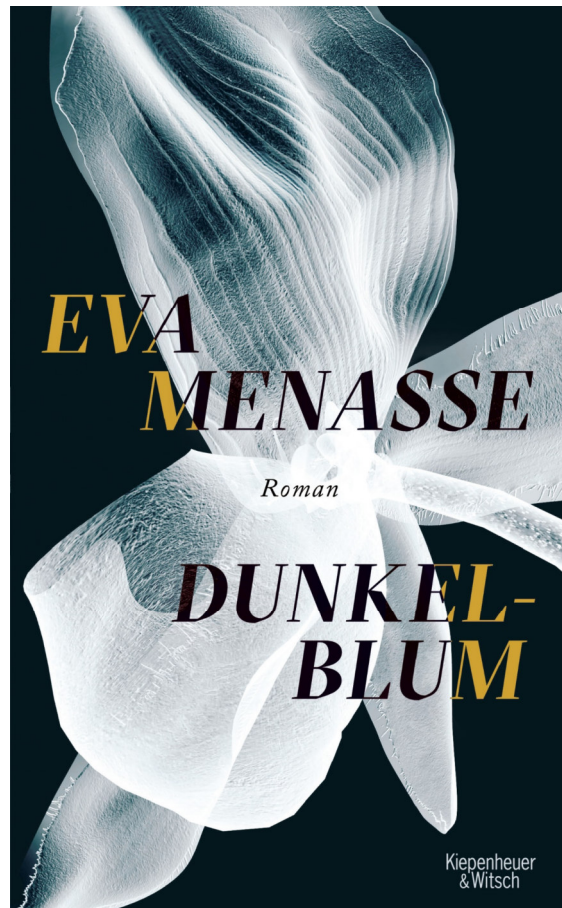


DARKENBLOOM

by Eva Menasse

Sample Translation © 2021, Charlotte Collins



Literary Fiction / Novel

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Part I

The Austrians are a people who confidently look forward to the past.

Proverb

I. / 1

In Darkenbloom the walls have ears, the flowers in the gardens have eyes; they turn their heads this way and that so nothing escapes them, and the grass has whiskers that register every step. People here have a sixth sense. Curtains billow as if fanned by quiet breathing, in and out, essential to life. Whenever God looks down into these houses from above, as though they had no roofs – when he peeps into the doll’s houses of the model town he constructed with the Devil to serve as a warning to all, in almost every house he sees people standing at the window, behind their curtains, peering out. Sometimes – often – there are two, even three of them in the same house, standing at windows in different rooms, concealed from one another. One wishes God could only see into houses and not into hearts.

In Darkenbloom, the locals know everything about each other, and the few tiny details they don’t know, that they can neither fabricate nor simply leave out – these are not irrelevant, these matter most of all. Whatever is not common knowledge predominates like a curse. The others, the incomers and those who have married in, don’t know much. They know that the castle burned down, that the count’s descendants now live in various far-flung countries but usually return for weddings and christenings, when there is great celebration throughout the town. The children gather flowers in the cottage gardens and wreath garlands, the old women dig out their hundred-year-old traditional costumes, and everyone stands the length of Herrengasse and waves. The foreign brides note with tight little smiles that, although the republicans took over many years ago, the subjects here can still be relied upon, on high days and holidays, at least.

It’s been a long time, though, since counts were buried here. The crypt can be visited, but it is no longer accepting occupants. It wasn’t until twenty years after the war that the counts were lured back to Darkenbloom, with the information that the family crypt was no longer watertight. By contrast, immediately after the war somebody – no one knows who – kept them away with astonishing diplomatic finesse: the news conveyed to them about the condition of the burnt-out ruin was greatly exaggerated. Demolished, alas, it had to be completely demolished: this was the assessment presented, amid wailing and gnashing of teeth. And the recently widowed countess-in-exile believed her former stewards and tenants and secretaries and maids, or whosoever was behind it, or whosoever passed on things they knew from hearsay or things they had been forced to say themselves. Perhaps the countess wanted to believe it. She was too lazy, or too cowardly, to come and see for herself, too low on funds to pay for a surveyor’s report. And so the castle was pulled down, and a huge piece of prime real estate became available in a previously inaccessible central location. Someone must have profited back then, because someone always does. The centre of Darkenbloom has been architecturally and atmospherically divided ever since: the centuries-old rustic half, with its winding streets and whitewashed houses

with their blue or green shutters, and the other half, hideously functional, all steel and silicone, practical, easily wiped clean, just as people would have liked to have been themselves, back then, in the period of reconstruction.

And so, twenty years later, the countess's genial eldest son returned for a flying visit, a man who could be described as many things, but not sentimental. The ancestors are seeping! he trumpeted, the crypt was opened, and what needed to be sealed was sealed. Afterwards, the priest blessed everything emphatically and for all eternity, and the crypt was closed again. It is said that there were still women of Darkenbloom who kissed *His Serene Highness's* hand after the ceremony, curtsying as they did so. Ferbenz, meanwhile, put up posters announcing happy hour in Café Posauner at precisely the same time. However, this attempt to divide the community did not meet with success: when the count and the priest issued a summons, most people knew what was expected of them, even if the majority were of Ferbenz's opinion. The count took precedence. He was so seldom there, after all. And so Ferbenz sat in Café Posauner with his hardcore stalwarts, and they drank till their noses glowed, and although it looked like a defeat, each of them knew that they would all always remember who had been there, and, more to the point, who had not; and those present who had bull necks – which was the majority – were already ruddy-naped with anticipation, because soon, when the count departed, the balance of power would be restored in Darkenbloom.

Ever since the counts had sealed their crypt, and with it their exodus, time had essentially stood still. Seasons and hemlines changed; television programmes became more varied, and more abundant. The people of Darkenbloom grew older, as people do, but because they drank copiously – flashing eyes, rosy cheeks – their ageing would go a long time almost unnoticed, until at last their friend John Barleycorn struck swiftly and without mercy. He was a professional killer: on getting out of bed his chosen victim would start to cough, just a little; then, over breakfast, he would bring up the first of many gobbets of blood; these followed one another in ever quicker succession until, after a quarter of an hour at most, it was all over, leaving behind – for those who were left behind – an impressive mess that almost never served as a deterrent. The idiot Fritz would be informed and, happy as a sandboy whenever he received a commission, would measure up the lovely oak boards in his workshop the very same day, whistling a ragtime tune as he prepared the so-called wooden pyjamas.

