

Barbara Frischmuth

Where We Come From

Novel. 367 pp.

Aufbau. Bound, dust jacket

2012, August

pp. 170-84

Back then the airport was called Yesilköy, the “Green Village,” and not Atatürk, even though the “green” was soon withered and the village gobbled up and then regurgitated as a suburb. The horizontal plane of the agricultural landscape was re-drawn into a perpendicular made up of living space for millions of immigrants: residences, apartments, and maisonettes for the upper middle-class—the more elevated levels on the social pyramid—now numbering some hundreds of thousands out of a population estimated at fifteen million.

There was neither a subway nor a multi-lane highway to the city center. The air over the coastal road running beside the town walls was heavy with the stench from the tanneries where the last animal traces were stripped from the hides to create objects for everyday use.

“Martha Weigert,” the customs officer says, checking my passport. He looks up, amused, because my German surname, but for one word, could mean I’m refusing.

“Isn’t there something missing here?”

His accent is noticeably Swabian, probably an *Almançı* who grew up in Germany and then came back to Turkey, maybe with his family—that happens more frequently than you might think.

“If you refuse too often, you’ll run out of luck.” He gives me back my passport.

I smile.

“If my luck’s as good-looking as you are, who knows?”

That startles him. He thinks he must have misheard, then suddenly remembers he’s an officer and waves me on with a curt gesture.

How easy it is to get these youngsters in uniform flustered!

I spot Lale before she sees me. Lale, “the tulip,” a Rembrandt tulip in layered colors: crème and raspberry from tip to toe; the raspberry shade is new. Besides that, her breasts are a bit fuller than a year ago.

Now she discovers me. We both run the few yards along the barrier, where we then fall into each other’s arms. I can listen forever to Lale’s twittering Istanbul singsong; I feel the softness and warmth of her body embracing mine; we shower kisses on each other’s cheeks, squeeze each other tightly to convince ourselves that this is really happening, that we’re both here in person, connected not just by cell phone or Skype but connected body and soul. Technology has actually worked: the plane didn’t crash, and Lale wasn’t killed in a car crash on the way to the airport. To whomever or whatever is responsible, we are grateful.

We’ve pulled it off again, our obligatory annual meeting. I keep coming back to the place where I spent the best years of my life, to reassure myself, as best I can, that what happened there really did happen. We always use the same words, follow the same script: You look fantastic, say I. You look tired, says Lale. Sometimes it’s the other way round. No real questions, no real answers; time enough for that later. What’s important is that nothing in our mutual affection has changed.

We walk over to Lale’s car in the parking garage. I put my luggage in the trunk, get in beside her, and buckle up.

“Coastal Highway, “ Lale says.

I just repeat, don’t really respond:

“Coastal Highway.”

I’m breathing again that air, saturated with the moisture of the Bosphorus, the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara, whichever way the wind’s blowing. I can feel the salt tickling my nose, blocking out the exhaust fumes, and returning a freshness to the air it may never have had in the first place.

“So speak up.”

My eyes are on the ships crossing the Marmara.

“So what can I tell you, who can I talk about.”

“Everything about everything and everyone.”

Lale laughs.

“Aren’t you sick and tired of hearing about people you’ve hardly had anything to do with for the past twenty years, people you never even see unless you happen to bump into them walking along Istiklal Avenue.”

“They were witnesses.”

“Witnesses to what?”

“Witnesses to the actual existence of Vedat and Robin.”

“Is that what’s bothering you?”

Sounds as if I’d thrown her off balance.

I realized I’d broken a taboo. Never before had we talked about Vedat and Robin on our way to her place, only when we’d got there. Travel time had always belonged to us alone.

“Well, you are asking, and I owe you an answer.”

The ritual is inflexible, that’s why we keep a close watch on each other. Ritual is the only way not to lose our past. We need this commemoration, Lale and I, perhaps more than other people do.

“Let’s start with your school.”

This is the least painful variant in our litany: discussing the teachers I knew at St. George’s School where I was employed as an assistant in the Art program, although I didn’t have the right degree. I also tutored in German outside school hours, but the school administration found me my jobs.

“Okay.”

That word had become part of her vocabulary. She began talking about the changes in the school system and how the government was taking control to such an extent that German-language instruction was suffering. We went through the list of imminent retirees, those who will retire to their native country and those who are going to stay put, either for a few years or permanently. Because they couldn’t bear missing this city; their clocks tick to the rhythm of Istanbul rather than Vienna or Graz.

