

My name was once Johann Kaiser. You've probably heard of me. I'm fifty-four years old, Aries, and currently living under an assumed identity at a location I can't disclose. It's for my own protection. Here's what I can tell you: there are clouds and trees here; there's grass and animals that eat the grass. We have running water and electricity, not to mention sunshine. People live in houses here. Houses with roofs and windows, balconies or porches. The average house has two floors, not including the basement, as this does not serve as living space, but instead as storage for food, photosensitive materials, and all manner of secrets. I, too, live in such a house. I sleep and shower and work here.

Aside from the chirping of birds and the sound a tree makes when seized by a gust of wind, things are quiet in the neighborhood. It's mostly families around here. The robotic lawn mowers that most households own are as remarkable for the precision with which they clip the grass as they are in their silence. When I prepare my breakfast every morning, they're already at it, trundling across the adjacent plots like electric moles. I like the discipline of their movement, the geometric forms they follow.

I boil an egg and toast two slices of bread that I coat with a thin layer of mustard and dress with cheese, tomato, and avocado. I arrange a glass of orange juice, a cup of coffee, my toast, and my iPad on a tray patterned with peaches and carry it out to the porch. I work my way through the daily papers as I eat. I read *Le Monde*, the *Guardian*, the *Sun*, the *New York Times*, *El País*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *BILD*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *BLICK*, *Tagesanzeiger*, *Liechtensteiner Volksblatt*, *Liechtensteiner Vaterland*, *Der Standard*, and on Thursdays, *DIE ZEIT*. I save PDFs of articles relating to my situation in a folder labeled "Me." I load the dishwasher, adding my plate and silverware to the dirty dishes from the night before, fish a tablet of detergent from the box, and select the appropriate setting. I usually go for the automatic wash cycle, and will occasionally opt for light wash, but never china/crystal. Glorious, the sound a dishwasher makes. I know to be careful not to grow accustomed to the things around me. Intense emotional attachment, whether to people or objects, leaves nothing but a void when it's gone.

I'm unable to reach any conclusions about the people who lived in this house before me. Someone went to great lengths to remove all sign of earlier tenants. There's no wear and tear on the furniture, the walls are freshly painted, and if the walls ever did have holes in them, they're so well spackled, I couldn't say where they might have been. There's a kitchen equipped with

premium appliances where I do my cooking, a living room where I can sit and relax, a bathroom where I wash multiple times a day, a bedroom where I sleep and masturbate, a basement I don't use, and finally, a roomy space under the roof I've converted into an office. It's so quiet up there, the only sounds I hear are those I create myself: my breathing, paging through a book, sharpening a pencil and writing with it in a notebook, cutting paper, punching holes in those sheets and later filing them in a ring binder, typing on a keyboard.

Given my professional situation, I have felt compelled these past few years to change my whereabouts on a regular basis, most recently a few months ago. I was in a café, drinking the best espresso I've ever tasted, yet again re-reading *The Disappearance of Data*, by the criminal psychologist Dr. Jan Mayer, in which he depicts a fictionalized version of our encounter. In the book I'm called Marius Fritz. A woman in her mid-forties sat at the next table, paging through the local paper. For as long as I can remember, I've been intrigued by dubious characters, which is why the headline on the back page caught my eye. "Would You Trust This Man?" the newspaper editors asked their readers, but I couldn't see the photo, because the woman's hand was in the way. As I purchased a copy at the next newspaper stand, I had no way of knowing that that would be the last espresso I'd ever drink at this latitude. The man whose trustworthiness the newspaper called into question was me.

I was beside myself. I got in the camper and drove down endless roads until the sun had disappeared below the horizon. I finally stopped hours later in a grocery store parking lot and dialed the number I had been instructed to, should such need arise. My whole body was trembling. The contact's voice was quiet and cool. I imagined she wore a suit and sunglasses. There was something arrogant about her composure, a real know-it-all air that sent me over the edge.

"Is there nowhere I'm safe, goddammit?" I barked into the receiver.

I slammed my forehead against the steering wheel and cried. Everything came rushing back. The torture in Argentina, my escape across Europe, then the fabrications sown by those who aimed to brand me a traitor. There's simply no escaping, I thought in despair. Not from yourself, and certainly not from Hans-Adam II and his cronies.