The drinkers to whom this had not yet happened believed that it was therefore unlikely. For decades, Ferbenz had sat with Berneck, the Heuraffl brothers, stitched-up Schurl and young Graun in either Café Posauner or Hotel Tüffer – once so elegant, now blighted by peasant ceramics and braided straw – explaining the world and its history to his drinking companions and scheming against the mayor of the day, or the bank manager, or the head of the tourist board, until one of these walked through the door and bought a couple of rounds, securing Ferbenz's unconditional support. Ferbenz himself actually drank very little, but was skilled at pretending otherwise. He knew how to emerge from any situation in life unscathed.

Just two streets away from the Tüffer, at Tempelgasse number 4, Antal Grün rearranged his grocery shop as tirelessly as an ant. He was a teetotaler, and based on his experience he believed many things to be possible, although he never talked about them. In his blue overalls, with three meagre strands of hair combed diagonally across his round head, from the right temple to the opposite ear, he unpacked fresh goods and packed up those that were past their sell-by dates, dragged crates and boxes back and forth, made sandwich rolls for a dozen schoolchildren whose parents could afford to pay for such luxuries and wanted to do so, as a way of showing off; he obligingly read out to elderly ladies the small print on the cummerbund around the balls of wool (*20 per cent Dralon, 80 per cent polyacrylic, no, my dear lady, there seems to be no cotton in that at all*), and took particular pleasure in threading a new roll of paper into his till. Every time he was amazed that it had worked once more. Every time he anxiously imagined the mechanism malfunctioning, the paper curling up, that instead of being drawn in it would be spat out, rejected. The prospect filled him with clammy unease. If he started obsessing about it, he had to go and wash his hands for a long time in order to distract himself. And only when there really was nothing else to do, when the roll of paper was fat and new, every shelf filled, the stone floor swept, only then would he turn thoughtfully to the new-fangled metal stands for newspapers and postcards that he had recently allowed a dubious salesman with a foreign accent to talk him into buying, and which now, rather oddly, even displayed hand-tinted historical photographs of Darkenbloom Castle.

The general practitioner Dr Sterkowitz, on the other hand, did drink, but in moderation, and only because it was the done thing around here. Elsewhere he would have chewed tobacco or eaten sugar balls; he set greater store by harmonious coexistence than was usual in Darkenbloom. Sterkowitz was almost always in his car, currently a flashy orange Japanese model, making house calls. He insisted that house calls allowed him greater flexibility, because if he needed to spend a bit longer with those who were bedridden he could just leave out the ones who weren't that sick anyway, or were, for the most part, hypochondriacs. The surgeries he was required to hold three mornings a week, despite his home visiting service, were thus even more chaotic than they would have been had his time been organized in a regular way. Vaccinated children bawling, feverish old people collapsing, and more than once he had thwarted double pneumonia at the last minute with a cocktail of broad-spectrum antibiotics, because even after all these decades not everyone knew that Dr Sterkowitz came to your house on principle, not just in an emergency; or else they preferred to come themselves rather than see that flashy car pull up in front of their half-finished bungalows and run-down farms. Sterkowitz refused to be talked out of his service concept. The truth was that he just liked being out and about. Perhaps he was so keen on driving because he had a particular aversion to being in closed rooms; who knows. Wherever he went he threw open the windows. You need to breathe, he would scold; sick people need fresh air, you'll suffocate before you freeze. Yet it seems that in our town everyone would rather simmer in their own fug!

Dr Sterkowitz was now several years past the statutory pension age, but so far this had not been a problem. He felt fit, his test results were satisfactory, and he'd bought the orange Honda new just a few years ago. That would have been a shame. Where else was he supposed to drive it, if not to his patients? Gradually, though, he found himself starting to wait: for the so-called twilight years, and the replacement he had been promised. These days he also thought from time to time about his predecessor, and how he may have waited to be replaced.

Time, suspended. Since people, unlike animals, always need to be doing something, even if only renovating their dwellings, they create for themselves the apparently necessary feeling that they are moving with the times. The people of Darkenbloom naturally believed this, too. In reality, though, they had finally been left in peace, left behind, marginalized as they were. The fateful native beast that, when it began to stir, brought death and ruin, and obliterated for decades not only the people but their moral principles too, had lain dormant for so long that people had slowly started to forget it. It seemed to have been finished off for good. Now it really was bedecked with little nails, and they were metal ones, not cloves, as Brahms's pretty lullaby would have it. The murderous lindworm lay motionless in a bed of concrete and barbed wire, and the drama of the world played out elsewhere. The last time the deadly serpent had made its presence felt, it had essentially been a long sigh, a deep, sorrowful exhalation, as if in an oppressive dream. That was how it seemed, anyway, looking back; but that time, the last to date, a female resident of Darkenbloom had suffered a dramatic breakdown. In early November 1956, after hearing the news on the radio, Agnes Kalmar snatched up a blanket and a few items of food and ran barefoot with her bundle, screaming and crying, right through the town and into the forest in the direction of Kalsching. Many people saw her run past; nobody drew the right conclusions. Some assumed that something else had happened to her son, Fritz. As a small child he had been shot in the head during the final phase of the battle for Darkenbloom, and had been regarded ever since as the village idiot – but by this time the fourteen-year-old was already apprenticed to the carpenter, and it wasn't until the following day that he mentioned his mother was missing. Two more days went by before Agnes was found. She was dragged out of the forest, hypothermic, dishevelled, witch-like, her lips and teeth blue with bilberries; she screamed and struggled, and was taken to a hospital a long way away, where she stayed until things had quietened down. Fritz learned to take care of himself back then, after a fashion, and all those who knew him were relieved. And it was then, with his mother gone, and despite the turmoil in the town, that his friendly, helpful nature was revealed for the first time. When he finished work he would show up at the old primary school, which had been converted into a makeshift dormitory for the refugees, and every evening he assisted Dr Sterkowitz and Antal Grün by running errands, carrying things, or doing minor repairs. Without discussing it – in fact, without ever making a conscious decision – the doctor and the grocer took on the organization of the whole operation. They worked till they were ready to drop. Fritz was almost always there with them. Late at

night he would bring a pot of soup someone had urged him to take to them; he fetched cigarettes and poured cups of bitter thermos coffee for the people lying on the mattresses. This went on for weeks. But in January, when the carpenter first showed his apprentice how to build a coffin, Fritz didn't seem to make the connection with the young woman who had frozen to death, and whose body he himself had helped recover by stretcher the previous night.