Lale is driving like most people in Istanbul—relaxed, if somewhat recklessly.

“They’re going to demolish the Tarlabasi district, raze it to the ground just so they can throw up a new commercial center.”

We’re driving down the boulevard that separates central Pera from the demolition sites.

Gypsies used to live here, then came Kurdish refugees from the eastern part of the country, and now it's war refugees from Iraq, Chechnya, or Afghanistan.

"They must have an infrastructure of their own, that's for sure. The city needs a new set of teeth to get its piece of the pie. The latest scientific data show there's less chance of an earthquake this high up. That's part of the equation, too, of course."

Little by little we're getting close to the Tower. I say "little by little" because driving these precipitous streets is an exact science.

"It's insane to even drive in this city, of course. But I have to keep going up to Tekirdağ to see my mother now that she's moved in with her sister after my father died."

I can't take my eyes off the fronts of the buildings. The present construction boom dates from an age that people are just now slowly bringing back to mind. Everything cheek by jowl, on the brink of dilapidation but vital in their substance even though their hair is disappearing, their false teeth rattling, and the balconies and bay windows acting like artificial limbs—tokens of frailty.

Lale will drive by the apartment building where Robin and I used to live with the twins, if she can possibly manage to. On the fifth floor, rooms with a view of the Bosphorus, the Galata Tower, and the Golden Horn. Its panoramic view hadn't figured in our rent back in the 80s; hadn't even been given a thought.

"You won't believe this, but your apartment building is being totally renovated, and that's why they closed your street."

I twist around in my seat, but all I can see are tarps and scaffolding.

"Real estate values shot out of sight in this neighborhood after a couple of artists opened their ateliers near the Tower, and ever since a Turkish mystery writer created a heroine—a German private investigator—who runs a bookstore nearby devoted only to whodunits. You couldn't begin to afford an apartment around here anymore."

We can't drive directly past the house because of the street closure, but at least I can see it's still there with its new façade and will probably be there forever.

Lale can hardly believe her eyes when she spies a parking space on a side street near her house. I get my luggage out of the trunk. Lale looks around as if she's trying to find someone to thank for this improbable gift of a parking spot.

Even the elevator is works. Every time this mobile cage obeys the laws of mechanics after all the decades of abuse, I still takes a moment to get used to it. But just in case, I shut my eyes when it gets going.

“This will tickle you: it actually *did* get stuck the day before yesterday.”

Lale laughs; I do not. A bit of bitchiness. She recognizes this foible of mine.

“You don’t use the word ‘rope’ to somebody with his head in the noose.”

“Oh yes you do. He’s being ‘elevated’ after all, the poor soul.”

It’s a joke after Lale’s own heart. Now the elevator’s about halfway up. She can’t help herself: she just *has* to mention the rope.

A sudden lurch between the third and fourth floors, and the elevator stalls. Lale pushes the buttons impatiently.

Now what? I keep my eyes shut.

She pulls out her cell phone, taps in the number listed below the buttons. Her voice is forceful, almost accusatory.

“I’m stuck in here with a guest. What’s she supposed to think? This is the third time in a week.”

She doesn’t stop to listen to the voice at the other end.

“Korkut bey, you get down here right away! Oh, you think you know who I am, do you? If you did, you’d know that I work for several newspapers, and among other things, I’m writing a column on the rotten state of elevator maintenance in this city.”

She snaps her cell phone shut.

“I’m afraid we’ll be here for a while, hanging between heaven and earth. I hope you don’t have to go to the bathroom.”

“Don’t get me thinking about it!”

I fumble around in my bag for the shrink-wrapped slice of pumpernickel, the wedge of cheese, and the chocolate Mozart dollar I pocketed on the plane for emergencies.

“Take your pick, sweet or salty.”

Lale gives me a hug and a shake.

“Just what I’ve always wanted: to be stuck in an elevator with you some day.”

She snatches the Austrian Airlines Mozart dollar out of my hand.

“Well, if it can’t be a chocolate Mozart kugel, it’s at least Mozart.”

“The real kugels are in my suitcase. But I’m afraid there’s not enough room in here for me to open it.”