Since moving into this house, I've become even more circumspect. I maintain an amicable yet distant relationship with my neighbors. They think I work in the so-called IT sector. I make sure to be seen regularly, but not too often. We wave over the hedges or engage in brief

conversations. Otherwise, I rarely leave the house, and when I do, it's to swim laps at the pool, send documents from the post office, or run little errands. I buy fresh milk, bananas, and mint every day. Beyond that, I work.

The first half of the day I spend reading and preparing excerpts, then turn my full attention to the text following a light lunch. The diligence of the scientist and ambition of the writer are to blame for the fact that I spend so much time formulating pithy arguments intended to resonate with readers. The truer a sentence, the more beautiful it is.

Despite the constant danger I face and consequent urgency, I have made it my business to research and cite sources wherever possible. For you to understand why I acted as I did, I need to do more than simply provide a comprehensive picture of my character and personal history. I must also depict the circumstances under which I found myself flung to and fro, like a pinball. Because this story—my story—is all I have left in my defense against those who wish to see me dead.

Wishing you a pleasant yet stirring read,

Johann Kaiser

Book One

(1962–1971)

## 0.

In September of 1962, Alfred Kaiser, a young amateur photographer from the Principality of Liechtenstein, was vacationing on the beach. In Badalona, a town just outside Barcelona, he bought a few cans of beer, parked himself on a wall along the boardwalk, and gazed out at the infinite blue blur on the horizon. Shrieking gulls circled overhead, and neon-colored swimsuits glowed in the sand before him. Accustomed as he was to the ubiquity of mountains that clearly delineate the landscape and demarcate where one thing ends and another begins, he came to realize that the sight of the sea frightened him. He finished his beer and escaped to a shadowy café, attracted by its dark blue awning. It smelled of stale smoke and deep fat fryer oil. A few Spaniards played pool as Alfred downed one shot after the other.

When he awoke the next morning, his head was pounding as if a road crew were at work inside it. Alfred was in a room that contained nothing but the mattress he lay upon. It was terribly drafty. First, he noticed that the walls were unfinished, then that the room had no windowpanes, and then that the view was breathtaking. What floor was he on? Alfred took a picture. Given the sound the camera made, he must have snapped an entire roll of film the previous night. After leaving the skeletal high-rise and having a little lunch, he looked for somewhere to get the photos developed. He then ambled through the streets, ate an ice cream here and there, and spent his evening watching TV in his hotel room.

A few days later, Alfred laid eyes on the best photographs he had ever taken. In the first two, young men assailed one another with broken pool cues. The following pictures showed an electric fan lying busted on a stone floor; a counter flecked with light; men in straw hats playing cards; lobsters crowding an aquarium; a flash of a dog sleeping soundly against an overturned paddle boat; and his own name, written in the sand. The remaining photos depicted a black-haired woman, whose age Alfred struggled to guess. She could as easily be fifteen, or maybe nineteen, as twenty-five. She had delicate features and a slender, almost frail body, but her gaze was severe. In what Alfred considered the most accomplished of the photos, she stood in the glow of a streetlight, pulling her salmon-colored top—which contrasted gorgeously with her tanned skin—up over her navel. The photos led Alfred to two conclusions: first, he had to make a career of his hobby and become a professional photographer. Second, he had to find that woman.

Alfred was finally successful on the second-to-last day of his trip. The owner of a neighborhood ice cream shop knew that the photogenic woman worked at an indoor market near Badalona. He took the bus to the city limit, then walked until he reached a large building with people streaming in and out. He walked among the stands, on the lookout for her. Was that her? He carefully approached and examined the apricots on display, weighing one in his hand. He didn't notice his hand was sticky until the Spanish invective reached his ears. He hastily searched his pocket for coins to purchase the crushed fruit, but was grabbed by the shoulder and yanked around before he could locate his wallet. It was her! From the way she was talking, it seemed she remembered him. Alfred smiled. The woman slapped him. Her hand was very warm.

They didn't say a word on the ride to Badalona. When they reached the bus station, the woman gestured toward a bar located across the parking lot. They sat at a table in the corner, a man brought them beer, and as soon as one glass was empty, he placed another full one beside it. Why doesn't the waiter take the empty glasses with him? Alfred tried to ask his companion, but his Spanish wasn't good enough. He sat silently, she sat silently, four empty glasses, two full, then the woman laid her hand flat against her chest and said, "Soledad." "Alfred," Alfred said. Six empty glasses, then eight, and suddenly ten. Soledad stood and said, "Tú." Alfred looked at her uncomprehendingly. "Pagar," she said, and Alfred paid. There were no farewells that night. Alfred stood sheepishly under a streetlight as Soledad pulled him into her building. He followed her up a dilapidated stairway, and when they reached her one-room apartment, Soledad pointed at the cot against the wall.