That, then, was the last time the serpentine beast had raised its head, sighing in its sleep, this monster of many names, *határ*, *meja*, *hranica*, all of them too innocuous, because none evokes the fire and the poison, the explosive mixture of past crimes, premonitions, fears for the future, hysteria. Only one thing is certain: nothing good has ever come from it, from the border.

I. / 2

Thirty-two years and a few months after Fritz helped carry the dead woman out of the snowdrift, a man took the bus to Darkenbloom. It was a hot day in the early August of 1989. This man wished to arrive as a stranger; he was hoping to approach it from an unbiased perspective. But Darkenbloom knows how to clout people on the back of the head so that they immediately topple straight into the old gutters, face down in the muddy puddles of their own prejudices. And so a malicious twist of fate slipped the man the regional edition of a daily newspaper, and he leafed through it, bored, an activity that demanded more of his fingers than his brain. Outside, fields stretched to the horizon in regular, colourful, transverse stripes, green-gold-green-gold-green-blue, everything straight as a die apart from the avenues of poplars at the edges of the picture, children's book aesthetics. There would be more topographical variation once they had passed Kirschenstein. Only at the very end of the journey would the landscape start to rise, or at least heave itself to its knees. Just before Darkenbloom the Earth's crust had bulged slightly, in time immemorial, forming what the people of Darkenbloom proudly called a *mountain*. The colours of the fields alternated in regular rhythm; the strip of sky remained immaculately blue, not so much as a scrap of white cloud. The traveller grew sleepy.

A Nazi salute on holiday is a travel deficiency that justifies a reduction in price; the removal of a towel, however, is not.

What? Excuse me? Sorry – beg your pardon? A jolt, as though at the very last moment he had escaped tumbling into a ravine, when in fact it was just his heavy head falling forward and being snatched back by the final vestiges of consciousness, as if by a furious coachman.

The bus bumped over the seams in the ready-mixed concrete slabs, which were once so popular in road construction and which it had unfortunately not yet been possible to replace in their entirety, like the asbestos fibres that still infested everything, or the old Nazis.

In any case, the combination of the intervals between these concrete speed bumps and the bus's leisurely pace generated a hypnotic earworm in the passenger's head: Nazi salute a travel deficiency, Nazi salute a travel deficiency, pa-dum, pa-dum, pa-diddle-dum... This is what happens if you don't keep your mind constantly under control.

What the hell was a Nazi salute on holiday? The newspaper had slipped from his lap when he dozed off. All around him people had already started to unwrap the marbled white greaseproof paper from their bananas and Extrawurst rolls. At least no hard-boiled egg had yet been peeled to spread its Mephistophelian smell.

He picked up the newspaper and leafed through. He couldn't possibly have imagined the Nazi salute; it had to be in there somewhere. But now it was hiding from him, presumably to make him doubt his own mind.

Where was it? Not in the politics section, which consisted of scarcely one and a half double pages; not in the local news – fire brigade festival in Kalsching, barn burns

down in neighbouring Ehrenfeld... a curious connection which the newspaper neither made nor commented on. Presumably the volunteer fire brigade had partied a little too wildly, but *everyone needs to let off steam sometimes*, and the young people *who courageously put their lives on the line day after day* (according to the photo caption, which made a mockery of the overweight lads with the impressive drinker's noses) had immolated the barn that night as part of their *festive fun*, as the article called it, bravo for the alliteration and bugger the barn, let it burn, who needs it, we certainly don't. Sports section already, almost more extensive than politics, interspersed with adverts and classifieds: Dragica offers *inspirational massage*, as if she doesn't know the inspiration affects the body, not the mind; Ilonka offers a refined escort service. The Unterrainer farm is selling direct from the farm shop again, starting on Sunday, and there's a children's jumble sale in Sternsingerasse.

In addition: Heuraffl, Graun and Malnitz have all started selling the new wine, same as every year. But here, under the heading *World News: Nazi salute on holiday* a travel deficiency; subhead: Removing a towel from a sun lounger is not. A holidaymaker had been dissatisfied with his holiday: bravely he had served out his time, partaking of the sun and the buffet, presumably under inner protest, already composing his complaint. Inner protest like inner emigration: always difficult to prove after the fact. But he did want some of his hard-earned cash back, *not like anyone ever gives us aught*, and what better trump card to play than political sensitivity? The judges did not accept his complaint that the towel he had spread out at the crack of dawn had been cleared away and his successful *reservation* of a front-row sun lounger by dint of self-righteous early rising not acknowledged. One might say that the sun lounger left the judges cold. In fact, his declaration that he only got his towel back after a thirty-minute argument had prompted the judges to respond with a sentence that made the man reading the newspaper burst into hearty laughter, a sort of bright, summery, bus-trip cheer: *Insofar as the complainant regards it as a deficiency that the removal of the towel resulted in a thirty-minute argument, it must be observed that an argument requires the participation of at least two individuals.*

The heads of the banana eaters and sandwich-paper rustlers turned towards the man and jerked away again. Not a single glance actually touched him. The jerking heads were a criticism. None of these old lizards wanted to know why he was laughing. They certainly didn't want to laugh with him. They don't have time for laughter. Not with him. The jerk of the head was intended to convey that his laughter had been noticed and disapproved of. Which, with the lizards, is almost one and the same: no sooner do they notice something than they disapprove of it. But they could have started doing this rather earlier: say, fifty years ago...

So he hadn't had any luck there, our plaintiff. The Nazi salute, though! He'd hit home with that. The club entertainers had performed a cabaret in which they had demonstrated typical greetings from different nations. When they got to Germany, the entertainers had affected a rigid goose-step, flung up their arms, and roared *Heil!* Seeing this, a German-speaking paying guest was not made to feel esteemed and welcome; the court agreed, and awarded the plaintiff damages in an amount that would

enable him at least to order two or three good lunches in a reputable local restaurant. For two, naturally – himself, and his wife, who had sustained similar damage. These damages, then, did not amount to an appreciable reduction in price, but a recognition of his hurt feelings.