“Don’t even try. I’ll assume the box you’ve brought with you is a fair size. The space would be too cramped anyway.”

“What about the oxygen level in here?”

“Don’t laugh, don’t cry, talk as little as possible.”

I nibble at the cheese wedge, holding the taste on my tongue as long as possible. Suddenly our snug little car gives another jolt, and we’re on the way up. I hold my breath, involuntarily, to lighten my weight as much as possible, not breathing again until we finally step out of the elevator, and I gasp for air.

Lale goes to the stairwell, leans out over the balustrade, and shouts:

“Thank you, Korkut bey. You’ve saved the good name of the neighborhood.”

And turning to me:

“Having to constantly rely on repair men has become more and more of a headache lately. I’ve already fired off a few letters to the editor.”

I’ve known this apartment going on thirty years. It’s molted repeatedly since then, going through a whole range of colors. Whenever I come, I regularly fall into a trap of my own making and ask Lale if she’s just bought that sofa recently, or if that chair is new. Her answer is always the same:

“Adnan, Adnan, Adnan.”

Adnan has been her upholsterer of choice for years.

“I thought he’d retired ages ago.”

“Adnan? He’s younger than I am.”

“That’s no reason not to think of him as a grown man.”

“Oh well, you know, I don’t really like the way he styles his hair. He uses upholstery shears no less. That simply isn’t done.”

Lale adores colors and textiles; she’d sooner go to Adnan’s than see a movie. He makes new curtains for her every two years and takes back the old ones. There’s always someone who can use her old ones. Papers her walls, upholsters her sofas and chairs.

“Ada paid me a visit.”

Lale opens the guest-room door, the door to *my* room for as long as I am staying. She’s gone and changed the color scheme here, too.

“Ada thought my new bedspread and cushions were the most interesting things she’d seen at my place in a long time.”

From the look Lale gives me, she’s hoping Ada might have reported something to me. She hadn’t.

“I saw Ada just for one minute in Vienna before my flight.”

“You hadn’t made it to her vernissage?”

“No, unfortunately, but I’ll tell you about that later. Wait till I’m settled in.”

Lale’s kept this Friday open in order to pick me up from the airport and cook, so we’ve got the whole weekend to ourselves. Lale knows that I know that she knows.

So it’s going to be all about Ada! So maybe her life would have been easier if we *had* stayed in Istanbul.

By the time I shower, fix my hair, change, and get to the kitchen, everything’s ready. Not enough room on the balcony for us to eat there, but with the door open, the evening sun slants over the dinner table in the salon—in Istanbul they don’t have living rooms, just salons.

I set the table, getting out the plates and small serving dishes while Lale’s mincing pistachios for the sweet pumpkin dessert. Just hors d’oeuvres and desserts: the perfect feast. Something of everything, nothing too much. I might really have felt guilty for putting her to so much trouble by coming to visit, except that I knew she devotes herself for hours to the preparation of all these trifling details with the fervor of a novice to the rules of her Order. But whenever I say one word about this, she blows a fuse.

“I’m on my feet day after day in the laboratory mixing and separating compounds, putting them in a centrifuge, heating them, cooling them, stirring them, shaking them, but if you think you could eat anything coming from all that, you are *very* wrong. So leave me my joy of spoiling you with dishes you don’t have to prepare yourself—you, someone who puts in day after day in *her* kitchen trying to pamper other people’s palates.”

As she says this, she’s hugging me so tight that I almost feel my ribs crack. It’s all I can do not to drop the plate of roe I’m carrying.

Up till now I’ve been able to avoid looking at the photo that lay precisely in the focal point of the setting sun. But only after we’re seated—Lale with a glass of red wine, me with white—do I screw up my courage and finally take a good look at Vedat and Robin: both in mountain-climbing gear,

Robin's long arm over Vedat's narrow shoulders, Vedat's pitch-black hair next to Robin's unruly, reddish blonde mane, Robin's head tilted, Vedat's turned upwards, both of them laughing, their teeth flashing.

Just as in all the years past, we toast the picture, as if we were standing at a graveside that where there was some physical trace of Vedat and Robin, bones, hair, whatever. An organic trace that would be proof that Vedat and Robin had actually lived and died. That they, like every other human being, had existed in real life, not just in pictures or our imagination.

"At least Robin does survive in your children's genes, but what about Vedat?"