Following his return to the microstate, people felt Alfred had changed. It came as a big surprise when word got out that this young man, who'd always been such a slouch, had applied for work as a news photographer at the *Liechtensteiner Volksblatt*. Even more surprising was when the ne'er-do-well got the job. The mailman told everyone about the letters postmarked in Spain that Alfred—whom no one had ever written in the past—had been receiving these past few weeks, and the word among regulars at Café Matt was that the godless boy had discovered his faith down there. How else could you explain the many times Alfred had visited the priest since his return?

The actual explanation, however, was decidedly more secular. The priest, who had been a missionary in Guatemala for a number of years, spoke Spanish. He translated Soledad's letters to Alfred and responded in Alfred's name. The priest translated Soledad's "I'm pregnant" as "I

can't wait to see you again, my darling," while Alfred's "I thirst for your thighs" became "Please move to Mauren." He delivered the news to Alfred that she wasn't going to keep the baby and he should send money by explaining "I can't afford a trip to Liechtenstein." He reformulated Alfred's "I want you" in response as "I will provide for you and the child." Alfred signed at the end, tucked a train ticket in the envelope, and brought it to the post office.

Soledad and Alfred spoke very little leading up to their wedding in May of 1963. A month after Father Ritter witnessed their vows, Soledad gave birth to two children. Twins Luise and Lotte looked so similar, Alfred had a hard time distinguishing one girl from the other. While he crisscrossed the microstate to photograph various events, Soledad tended to the children and the household. She quickly learned the language, and when it became possible to converse with her husband, she discovered it would be best to keep communication nonverbal in the future. Their relationship was defined by a special type of magnetism. The attractive force that governed their bodies morphed into revulsion the moment one of those bodies made use of its voice. As a result of the former, at 2:33 in the morning on March 31, 1965, a big baby boy was delivered in the National Hospital in Vaduz. That boy was me.

## 1.

How very cold the world was. How inhospitable and bleak. The light in the delivery room was dim, and raindrops pelted the window. Alfred sat on the bed and cradled his leg. In an outburst of extreme anger, he had kicked the coffee vending machine in the hallway, because it had eaten his money without offering anything in return. Trying to get me to laugh, he leaned over and made a face. Horrified that I should spend the rest of my life with this person, I let out a cry that rattled the windowpanes. The cry echoed its way out of the building, swirled around the tip of the church steeple, and fired off twelve strokes of the bell inside. It forced its way through a crack in the door to the seat of government—what's great about Vaduz is how compact it is, everything located within a stone's throw—and swept through the parliamentary chamber before gaining access to Dr. Gerard Batliner's office, where the prime minister was asleep with his forehead on his desk. At the sound of several binders tumbling from the shelves, Dr. Batliner awoke and didn't know who he was. The cry howled through the capital, shattered the windows at Huber Fine Watches & Jewelry, and sped up the hill until it reached the castle enthroned there on an

outcropping. It penetrated the thick walls, roared past the royal family treasures housed in the basement—past the Picassos and Rembrandts, Cranachs and Botticellis—until it reached the upper apartments to find the princely couple of Liechtenstein dreaming in a four-poster bed. Prince Franz Josef II embraced Princess Gina in his sleep—he was the big spoon, she the little one. The cry then whooshed past the other slumbering princes and princesses and entered the room of the eldest son and heir to the throne, Hans-Adam II, who awoke, heard the roaring cry, and quavered with fear as he pulled the blankets up over his nose. The cry vanished into the night and climbed to the microstate’s highest point—the summit of the Grauspitz is 8,527 feet above sea level—before detonating with deafening volume. The sound echoed in the valleys for a long time to come: the Data Thief, the Data Thief is born.

“Typical Aries,” the midwife said with a smile. Alfred sulked by the window. The skies split open and displayed a crescent moon, which flooded the delivery room with silvery light.