If only the visitor had not read any further! If only the little report had ended there! He would have swayed on to his destination, amused and mollified, a little sweaty from the fake leather seats, there are idiots everywhere, Na-zi-sa-lute a tra-vel de-fi-cien-cy, Na-zi-sa-lute a tra-vel de-fi-cien-cy; he might have dozed off again, he would have shown some sympathy to the banana eaters and given the sandwich rustlers a smile. The young day would have pretended to be innocuous and peaceful, but that, let's be honest, is what days never are, not a single one, so we shouldn't allow ourselves to be deluded. The final sentences of the report stood out in contrast to the dry news-agency-speak; they had been added by the editor. These final sentences not only unexpectedly lifted the anonymity of the plaintiff, they also provided people familiar with the area with a barrage of subtext, like a mudslide. *In an exclusive interview with our newspaper, Dr Alois F. expressed his satisfaction with the judgement pronounced. It had never been about the size of the compensation, he said, but about putting a stop to the Egyptian entertainers' tasteless jokes, for the benefit of future guests. Furthermore, Dr F. said he would forego expensive foreign holidays in future: his homeland, he said, was beautiful enough.*

The traveller crumpled a corner of the newspaper in his fist and glanced around in fury. He had been reminded of where he was. Where he was heading. As if in confirmation, the other passengers were chewing, staring into space and rustling. Suddenly his bones ached. He wasn't on a pleasure trip; he was sitting in the dull, sweaty, stuffy bus, heading in a direction he had spent decades avoiding. The bus would soon be stopping in Kirschenstein, then in Tellian, in Ehrenfeld, and finally in Zwick, which was already part of Darkenbloom. And the plaintiff in this case was no amateur bringer of legal proceedings, some pensioner from Landshut or Amstetten whose long-standing diabetes made him permanently irritable – it would, in any case, have been interesting to know what it was about the Nazi salute that bothered such a man! – nor was it a peacenik, thoroughly-come-to-terms-with-the-past family man of the '68 generation; he would have given an anguished nod and murmured, 'Serves us right.' No: it was the infamous Dr F. from Darkenbloom. It was he, no doubt about it; there had been no need for them coyly to abbreviate him. Presumably he was still proud of his symbolic victory in the faraway Munich district court. And of course it was not the Nazi salute *per se* that bothered him, but the fact that it had been executed by *Egyptian entertainers*, which in Alois F.'s world was a synonym for, at best, *homosexual scoundrels*. The editor of the local paper was sure to know this; everyone here knew it, all the way to the nearby national borders. Dr F. was renowned. Meanwhile, an uninformed reader from the capital or another province would notice nothing at all. The uninformed would be touched to hear that F., you could bet on it, had donated the damages, almost four hundred schillings, to a recently widowed

young mother or a disabled man whose wheels were in need of expensive repair. For Dr Alois is also renowned, well beyond Darkenbloom, for his charity.

The main square, the terminus, was deserted. The sun stood directly over the plague column. For the past two hundred years a half-naked sandstone beggar woman had held out her beaker accusingly to new arrivals. Even without the harsh sunlight you believed she really was dying of thirst. The two saints at her side, Roch and Sebastian, whose sensitive noses had been eroded by wind and rain, making them look like offended sphinxes, had given her nothing to drink for more than two hundred years. Long after the bus had turned around and headed off back to the more lively, normal world, or a mysterious depot where it mustered the strength to escape, the visitor was still standing there in the sunlight, a compact leather bag at his feet. The other passengers had quickly and soundlessly disappeared, like mice into their holes. He took his time looking around, confirming to himself that he really was here again. The tower, the sole remnant of the castle's former glory, stared back at him from sullenly narrowed window slits. That's the start of Asia just over there, the people of Darkenbloom liked to say, shuddering melodramatically in the direction of the border; we're the last foothills. The loss of the castle had led to a photograph of it, framed, being hung in a prominent position in almost every house. And they still sold picture postcards. He knew this because he had recently received one – colourized! They missed it now. Back then, when they pulled it down, they wouldn't have known how to spell the word 'tourism'; *guest rooms* were what was offered, as a sort of favour. The phrase *historic town centre* didn't exist then, either. Things weren't historic in those days, they were just old.

Shortly after the war, a little wall had been built to the left and right of the tower in the old, whitewashed style, as if it were a grotesquely inflated decorative element in the wall of a park or cemetery. And thus it had stood ever since, a giant whose minuscule clipped wings ineffectively kept the new, utilitarian buildings on either side at bay.

Hotel Tüffer was directly opposite. It no longer belonged to the founding family; the Reschens had taken it over years ago, but at least they had had the good sense to allow their trophy to keep not only its name but also the elegant pink 1920s lettering. All in all, they had not made many changes. In this instance, there had been a conservationally fortuitous conjunction between the vague intuition that the original owners' taste accorded better with the expectations of widely-travelled guests, and obsessive provincial parsimony. The visitor pushed open the door and inhaled cautiously. For a few nostalgic seconds the smell of the rooms – patchouli, eau de Cologne, floor polish and candles – transported him back in time: he was young again, barely eighteen, ladies of all ages smiled at him. It was the scent of before-the-madness, of better days nearing their end, elegant, suspended. This harmonious building with its dark wooden panelling, brass lamps and green glass lampshades was no longer in keeping with the times, and certainly not with contemporary society. Proof, if proof were needed, was standing awkwardly at the art deco reception desk in

the shape of Zenzi, the hotel maid, wearing a cheap dirndl and gawping at the new arrival.

I'd like a room, he said, for a few days or more.

She handed him two keys. The chunky fob which, in hotels all over the world, is intended as a reminder, if only by dint of its weight, that this item of hotel property should never be removed from the premises but always handed in at reception, took the appropriate form of a huge, ornate mortice key. They probably used to open the castle gate with a monster like this.

Is it a nice room, he asked.

She hesitated, set the first key aside and gave him a different one. That's the nicest I can give you, that is.

I'll be sure to verify, said the traveller, almost moved by her doubling of the relative pronoun. Then he winked at her, because he felt sorry for her, and because she might prove useful to him later on. Apparently she hadn't picked up from his accent that he was from the region.

[...]

I. / 7 (Summer 1989)

And just a few days later that Ehrenfeld barn had gone up in flames, and Berneck, whose heavy, red-necked person embodied the insurance company's only regional liaison office, waited without interest for the assessors' report. Then one morning Lowetz and the guest from Hotel Tüffer encountered one another at the grocer's.

As mentioned, Darkenbloom had had supermarkets for years. They were not yet the brightly-lit, air-conditioned UFO hangars of later on, but even then – smaller, greyer, more cramped – they each sat at the centre of a perfectly level field of asphalt where you could park your snazzy new car for everyone to admire. This was where the first generations of Darkenbloomers to move into physically undemanding white-collar work indulged their modest consumer happiness.

