the good living room curtains. She taught Mama what a flat seam was and a chain stitch. And for Christmas 1920, she made me some new, white winter boots out of my mother's Arctic fox fur, which looked a little peculiar, like giant snowballs, and for which I was teased at school. But it was better than walking barefoot through the snow, and I still have them today. I saved them through all the wars and expulsions, through terror, mass murder and dictatorship, and I particularly love the shaft of the left boot, to which an Arctic fox paw is attached.

Ev was aware that she had not only to impress Mama, but also to overwhelm Papa. He was initially less enthusiastic than my mother about the idea of adoption, and took it to be a new manifestation of her guilt complex. He even claimed that this scrawny little Eva-child nibbling away at our last provisions was a kind of letter of indulgence that Mama was writing to Grandpapa in the hereafter.

Mama took to slamming doors again – at least the ones that had not been turned into firewood.

Ev reacted with meekness. She never showed any overly great devotion, except with me: she called me her big sister, while Hubsy became her big brother.

There was nothing false about her; she never curried favour, and she didn't tend towards flattery. In her coy, sometimes cheeky way, she just made herself indispensable. She had a seventh sense for what the person she was with sought most desperately, and in her arsenal of appropriate ways to help she often found the right thing, which was perceived gratefully as an emotion, although it may well not have existed. We hoped she would see us with her heart. And who else can do that.

She managed, in any case, to hit the mark with Papa as well. She thrust herself upon him as an artist's model - something he resisted strongly at first, but ultimately without success. Papa had received his first major post-war commission: illustrations from the *Kamasutra* to be painted as frescoes in a new war profiteers' brothel on Elisabethstraße. It was imperative that Mama never found out about this, and she never did. The commission was far beneath my father's dignity; it drove him to vodka and fed us secretly. On the necks of women's defoliated and bacchanalian bodies he painted angry white ovals, since in his opinion the whores who sat for him possessed snouts, not faces. Ev, on the other hand, who despite being only ten years of age had a clever, circumspect and largely unabashed profile, second not even to a young Mata Hari in her radiance and her rosebud mouth, had so many faces that they found a home on all the women's bodies. Papa concentrated on her variety, her wealth of expressions, her eyes, and all the incarnations of ecstasy that little Ev was able to put on like masks. In the studio, she often had to tense her facial muscles for half an hour at a time, while Papa arranged them on the *Catherine Wheel*, the *Fantastic Rocking Horse* or the *Nirvana*.

"Do you know what a position is?" Ev asked me one evening.

I knew about social position, military positions on the battlefield, the way you turned a horse's neck, even positions in roulette and of course the relationship of one thing to another, like the stars, for instance, though that was usually called a constellation.

"No, Kojá, I mean the sexual practice."

"You're not allowed to say things like that."

"Why not? Papa explained it to me."

She was now permitted to call Theo Papa, although at first he had favoured "Father" and occasionally even "Uncle".

"Why on earth would he do that?" I asked, taken aback.

“Well, you know, there are sheets hung over all the walls. And recently when he was painting me, one of the sheets fell down and then he had to say something.”

“Uhuh.”

“Yes, because there was in Indian woman on the wall wearing pearls and nothing else, with a naked Indian man crouching behind her like a dog. Like this.”

She showed me.

“Papa was very embarrassed, and I mustn’t tell anyone about it. He told me what a phallus is.”

“What?”

“A phallus. When a penis grows, it’s called a phallus. You’ll get one too, when you’re older. But I really mustn’t tell anyone.”

“So why are you telling me?”

“I mean, I mustn’t tell anyone *else*.”

“That must have been a terrible sight.”

“Yes. Do you want to see?”

“No.”

“I know how to get in without a key. I mean, it’s a building site, after all.”

“Papa would beat me black and blue.”

“I looked at everything. There’s a picture where an Indian woman has the phallus in her mouth.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I swear.”

“So someone’s peeing in her mouth?”

“No, peeing is what you do with your penis. It’s only your phallus that you put in someone’s mouth, not your penis.”

“That’s disgusting.”

“No, it’s a perfectly normal position.”

“Papa doesn’t paint those things. No, Papa doesn’t paint those things.”

“Oh, Koja, why are you crying? I’m sorry. Please forgive me. Let’s hug each other and *davenen zu dem gutn got, yo?*”

Years later, as a student, when some members of my Corps and I visited that discreet establishment, the exotic name of which changed as frequently as the women who worked there, I saw for myself that all the rooms were adorned with shimmering wall paintings, temple dancers with many arms, topped with the unmistakably childlike physiognomy of the young Ev. My father’s brushwork was also unmistakable. Her innocence more evident than his. I chose a room with an image of cunnilingus and a rather buxom Slovakian girl.

When I told Ev about it later, I thought she would laugh. But this time she was the one who grew dejected. And I had to hug her and *davenen zu dem gutn got* with her, our arms wrapped around each other as before. For there was no more innocence, there was just guilt and guilty people, and we would all have to be painted as centaurs – Ev, me and Hub – as mythical creatures born out of a dark cloud, hot-headed and wanton, siblings wedded to each other.

And thus we really did become the raging of the whole world.