“Interesting,” the midwife said, pointing at the starry sky. “Look at that, Herr Kaiser. A large concentration of planets in the second house, the house of Taurus.”

“Ah,” said Alfred.

“Remember that the second house symbolizes the world of concrete objects. The moon, Venus, Saturn, and the minor planet Chiron are all present tonight.”

Alfred nodded impassively.

“The moon,” the midwife explained, “stands for property and permanence. Venus suggests both business acumen and sensuality, while Saturn is a sign of thrift. Chiron stands for ambition and the need for security.”

“Oh,” said Alfred.

“To hear the stars tell it, little Johann will put a lot of energy into amassing property.”

Alfred’s ears perked up.

“Johann will be a frugal person,” the midwife continued, “who earns a lot of money through hard work.”

Alfred reached for my hand. The midwife smiled knowingly. As it happened, she would never discover how right she had been. She died three years after my birth, in a skiing accident in the Swiss Alps.

The room I occupied those first few years was painted pale blue, with gentle shimmers of pink still visible in spots. In the middle of the room was a bed enclosed in wooden slats that seemed to me to reach all the way to the ceiling. I would lie there and watch the shadows of tree branches move across the drawn curtains. It was like in Plato's Cave. While the real world blossomed in every color imaginable outside my room, I—the human trapped in a crib—was left with no choice but to settle for simulacra. For colorless, sad shadows.

It was light during the day and grew dark at night. Although I'd become an expert in darknesses in recent months, this one was different from those that came before. This darkness had eyes. This darkness pierced. I turned toward the movement, and as I did, the darkness assumed the shape of a body. Hands. This darkness had hundreds of hands. It would prick me on one side while jabbing a finger in my ear on the other. It bopped me on the nose and yanked my toe, and when I opened my mouth to ask what was going on, it hissed, "Quit crying, you rotten little traitor," and covered my mouth with another one of its hands.

Mamá appeared at first light. She was holding two braids attached to two identical faces. Both had bushy eyebrows and full lips as well as freckles covering cheeks damp with tears. The missing incisor in the left one's mouth was all that distinguished it from the one on the right.

"This is Luise, and this is Lotte," Mamá said. "Your sisters."

She had to pull my sisters' hair harder till one of them finally said: "Hello." The other one added: "Nice to meet you." "My name is Johann," I tried to respond, but instead of speaking, I started to cry. "You must be hungry," Mamá said, unbuttoning her blouse. As I suckled at her nipple to be polite, I spotted the girls standing in the doorway. The one missing a tooth slowly drew her outstretched index finger across her throat.

Having a "family" was peculiar. Everyone but me had something to do. The twins went to work at "kindergarten," Alfred went to work as a "photographer," and Mamá went to work on me. She had jet-black hair and the peculiar ability to bring things into being using the simplest of resources. Here's an example: she might say "come," then "changing table," and suddenly I found myself on a wooden surface. If she said "change," followed by "diaper," an unpleasant smell wafted up to my nose. Then she said "powder," and the stench dissipated. "Curtain" meant light entered the room. "Johann" meant she was kissing me. Best, though, was the word "door." It promised nothing short of amazement when opened.

“Living room,” “kitchen,” “garage.” Fascinating, the things a “house” contained. There were “carpets,” “pillows,” and “sofas,” not to mention “lamps” and “curtains,” and in the same way “curtains” were what encased the “windows,” “outside” was what encased the house. “Outside” was called “Mauren.” And Mauren was where “the trees” were. There was a “sky,” and the white spots on it were “clouds,” and when the “neighbors” wore “hoods” on their “heads,” it meant that the clouds were dripping. That was “rain.” Only “morons” left the house when it was raining. “Alfred,” for instance. Alfred left the house every day.

The most peculiar object in this house, peerless as it was in its assemblage of peculiar objects, was located in the room Mamá called “my bedroom.” She opened the door, pointed at the wardrobe in the corner and said, “Look.” You could see into the wardrobe through a rectangular window in the wood. Two people lived inside. A woman and a baby. The woman was so beautiful. And the baby. What a beautiful baby. The woman appeared to agree. Whenever she stroked the baby’s head, I could feel something touching my hair. “That’s you,” Mamá said, and the woman pointed at me. “That’s me,” she said, and the woman in the wardrobe pointed at her. The baby didn’t seem to understand. It reached out its hands and grabbed the woman’s cheek. Mamá’s skin was very warm. “My darling,” Mamá said. “Once you’re a little bigger,” she continued, pointing at a photograph taped above the wardrobe window, “we’re going to move.” The picture showed the sun sprawled out over the rooftops. “Spain,” Mamá said. “Alfred promised.” Was the woman in the window crying? “Do you understand?” I gurgled. She kissed my forehead and said, “Genius.” The baby gave me an imperceptible nod.