But anyone who was short a few onions or drawing pins, or who found themselves, from one minute to the next, in need of a mousetrap, washing line, crossword puzzle, stamps or bar of soap, bought these small goods from the grocer, Antal Grün. For a while, after the war, the shop had been in a different place, in another house just a short walk away. But for almost twenty-five years now it had been back in its original spot, Tempelgasse 4, and Antal Grün in it, and for a long time his mother too, Gisella. Before that, her parents, Josef and Mathilde Wohlmut. Before that, Josef's parents. And so on and on, probably all the way back to the late seventeenth century, when Emperor Leopold, egged on by his wife, threw the Jews out of Vienna. Margarita Teresa of Spain, very Catholic, was mourning the loss of her first-born, and her pain was so searing that only a tangible scapegoat seemed to promise relief and a reason for this senselessness; someone who could first be blamed, then got rid of. A response that restored authority of action, after the helpless kneeling and screaming at the little child's bedside. If only the Jews would leave, the children that followed would stay alive. Unlike what one has since come to assume, the way they went about it in those days was relatively civilized. The Jews were given an eight-month grace period. Eight months: that's adequate, that's really not short. Hitler was only here ten times as long. Vienna's fifty richest families received an invitation from the Elector in almost inconceivably faraway Berlin. The others found shelter much closer to home: in the south-east, under the wings of princes and counts who set greater store by the weight of their treasure chests than the superstition of their priests and spouses. Here, in the south-east, the Jews were protected and left in peace for more than two hundred and fifty years; their lives were so comfortable and secure that they were particularly surprised when this period came to an end. Particularly naïve and defenceless.

A family business; an institution. Not *Grün's* – no, that would have been too familiar, but *the grocer's*. Impossible to imagine the town without it. It had long since joined the A&O Cooperative. Apart from the logo stuck on the shop window and the standardized plastic bags, little had changed. The contract probably gave Grün access to a bigger, more modern range of goods. And perhaps the A&O banner also helped non-locals to recognize the little cave packed to the rafters for what it was.

When Lowetz opened the door, Grün, in the half-light at the back of the shop, looked up at him as if he were the Saviour himself. He scurried out from behind his counter – thinking about it later, Lowetz had the impression he was backed right up against the shelves, away from the stranger speaking to him – came over and shook his hand at length. Lowetz didn't have time to be startled; Grün was already ambushing him with a torrent of words about the house, the garden, his poor, dear, wonderful mama whom they all missed so much. Lowetz felt as if he were having to ward off a hail of sweet, soft projectiles. But he had an affection for Grün; as a child he used to visit his store to pick up shopping for his mother, not infrequently putting it on account, and Grün used to slip him lollipops. Then, as a teenager, he'd helped him with the inventory, because sometimes the grocer would get confused and had to stop counting. In moments like these he couldn't write, could hardly breathe, and would crumple the forms; Lowetz remembered one occasion when his mother had carefully removed the clipboard of lists from Grün's hands. He always recovered quickly from these attacks; all he needed was to sit down and drink a glass of water, and for someone else to take over the counting and writing things down. Now, though, good old Grün seemed to have gone a bit peculiar. He was talking at Lowetz as if someone were paying him to do so. The man in the background was gradually edging closer, as if he were part of the conversation. He was smiling, appeared friendly and engaging, and was clearly waiting for a pause in which to say something.

The stranger took another step forward. Now he was standing right beside them; they had become a group of three. Antal Grün broke off, almost in mid-sentence, gesticulated at the stranger and mumbled something about a historian from the region – in the region? – but that unfortunately he really couldn't be of any help, please believe him; after all, he hadn't even been here at the time in question.

The man, whose eyes were dark and serious although the rest of his face didn't stop smiling, shook Lowetz's hand and introduced himself. As often happened on occasions like this, Lowetz didn't quite catch the name but was too slow, too shy, or just not sufficiently interested to ask him to repeat it.

And what are you researching, Lowetz asked. The graves, answered the man, with his winning smile. The graves, repeated Lowetz, without understanding, without even feeling shocked; he must instinctively have thought of mummies or Celts or the early Stone Age, because didn't people regularly find small stone axes, flints, metal coins and broken pottery, even quite nearby? But Antal Grün shook his head, back and forth, his eyes closed in disapproval, or despair, or pain; shook his head, back and forth, forth and back.

No, Lowetz had never heard about them, even though he had grown up here. Come on, I was born in fifty-four, said Lowetz, and gave a little snort. Obviously I know a lot of stuff happened here during the war. Same as everywhere along the border, right?

Yes, unfortunately, the stranger confirmed, same as everywhere. But in Tellian and Kirschenstein and over in Mandl and Löwingen we found them long ago.

They all stood staring at the floor. Grün wiped his palms on the front of his overall, as if trying to brush himself down. Lowetz felt he ought to ask a question, but he couldn't think what. Not a nice job, he said, after some consideration.

It is, actually, the stranger replied. Once they're found, they can be given a proper burial and can rest in peace.

Dead's dead, though, isn't it, said Lowetz.

Grün said: Come now, lad!

Sorry, said Lowetz.

After a long pause, the historian said: Listen, Tolli, I'll come back another day. When you've got more time. Right now I'd just like to buy a few postcards...

He turned to the new rotating display stand. The lower sections were full of newspapers, magazines and wrapping paper; higher up it had little wire baskets for envelopes, greetings cards, postcards. He spun it right round a few times, as if admiring its well-oiled movement, before finally stopping it at the postcards of the castle. He took one out, held it up and asked: Who does these, by the way? Who gets the cards printed? They weren't around before...

Grün wiped his palms on the front of his overall. They came with the others, he said, the new ones of the plague column and the aerial view. The aerial view is very popular, too, you should definitely take an aerial view.

Lowetz picked up one of the postcards of the plague column. The monument had been photographed in portrait format against a blue sky, and looked overly defined; every detail was clearly visible, including the fact that the noses of both saints had crumbled away.

When I was a child I asked my mother if that was old Mrs Graun, said Lowetz, pointing to the ghastly beggar with her outstretched beaker. At this, both Grün and the stranger burst out laughing.

Lowetz studied the card. He hadn't looked at the plague column properly in years. The figure's face was contorted, her hand clutched the beaker, and the rags she was wearing were about to slip off her breasts. Fortunately both breasts and rags were made of sandstone. It seemed to Lowetz that it was inappropriate to portray a person like this, even if there had been no real model for the figure, or only one who had been dead and forgotten these past two hundred years. Because something about the beggar woman seemed so real that you felt at any moment her living prototype might walk through the door, weeping and wailing. Was this simply because of the expressiveness of the scene, the aspect of frozen despair?

Old Mrs Graun, on the other hand, is not made of stone, thought Lowetz, which is why she has to drink to such miserable excess.

Apparently the visitor was a mind reader. I wonder whether it was just her husband's death, he said, or if there's another reason?