"As far as I know, Robin never had his genes analyzed. There was no such thing back then."

"But I'm a living witness to the fact that your husband, Robin, *did* live with you in Istanbul."

"You can't swear that *my husband* and I lived here. We weren't even married then."

"And as for you, you can't swear that Vedat was a Kurd. It's not in his passport or on his birth certificate, which is why you can't prove, either, that his and Robin's death could have had anything to do with the fact he was a Kurd."

All the old questions, all the old answers. No body, so no closure. It's been twenty years to the day. Not necessarily the very day Vedat and Robin lost their lives. Maybe three or four days earlier. It's the day we were notified officially that Robin Stewart and Vedat Özakin in all probability disappeared forever down a glacial crevasse on Mount Ararat, and that even if the crevasse were found, it would be impossible to recover their remains.

The information from the police station in Doğubeyazıt stated in effect that two mountain climbers, one a Turkish national, the other British, had been sighted earlier in the vicinity by shepherds. They were, it went on, engaged in climbing, with professional gear but without a guide. Furthermore, the statement said the weather had turned suddenly violent, a radical change: there was an ice storm, thunder and lightening, with a ferocity rare at this altitude even in the East. The report stated further that the police, alerted by the shepherds and with later support from the Army, sent out search parties in the aftermath of the storm. They reportedly found nothing but Robin Stewart's camera, with his name and address written in indelible ink on the canvas case, the only evidence they had as to its owner. They also found a

backpack with Vedat Özakin's name and address. Both items were forwarded to the Istanbul police to be returned to Lale and me.

To date, the report concluded, no further evidence has come to light regarding the two missing climbers; nor has further investigation yielded any trace of their disappearance or, at worst, their accidental death on Mount Ararat.

Lale and I were furious, downright furious, that the two of them had decided to go mountain climbing so late in the season.

We were furious and indignant because we *had* agreed, after all, to go on a trip together down South to Antayka to see the Byzantine mosaics and visit the city itself. But at the last minute they changed their minds. That Fall had been unusually mild, even in the East, so they claimed they wanted to make use of that, since they hadn't gotten to it in September.

Lale and I were sulking and even considered flying down to Antayka by ourselves just to prove we could manage very well without them.

We would have done it, but the twins didn't want to travel with the two of us alone. And that's God's honest truth.

What's more, I'd had another scare that I was pregnant. I'd thrown up that morning after one of our "clandestine orgies," as we called the evenings we spent by ourselves. And that's another part of the truth.

When we hadn't heard from them for days—who had a cell phone back then?—there was a vague report from Doğubeyazıt. I got in touch with a few of Robin's colleagues, some of them Turkish. What came aterrorers was the chaos that follows the storm. A host of rumors and suspicions. A recent shoot-out between Turkish soldiers and Kurdish freedom fighters just before the ice storm suddenly turned out to be more than what had simply been dismissed at first with a few words as a mere skirmish. Some journalists thought it was entirely possible that Vedat and Robin had wandered into the no man's land between the two fronts—especially once it came out that Vedat was a Kurd.

Every day his colleagues came snooping around at Lale's place as well as mine, trying to ferret out some information about what stories Robin was after, or about Vedat's stand on the Kurdish question. And to find out, among other things, whether maybe that whole mountain-climbing business in Kurdish territory was just cover for two investigative reporters—just one example of what those colleagues were thinking. They thought it extremely suspicious that there

was no film in Robin's camera and that Vedat's backpack didn't contain the workbook or camera he always had with him.

I was so confused I didn't know what to do. How was I supposed to explain to the twins that Robin was gone. Gone, not just for them, but really and truly gone. I'd never had any doubts that it was a real accident, in spite of how horrified and wretched I felt when Robin disappeared. At least no doubts at the time. Completely unlike Lale; she's actually raising a glass to Robin and Vedat. Even today she still doesn't believe it was an accident. I turn to face her.

"Any news from the front?"

"Not really, the Stewart/Özakin case has long since been shelved, though it's never been solved. Now and then a former colleague comes up with a new hypothesis, for example, that a splinter group of the PKK thought they were spies and were hunting them down. Then, he says, when Turkish troops arrived, they were used as living shields, which didn't do any good because the soldiers fired anyway. They'd disposed of Robin's body immediately, maybe actually thrown it into a glacial crevasse because, he points out, a dead foreigner means problems. The Kurds would have taken Vedat's body back with them, he reasons, to bury him on *Kurdish* soil, as is their custom. He says that there's a rumor that the Kurds have told me secretly where he's buried so that I can go there to pray once all this is out of the spotlight. To tell the truth, I'm not holding my breath for any news of the kind."