Alfred came to see me on the days the *Liechtensteiner Volksblatt* was printed—Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. He entered the room, newspaper clamped under one arm, and shook my hand in greeting. He showed me which pictures he had taken and read aloud the articles he considered especially accomplished. You had to watch out for Communism, he said one Tuesday, when the topic turned to the Soviet satellite that had been orbiting far above our heads in recent days. “The Soviets are everywhere.”

One night, I noticed something red blinking in my room. I clenched my fists. “Freeze!” I yelled at the Soviet satellite that had clearly come for me. I climbed out of bed and followed the glow into a room where Alfred was asleep on the couch. The satellite whirred around his head, and I took a careful step closer, until I was just inches away. I sensed its warmth, its pulsation,

but as I swooped in to destroy it, the room morphed into my nursery. The darkness had lifted. It was morning. I was back in bed.

Mamá interpreted the idiotic babble that issued forth, as I tried telling her about the satellite, as a sign of hunger and stuck a nipple in my mouth. What had come so naturally the night before—bipedal movement, verbal expression—had at daybreak reverted to the old immobility and futile stabs at communication. Maybe the Soviets weren't so bad, after all, I thought, folding my hands the way Alfred did when he wanted something.

It seemed there existed a qualitative difference between places. Those I frequented with Mamá were the unspectacular ones. They were those of light. Whereas lightness forced me into a straitjacket, the places that took shape upon the return of darkness granted me unrestricted freedom of movement. I loped through cornfields, soared above forests—if not on my own, then on the backs of birds—explored the bottom of the ocean, or sang my name from the mountaintops. There was nothing I couldn't do there. I eventually realized that darkness was a condition I could induce on my own by closing my eyes. I wasn't always successful in falling asleep, though. The more I tried, the more fitful I grew, and being fitful made me cry, and because Mamá couldn't stand me crying, she said, "Want to see a trick?" I looked at her in anticipation. "One," she said, and paused. Then she said, "Two." What kind of stupid trick was this? "Three." Because she, "four," ignored my quizzical look, I decided to play along at "five." "Six." What did I have to lose? "Seven," "eight," "nine." She lowered her voice, "ten," with every word, "eleven," and my initial irritation "twelve," slowly gave way, "thirteen," to relaxation. "Fourteen," "fifteen," "sixteen." Weirdly enough, it was kind of nice, "seventeen," to have someone sitting beside me, "eighteen," just, "nineteen," saying words, "twenty," I didn't understand. "Twenty-one," my eyes closed, "twenty-two." The distance between Mamá and me grew. "Twenty-three." It wasn't scary, though, "twenty-four," because I knew, "twenty-five," she was right there. "Twenty-six." Always there. "Twenty-seven," floated in from afar, and I barely heard "twenty-eight." "Twenty-nine," I was so tired "thir—"

I only returned to the light of the world in order to eat. Summer had arrived, and I was busy running through irregular verb conjugations when a tremendous hunger forced me to leave my study. The twins' faces appeared above me like two suns.

"Mamá isn't here," Lotte said.

“So we’re going to feed you,” Luise added.

While Luise fetched the light blue pillow with the big fish on it, Lotte lifted me from the crib and laid me on the floor. Then they tossed the pillow back and forth above my body, and I reached for it, squealing with delight.

“Do you want the pillow?” Lotte asked. I laughed.

“Well, here it is,” Luise said, planting it on my face.

“Do you know who this room belonged to before you?” I heard one of the twins ask.

My perfectly enunciated “No” was swallowed by the pillow as the pressure increased. It was getting harder to breathe, and I didn’t like the darkness anymore. I tried to remove the pillow from my head, but I wasn’t strong enough yet. Then suddenly, the light returned. I took a deep breath and vomited. Alfred stood before me, two braids in each hand, pulling the shrieking twins off me like rabid dogs. I closed my eyes and counted to thirty. There was nothing to hold me here in this world.