I don't know what it could be, said Lowetz, shrugging. I'd have thought it was enough for a young woman suddenly to be left on her own with a child and a farm to look after.

From that point of view, the other man continued, she did a fantastic job: brought up the child, scraped a living for herself and the farm until the son was able to take over. And then she opted out... Is that how it was?

You could say so, said Lowetz, except that she always drank. But you're right, of course. She managed, though you do wonder how.

Lowetz put the card back in its little basket, but the stranger picked up the whole pack of castle postcards and placed them beside the till. Antal Grün counted off the cards and put them in a little paper bag. Stamps with those? he asked.

Just four for now, said the man. But, Tolli, one more question: tell me, when did you actually get the shop back?

After Horka left, said Antal Grün reluctantly. He just disappeared one day, and his wife sold it to me then and there. She seemed to know he wasn't coming back.

And the wife? asked the visitor.

Went to live with her family in Styria, said Antal Grün. None of them are here any more.

When was that? asked Lowetz, who barely understood what this was about, although the name Horka had reminded him of something he had forgotten.

Sixty-five, said Grün, the year the count sealed the crypt. You were a lad, you helped me with the move. Don't you remember?

Not a thing, said Lowetz, shaking his head.

After the stranger left, a little wave of customers swept in and out of the shop. Mrs Koreny needed cooking string, pork belly and dog food; some young strangers, presumably from the cemetery, bought sliced-sausage rolls and drinks; finally, Zenzi from Hotel Tüffer picked up a big box of pre-ordered goods that she transported on the chassis of an old-fashioned pram. When things quietened down again, Lowetz and Grün sat on the stone steps at the entrance, smoking cigarettes.

You didn't like that guy earlier, commented Lowetz.

Antal Grün played dumb. Who?

You know – the one who bought all the postcards of the castle, said Lowetz.

No, no, not at all, protested Antal Grün, I just really can't be of any help to him, I wasn't even... I simply don't know anything about it.

Then he'll just have to ask someone else, said Lowetz.

Right, said Antal Grün, but I suppose he's already tried that.

Horka, though, said Lowetz, a few minutes later, I only remembered about him today. They used to threaten us with him back then, when we were young.

I bet they did, said Antal Grün.

Horka was the dark man of Darkenbloom, said Lowetz, and laughed. And you bought this place off that creep? I don't remember your old one at all.

Come now, said Antal Grün, I was right next door to you, where Fritz has his carpentry workshop now. You were always in and out when you were little, until one day Eszter told you you should only go through the garden.

So the doorbell isn't ringing all day, said Lowetz, the sentence rising up in him from the same depths where he had just come across the threatening but as yet still faceless Horka.

So the doorbell isn't ringing all day, Antal Grün confirmed.

But you don't have a bell at all now any more, said Lowetz.

It stopped working. I'm in the front of the shop most of the time, anyway. And if not, people just call.

I'll take a look at it, said Lowetz, and got to his feet.

Leave it, Antal Grün demurred, I don't need it, but Lowetz was already inside the shop; he brought out the ladder, set it up outside the door, peered into the bell and held up his lighter to get a closer look. There's just something stuck in there, he called down; quick, pass me a knife or a screwdriver.

Carefully, Lowetz eased a small, greyish-white lump out of the doorbell, which at first he thought was a big piece of dried chewing gum. But the lump had a hard centre, and afterwards, sitting on the steps and smoking another cigarette, he scratched at it with his thumbnail. Inside was a little porous pebble, a tiny, asymmetrical cone, narrower at the waist, with a little round head, almost like a Ludo playing piece.

He wanted to show it to Grün, but he was busy replacing the roll of paper in the till. Lowetz noticed that the old one wasn't even empty. He chastised him by closing the door and immediately yanking it open again. There was a piercing jangle, and Grün flinched.

You did that yourself, Lowetz teased him, holding out the little stone; there's no way this got up there of its own accord. Be honest, Uncle Grün: you wanted to silence the bell, didn't you?

No, no, I didn't, he answered, intently focussed on threading the freshly-cut roll of paper into the machine. I'm telling you, one day it just stopped working.

Lowetz rolled the little stone around his palm. This almost looks like a piece of bone, he said. You really think someone would have glued this inside your doorbell?

Antal Grün pressed a button, the till made a whirring sound and the roll of paper began to turn, but the end didn't go through the slit; it backed up, crinkled, balled up, pressed itself desperately, fearfully into the machine before spewing out of the top in a paper fountain.

Nonononono, Antal moaned, now look what you've done...

Me, asked Lowetz, what have I got to do with it?

But Antal Grün was so at a loss, staring helplessly at his rattling cash register as it gobbled the roll of paper, that Lowetz had to press the button and switch off the machine. He grabbed a pair of scissors, pulled out the length of crumpled paper and cut it off. He cut off two more corners at a steep angle to the outer edges, so that the end of the paper roll looked like an arrow or a sharp tongue. People said they did this with the loo roll on Malnitz's organic farm, but Lowetz couldn't remember who told him that – *they even fold the toilet paper up there, but then their guests probably shit primroses and lilies of the valley!* He pressed the button again, the apparatus whirred into motion, he fed the paper arrow into the slit, and the arrow slipped in and through

as impassively as a trained lion leaps through a burning tyre. Lowetz pressed down the cover of the till and cut off the superfluous tip, grinning. Antal Grün stroked his chest and belly with outstretched fingers. See, Uncle Grün, said Lowetz, sometimes it's just a question of technique.

[...]

I. / 9 (1945)

Horka's alarming reputation, which he wore in later years like an aura and protective shield, was due in large part to his actions during the defence of Darkenbloom in the final days of the war. In the months prior to this he had been in command of a forced labour camp. For seven years Darkenbloom had been *Jew-free*, but then, when everything really started falling apart, they sent wagonloads of ragged, half-starved creatures from Budapest. Along with anything in the area that could still stand, walk and hold a shovel – apart from *foreign workers*, who had it slightly better, this was mostly local women and older children – they were to build the so-called South-East Wall. This wall was one of the last grandiose ideas to emerge from the Führer's bunker in Berlin. In order to repel the Red Army, the plan was to construct a defence system like nothing the world had ever seen: the Great Wall of China, the Roman *limes*, closely followed by the South-East Wall – something like this. Their own armies were still on the other side of it, but were they to be beaten back – and they would be, anyone who could read a map and was following the Wehrmacht reports knew that – upon their retreat they were to find a marvellous line of defence, with spherical bunkers and gun emplacements into which they could slip like a hand into a pre-warmed, ready-laid glove. From here, they would continue to defend the Thousand Year Reich. The Führer had already thought of everything. That was why thirty thousand, forty thousand people were digging and shovelling from the White Carpathians to the Drava; it would be a monumental construction, insurmountable, invincible. So shrieked the propaganda, anyway, always at its most shrill when it least corresponded to the facts. Yes, the number of crimes committed along this line, the number of senseless, brutal deaths died in its name, was record-breaking. But the sheer impact of the structure...? This is how it was near Darkenbloom: a first Soviet tank drove carefully into the ditch. A second drove on top of it. Thick beams were laid over the two tanks, and behold: a makeshift bridge. Elsewhere, apparently, the wall was more effective, but that didn't help the people of Darkenbloom.