"Do you seriously believe that's how it all happened?"

"Yes, I do believe that things could have happened like that, but I do *not* know if that's what really happened."

Even after twenty years, I can still get angry at Robin's death—it was sheer madness that could have been avoided with a little common sense. A little . . . a climb, undertaken so recklessly and with such lasting, painful consequences. Basically, I refuse to see that this has anything to do with Fate. Whatever else it may have been, it was pure chance.

If Robin and Vedat hadn't been journalists, the whole matter would have disappeared faster out of the media. As things stood, however, his colleagues intended to go to find out what really happened to them, come what may—because they'd have to keep in mind it could also happen to them if ever they ever wanted to climb Mount Ararat themselves at an inappropriate time.

“I can’t even open a newspaper anymore without my knees starting to shake,” Lale says.

The twins were distraught and began reading the Turkish tabloids. They’d just turned nine and, misinterpreting much of what they read, they tried to recast Robin and Vedat’s disappearance that they knew about from the newspapers into fantastic, ultimately surreal stories where they mixed Kurds and wolves together—both are called *kurt* or *kürt* in Turkish. They mutated soldiers of the Turkish Army into some kind of extraterrestrial aliens that wanted to destroy the Earth so it wouldn’t be left to the wolves. Olli was the one who got himself totally involved in these fantasies, inventing one horrifying scenario after another.

pp. 309-314

“Bad enough, that you can’t help remembering things from time to time.

“I listen to those research students in the café talking about their interviews with the locals, and I wonder what’s true, what isn’t. Who they talked to, who they didn’t talk to. There are some people around who still think you can make what happened not have happened if you just don’t talk about it.”

“What was it with that girl Lilofee when she was my age?”

“You’re already older than she was then. She was going on sixteen, Mother says.”

“Why was it such a big deal anyway? So she got pregnant way too soon. So what? And what about the man?”

“Prisoner of war, Mother says, she’s sure about that. One of the POWs that was still able to work. The ones the rangers went and got from the POW Stalag. The locals were all gone to war.

“The rangers got them interned them in a barrack in a logging camp. Over by Lake Toplitz. Where the Navy was operating a testing station for submarine rockets.”

“Rockets in the lake? Here, in the mountains?”

“Top secret. They had the place all to themselves. The POWs worked in the woods, the same neck of the woods but so far off they couldn’t have gotten wind of what was going on at the testing station. Worried about sabotage.”

“Weren’t there any guards?”

“Sure. But who’d have ever wanted to take off? And where to, anyway? They couldn’t have made it very far after all that hard labor and rotten food. All their windows barred, door locked from the outside every night. Sure they could’ve escaped if they’d really wanted to. Sometimes villagers slipped them something to eat to keep on working. Bread or cabbage. Windfall apples. The locals were hardly living in the lap of luxury themselves. The only things raised around here are meat and plums for slivovitz.”

“Meat?”

“Cattle, what else? Beef was everybody’s favorite dish. And they were keen on fish, of course. All of them went out after game, but you didn’t want to get caught, that meant penitentiary or even the death penalty.”

“You still can’t hunt game.”

“OK, so it’s still illegal, but the penalty for it’s a different kettle of fish. The hardest thing those guys had to put up with was their footwear.”

“What’s with the footwear?”

“Just imagine you’re out there in the woods, chopping down trees, stripping bark, stacking logs onto wagons, hammering hooks in so that nothing falls off. You’re working on a slope, hard to get a footing. Sometimes it’s raining, soon enough it’s snowing. You need solid footwear, sturdy boots. But that’s just what was never sent. Not boots.

“Prisoners, yes, but no boots. And never any padded jackets, or heavy sweaters, or workpants. Just the clothes they had on when they were brought here. And that stuff wore out fast with all the work in the woods. Pine pitch all over them, leaf mold all over them, muck all over them when it rained. Clothes that never really dried out. They’d wash their things in a creek and hang them out to dry on a cord outside the barrack on a warm day. When it rained they’d hang them on poles over the stove. Not enough room for everything. Old lady Gaiswinkler did their underwear.”