So they had arrived, the Soviets, and the *Volkssturm* man who greeted them with an anti-tank grenade launcher from behind the war memorial was as pleased as Punch when he saw he had finished off their first T-34. Perhaps he was already picturing himself with a medal on his chest, or perhaps, on the other hand, the adrenaline was pumping too hard for such sweet dreams – *you had to have been there to understand...* In any case, the joy and pride lasted two minutes at most, until the second Russian tank wiped out him, the war memorial and part of the house on the corner of Karnergasse.

Horka and old Graun spent the forty-eight hours after the Soviets captured Darkenbloom – the first time they captured it – in the attic of the Stipsits house. This attic had a distinctive feature: at the gable end was a false wall that separated a strip just over a metre wide from the rest of the room. This wall looked just like the others, covered in cracked and yellowing plaster. In front of it, stretching almost halfway down the side wall, was a massive old wooden wardrobe, not an attractive piece with

decorative paintings and wood carving, just a heavy, worm-eaten, three-door cupboard. That, however, was the entrance. The left-hand section had five shelves starting halfway up, with the back of the wardrobe, painted blue, clearly visible behind them. Underneath, though, it was missing. Anyone who climbed in and ducked under the lowest shelf practically fell into the hidden room. The set-up was a very old one, and nobody outside the Stipsits house knew about it. A Stipsits ancestor had either hoarded treasure in this hiding place or indulged in other furtive dealings; who knew what they might have been.

Old Graun had discovered it when he was still a schoolboy and it was empty save for dust and mouse droppings. For a while, the Darkenbloom school had had a supply teacher called Jenő Goldman. Goldman was young, liked children, and had modern ideas, one of which was occasionally to take the children out of the school and let them draw in the open air. After he did this once or twice it was made clear to him that he shouldn't do it again. Back then, there were still people in Darkenbloom who didn't see why their children should have to go to school instead of helping on the farm if they were just being taken on walks around town. But in one of those two, at most three outdoor classes, Jenő Goldman told the class to sit on or near the steps of the plague column, choose a section of the main square and draw it. Lots of children chose the castle with its imposing tower, but the schoolboy Graun, who could draw particularly well, picked the end of Reitschulgasse, the street facing him, which was diagonally across from Hotel Tüffer. The first building was the school, the second the Stipsits house, the third an office with thick walls belonging to the Rosmarin family of industrialists. The Rosmarin villa, Reitschulgasse 8, with its wrought-iron railing around the garden and the two stone pillars flanking its wrought-iron gate, couldn't be seen properly from the plague column, which was why Graun decided just to indicate the iron railing at the edge of his drawing. But he put a lot of effort into the windows, doors and roof tiles of the other three houses, rubbing out, crosshatching, and smudging the crosshatching with a moistened index finger to depict as many different surfaces as possible. Jenő Goldman praised him. You've got a very good eye, he said, but Graun just grimaced slightly. He knew people thought this teacher was a fool, so he didn't want to be familiar with him. Although he liked the drawing lessons. He didn't say that, either. You did as you were told and kept your head down, that was how it was back then. And how it was later, too. But during that hour at the foot of the plague column, Graun the observant schoolboy recorded the proportions of the houses he was drawing very precisely. And when he happened to be delivering something to the Stipsits house a few days later and Mrs Stipsits asked him to carry a heavy basket up to the attic, he noticed almost immediately that the room was missing a skylight that was visible from outside.

He couldn't get this puzzle out of his mind. The evening of the summer solstice, when all Darkenbloom was out and about, seemed like a good opportunity to investigate further. He crept away unobtrusively from the solstice fire, climbed the stairs to the Stipsits attic and looked around. He opened the skylight on the left, just a crack, for fear someone might notice him from outside. A sideways glance was enough

to ascertain that the office building was right next door. So it had to be the other gable end. All sorts of things were piled up against it, including the huge cupboard. Graun opened the left-hand door. He was no taller than one metre fifty at the time, meaning that he only needed to bend down slightly to see under the lowest shelf. At any rate, he smelled or sensed that he had found what he was seeking. In he climbed, and discovered the secret cubbyhole behind it. He took a quick look around – just mouse-droppings and dust – and was about to slip hastily away and think of how he might put this new knowledge to use. But there, standing outside the wardrobe and grinning, was Horka, who had been spying on him again. And so both of them knew about it; and more than twenty-five years later, in that life-or-death moment, both of them remembered.

At first it felt like a trap: the two of them holed up in a little room while invaders gathered outside the windows. No matter when they emerged, the assumption that they were not innocent civilians would be as logical as the only possible consequence: they would be shot on the spot. Both of them had lost visual and audio contact with the other defenders; instead, all of a sudden, they had heard the enemy tanks. At first they were as aghast as everyone else, since they had firmly believed in the wall's protective effectiveness, and so had reckoned with the possible arrival of soldiers but not the line of tanks that made the earth shake. At the very last minute they had managed, separately, to get to the Stipsits house. Someone – Graun? – had at least thrown some provisions through the gap beforehand, and they had enough ammunition, as well as one Panzerfaust 30 anti-tank rocket launcher apiece. And so there they were. The space was big enough for them to sit side by side with their legs outstretched, or under the window, each at an angle with their knees bent. They spent forty-eight hours like this, talking, silent, smoking, listening. The hidden chamber became the ideal strategic position. In the early morning of Good Friday they heard cannon fire again. They're coming to liberate us, hissed Horka, who had been scratching the plaster off the wall on the street side with his knife the whole time, in the hope of loosening a tile and pulling it inside. They didn't dare peek out of the skylight during the day, and at night there hadn't been much to see, just occasional torches and the glow of poorly shielded cigarettes, which they would dearly have loved to fire at.