“I can’t see how they could even work at all, in conditions like that.”

“You haven’t got a clue what working conditions were like for us on the home front.

“The one ironclad law: you don’t work, you don’t eat. Not a bad idea for some people today who can’t see their dick for their belly.”

“Where did all those POWs come from?”

“Enemy countries. There were British, French, a few from the Eastern front. Most of them had very different jobs as civilians. Civil servants, teachers, day laborers, wine growers. You can imagine how they took to their new work.”

“What about Lilofee’s guy?”

“Polack, Russian, Serb. Probably one of those so-called Slavic sub-human types, Untermenschen. That’s what they called them back then.”

“I heard talk of a Ukrainian.”

“Possible. Lilofee’s the only one who could have known for sure, if he ever mentioned it at all.

“Lilofee was in great shape. Always paddling around the lake in her folding canoe, right through to Fall. She didn’t mind how cold the water got. Over the lake and into the forest. Picked berries. Gathered mushrooms. Collected fir cones to make cough syrup. Not ’cause she had to. Emmerich was a big shot. The Emmrichs never knew what hunger was until the war was over.”

“Just because she liked to?”

“That’s why they called her Lilofee, like in the folk-song. It was all about her boat and her forever swimming in the lake, always the lake.”

“And what’s *his* story?”

“The only prisoner who ever got away. There was talk of an argument or something. About politics or whatever. In any case, he was gone. Just when the rangers had figured that nobody was ever going to take off. Where to, anyway? And miss out on the daily soup ration, their chunk of bread. That was something the prisoners could rely on, at least, to keep them from keeling over at work.

“He was up and gone. No sense of direction. So instead of heading through the Enns valley, he came up over the mountain to our lake.

“Like the mountain bear that came down from the Karawanks and went through here last year.

“It looked like he’d taken a bad fall, worn out as he was from all that logging. Broke a shoulder, maybe an arm, I don’t know. Lay flat in the middle of the blackberry bushes.”

“That’s where she found him?”

“Must’ve found him there and hidden him in one of hay sheds. Apparently made a splint for his arm, put God knows what on it. Brought him something to eat as well. The shed was a pretty safe place, mountain hay was already stored in it, and feeding wouldn’t start until winter.

“Mother says you could watch her changing from a girl to a woman before your very eyes. She’d had it with school, much too boring for her anyway. She racked her brains how to keep this guy alive till the War was over. More than a few of us had figured out by then that the War was coming to an end and we’d started turning a blind eye to everything. And that the Thousand-Year Reich was going nowhere, no matter how many sacrifices we’d go on making.

“It must’ve been a Fall like the one we’re having now. Nobody paid much attention to Lilofee taking her boat out every day, or her going swimming. Nobody took a look at whatever she had in her boat either.”

“She must’ve really been in love with her Russky. Or maybe he was a Polack after all?”

“No wonder. No young men in the village anymore. All of them off to the front.”

“Maybe he had a nice build. Wouldn’t take much to get a girl her age going. Besides, he was injured. A secret like hers was something special because she couldn’t tell it to a single soul. Could almost envy that girl.”

“C’mon! Those POWs were half-starved and in rags, feet covered with puss-filled blisters, scraggly hair, filthy teeth, badly in need of a bath. Nothing to envy there, believe me.

“There’s a little creek behind his hideout. She probably got him cleaned up there, brushed his teeth with salt the way we all did in those days, cut his hair, his beard. She fixed him up the way she wanted him to be. Boiled the water for his tea on a Primus stove. Heated his meals.

“And let him screw her up. That’s what this world’s all about. Money and screwing. There wasn’t any money for either of them, so they tried screwing. It was the only fun folks had back then. No pill in those days. That’s the only reason folks went on having babies.”

“There’s always going to be babies.”

“Do you young people think for one minute that anybody actually wanted to bring a kid into this screwed-up, war-torn world? Babies just happened, ’cause people wanted a bit of fun and because women were afraid of an angel-maker’s abortion. Afraid the angel-maker would botch it, like what happened to Lilofee, or afraid somebody would report them to the police. Abortion meant penitentiary, too. It was forbidden to deprive the Führer of one single, pure, Aryan child.

“But Lilofee was going to have her little bastard no matter what. The same way she’d wanted a doll the year before, Mother says. She was way too young—the jerk took advantage of that.”

“Took advantage! You know what girls are like when their hormones kick in. Should’ve used a safe.”

“If that was always so safe, most of us old folks wouldn’t even be here.

“The simple fact is she got pregnant, safe or no safe.”

pp. 322-28

“Of course he was a party member, our Councilor Emmerich. Otherwise he’d never have become director of the big museum in Vienna. Contacts at the very top. My Mother says he used to wine and dine the Gauleiter and the boss of the Reich Security Head Office.

“Crème de la crème, as they say. The wife of Propaganda Minister Goebbels and their six kids were parked in the mansion on the other side of the lake to get away from the bombings in Berlin. They say Emmerich and his wife were even invited over for a visit once, when the minister himself dropped in to see if his kids would be getting politically correct schooling.

“He swallowed a whole lot of their stuff, especially the Aryan business. Genealogy, made it his hobby. How ‘inferior’ races could be distinguished from Aryans because obviously they were inferior. That’s why they had to be gotten rid of. Rid of them and anybody mentally or physically handicapped. Just blocking the way for so-called ‘superior’ types.

“Emmerich used to take the measurement of noses in his spare time. Checked out people’s skull shapes and foreheads. Once, when Mother was over cleaning at the Emmerichs’, he took her by the chin and turned her head to inspect the profile of her nose. He pronounced it a Roman nose, an imperial nose. Mother didn’t know what the hell he was up to.

“His staff thought he was a nut, with all his Aryan crap. Other than that he was perfectly competent in his field, like knowing how art works are stored and at what temperature.”

“How was he involved with that business about the mountain?”

“He was director of that Vienna museum, so he was a consultant on how to save valuable art works and how to store them. Mineshafts would be the best protection against enemy bombs, and Emmerich was very familiar with that mountain.

“As for art, he didn’t toe the party line. Certainly not when the war was almost over and the Gauleiter was going to blow up the whole damn mountain. A man of culture, he was, our Counselor Emmerich, and he’d actually turn his hand to art and paint, when he wasn’t busy with other people’s noses and bloodlines. Painted the lake a good hundred times and the rock face maybe a thousand.”

“But those art works, wasn’t it partisans and miners who managed to save them? Because they couldn’t risk it that the Gauleiter might blow up the mountain? They’d been making a living off it for hundreds of years.”

“Partisans, sure, but not like Yugoslavian partisans. Mother says most of ours were deserters, conscientious objectors, Communists. Hiding out in haystacks or mountain sheds, kept alive by women who had guts enough to go and feed them.”

“But still, there must have been some who really were resisters and *not* party followers.”

“Well, true enough. But not one of them ever even tried to knock off one of the Reich’s big shots. And it couldn’t have been easier anywhere but right here.

“The British trained a deserter from Altaussee as a paratrooper to come and kill Goebbels here, but by the time they got him ready for his jump, the Reich Propaganda Minister was over the hills and far away.

“When I listen to what you’re saying, it’s ridiculous. Have you any idea what would’ve happened if they’d ever nabbed one of those high and mighty shits and shot him or strung him up in the woods? They wouldn’t have left one stone standing here. I swear to God not one of us would’ve been left alive.”

“Anybody *that* scared is as good as dead.”

“What the hell do you know about being scared to death? The biggest moral problem you’ve ever had since coming into this world is to smoke or not to smoke.

“Let’s get back to those art works. Emmerich didn’t see eye to eye with the Gauleiter who ordered them blown up. The councilor had something totally different in mind.

“Now the manager of the salt works, the curators, and the other museum directors they consulted—they all wanted to save the art works. But there’s one more man who did, too.”

“So who’s that.”

“The former Austrian SS Führer Kaltenbrunner. He’d managed to become the head of the Reich Security Head Office in Berlin and was banking on a ministerial job in the post-war government. Shouted down the Gauleiter on the phone and ordered him to get the dynamite out of the mineshafts. So it couldn’t interfere with his post-war career.

“Big mistake. The Americans pulled him and two guys from the village out of the shed he was holed up in, hoping for his government post after the War. Shipped him off to Nuremberg instead. Death by hanging.”

“What about the councilor? Got off with nothing, they say. A year’s detention in the camp at Glasenbach, that’s all.”

“No, no, Mother says he didn’t get Glasenbach. Did very nicely for himself with the Amis right away, just like he did with the Nazis in ’38. He wasn’t ever in the War. Got deferred ’cause he was a museum director. What’s more, he’d helped rescue the art works and hide them.”

“And our Lilofee?”

“She was traumatized for quite a while. The angel maker would’ve been digging her own grave if she’d ratted on the councilor to the police. There were no other witnesses.”

“What about her guy from the East?”

“Emmerich packed him off to Ebensee as an escaped POW. Said he hadn’t just escaped but had raped his daughter. All contact with POWs, especially sex, was banned. The legal penalty was concentration camp was, in extreme cases, execution. Standard practice for rapists.”

“Concentration camp?”

“There were different kinds in Ebensee. No idea which one he did not get out of.

“When Lilofee was working in a law office afterwards, she had them check the lists of the dead and the survivors, but they found nothing.

“Most likely she didn’t even know his last name. And given the way Emmerich had him roughed up, there’s not much chance he’d ever have lived a normal life anyway.”

“Was everybody such a fanatic back then or just the Nazis from Vienna and Berlin? Emmerich was from Vienna, right?”

“If you’re sucked in by that sort of thing, it makes no difference whether you’re from Vienna or the Alps. Mother claims they were so cocky they were sick. Just because our skin became paler and our hair blonder, or whatever they think made us ‘superior’. Everybody knows Iranians all have black hair and they’re still supposedly Aryans.

“The art works they hid in the mineshafts were meant only for ‘the superior race’. And if we’d already lost, then nobody else was going to enjoy them. Certainly not Jews or Slavic *Untermenschen*, who don’t know a thing about great art anyway except how to make money off them.”

“What’s this great art you’re talking about?”

“Art treasures from occupied countries, and from Jewish collectors, too, of course. Their art works were either paid for just on paper or or were simply confiscated for the Fuehrer’s

collection in Linz. Pieces like the Ghent altarpiece, and Bruegels, Rembrandts, even a Vermeer. Nothing but the finest, if you get my meaning. Even the Venus of Willendorf—how about that!

“You could do anything you wanted to the Jews back then, it was all legal. They were treated worse than Lilofee’s *Untermensch*.”

“The worst thing the likes of us could do was to have anything to do with a Jew.”

“That must’ve really put you on the spot.”

“There were people a lot more dangerous than the councilor. He only *believed* in all that crap, never had to *act* on it. Legal cover for everything. They locked you up just for letting a foreign worker have a swig of your beer.

“Mother told me about a midwife who had something going with a Jewish businessman in his summer house over in Bad Ischl. She was seen going in so many times that somebody reported her. She was obviously long past menopause, so nothing could have come of that *Rassenschande*, that ‘racial defilement’. But they hauled her into court anyway and gave her a year in jail. And she was one of the lucky ones. The man himself was sent to a concentration camp in the East—no way he survived.”

“Nobody ever talked about stuff like that at home.”

“You’re another schoolgirl who didn’t pay attention.”

“Our whole class *did* watch the documentary on Simon Wiesenthal, but that Auschwitz is miles away.”

“So your school couldn’t manage to make the few miles to Ebensee or Mauthausen?”

“I know that something went on over there. But that it could’ve happened in Ischl, *that* I just can’t believe.”

“What’s right in front of you, can leave you flabbergasted anytime. So you needn’t be surprised that even our Councilor Emmerich, whose family owned the *Seehaus* Hotel for two generations...”

“Stop! Enough of your stories! Who gives a hoot about them now? Things are different these days anyway. Thank God!”

“Sez you, but when Resl’s daughter showed up with a black baby, you were the first to say the father should be locked up.”

“Because they don’t belong together, black and white.”

“Back then the Nazis called it ‘a Gross Violation of the People’s Healthy Sense of Common Decency’.”

“That is stupid! That’s not what I meant at all.”

“You actually think jails are more comfortable nowadays with their hot water and TVs?”

“You’re at it again, seeing ghosts.”

“Yes, I *do* see ghosts, and those ghosts are very much alive.”

Translated by James B. Lawson and Gerald Chapple

For Foreign Rights Inquiries Please Contact:

Inka Ihmels
Foreign Rights Manager
Tel: +49-30-28394-123
ihmels@aufbau-verlag.de