Darkenbloom was a ghost town, though not all the inhabitants had fled. A few had stayed, because they feared for their house and property, or because they had calculated that they stood even less of a chance of surviving indefinitely in the forest in winter. The old, the sick, women and children hid in wardrobes and coal cellars, in cattle sheds and haylofts, where they waited for an end that none of them could really picture. Would Austria become communist? When people are swimming through them, time and events are fluid, but this is seldom recalled years or decades later when saying things like *the end of the war*. Then, it is seen as a clear delimitation in the flow, something fixed and clearly recognisable, solid, like – for example – a breakwater.

Darkenbloom is a prime example of this. Everything already seemed to be over; the Russians had overrun the South-East Wall more or less in their sleep, and now they and their tanks stood in the main square and in the surrounding roads and side streets. They had set up their main observation post at the top of the castle tower, as anyone would have done. For forty-eight hours the scales hung in the balance. There were no white flags; not this time, not in Darkenbloom. Darkenbloom did not surrender, as many other places did; it was deserted and hostile. The Russians had no contact with any locals; it was as if the ground had swallowed them up. Anything that moved was shot at. The names of the victims are inscribed in the town chronicle: Theresia Wallnöfer, Aloysia Malnitz, Hubert Gstettner, Eduard Balaskó, and a child, eight-year-old Edwine Grubar. None of them had wanted to surrender, to come out with their empty, unarmed hands above their head. Some had been shot dead even doing that, surrendering: by the Russians, or by their own people, from behind, in the back. Not here, but elsewhere. All this was well known. At the time, in the calculation of probabilities, dying was very close to survival, for the civilian population, too. So they preferred to stay in their hiding places and wait. If they were caught, it was because they were scuttling about, from the privy back to the hayrick, or from house to potato cellar. The Russians realized that things were not yet at an end, and called for reinforcements.

Instead, the Germans returned, in unexpected strength and numbers. The scales had flung their right arm in the air again; they had an idiosyncratic sense of humour. Horka had finally loosened his roof tile, and carefully pulled it inside. The noise of battle grew louder. Anti-aircraft guns rattled, firing into the town instead of at planes. The Russian tanks began to withdraw; from the attic, they couldn't see where to. And this was the big moment for Horka and Graun, who unexpectedly found themselves positioned behind the enemy. Horka flung up the skylight and finished off the last two tanks as they were driving away, with the two anti-tank grenade launchers, one after the other, quick as a flash, before the second tank could even turn around. And from their position this was no mean feat, no mean feat at all. Afterwards, they left their hiding place, running under cover of the walls and alleyways they knew so well, taking short cuts through gateways, farms and vegetable patches. They pursued the Russians out of the town, street fighting from house to house, finally yelling and cheering when they joined up with the astonishingly large units of the Waffen SS Wiking Panzer Division. It was made up of fanatical Germans, Austrians, Dutch, Flemings and Balts, yet the two boys from Darkenbloom must have appeared to them like invincible fighting machines, emerging and attacking the enemy from behind the way they did. That, at any rate, was the way it was subsequently told; because the story of their pursuit of the retreating Russians was often brought out, especially by Ferbenz on the appropriate memorial days, which were commemorated in Café Posauner – the thirteenth of February, the twentieth of April, the first of May and the ninth of November – and they would slap young Graun on the back as a proxy, the Heuraffls, Berneck, stitched-up Schurl and the rest.

Hell of a pair, Graun and Horka, Ferbenz said, again; the older he got, the more his chin would tremble. German heroes, said Ferbenz, his reddened eyelids growing damp. They don't make 'em like that any more. But we'll be back. Maybe not in my lifetime, but just you wait, you'll see, all of you... we'll be back.

The Heuraffls, Berneck and stitched-up Schurl all nodded. They knew what he would say next.

Because *he* will endure for hundreds of years, said Ferbenz, and his old man's voice rose in pitch until it was almost as high as Rehberg's; no, thousands of years, a figure to be studied by all the best minds one day, including the Jews.

Young Graun sat there, unmoved. He wasn't embarrassed, it wasn't important to him, he was indifferent. It was like the weather, like his wife's nagging and his mother's drunken stupors: it came and went, and at the end of the working day you sat there and drank your schnapps. He didn't think about the fact that the heroic expulsion of the Russians was only half the story, only one part that, in view of the outcome, was the least significant, as it had entailed a whole week of reconquest, the deaths of twenty Darkenbloom residents, most of them women; little Fritz Kalmar dragged out from under his dead grandmother with a piece of shrapnel in his head, more than a hundred dead soldiers and *Volkssturm* militiamen, and an unknown number of dead Red Army soldiers; in addition, the reduction of two dozen houses to rubble, not to mention the castle, set on fire by its own people because the Russians perched up in its tower had to be brought down. And then the castle had burned as the fighting continued; it burned for days, a torch visible for miles around, because unfortunately they couldn't extinguish the fire in the midst of battle.

Graun and Horka, Horka and Graun, the two heroes who gave it their all. In the story they were transformed into best friends, simply because that was the picture the war anecdote painted more or less by itself. But the stories don't fit together: stupidity and heroism; surrender or bloody resistance; friendship, enmity, or simply exploiting a fortuitous advantage in a desperate situation, holed up in the hidden room. Young Graun would have been the last person to ponder this. His absolute lack of pondering could almost be termed an achievement. Because in Darkenbloom, at least among the older residents, it was accepted as fact that it was Horka who, almost exactly one year later, shot his fellow combatant Graun in the forest and then burned him, along with his dog, so that almost nothing remained. It was accepted as fact, although nobody talked about it.

[...]

Part II

Here, too, people are used to dying; more so, at any rate, than they are to thinking.

Hans Lebert

II. / 2 (Summer 1989)

Like so many others, Dr Sterkowitz too was standing at the window. Unlike most, though, he barely registered the menacing aspects of this storm, neither the noise nor the lightning bolts that stabbed down like knives. He was primarily concerned with the black masses of water slamming against the houses and trees like hard sails, clattering unceasingly instead of just collapsing and being swept away like... wet clothes or bundles of rags, downstream into the darkness, off and away.

He had got home late. His wife had taken the food covers off the plates, and his cold supper was waiting underneath: bread, sausage, Liptauer spicy cheese spread, gherkins, the same as usual. Although she was already in her nightdress, she sat down with him and asked him about his day. To distract her, he talked for longer than necessary about Balf, poor chap, and how upset Koreny seemed to be about it all.

He thinks Balf is still talking to him, when he's not even conscious, he said, with his mouth full. He seriously tried to convince me that he's been giving him instructions.

His wife shook her head, troubled.

And in the car on the way back, all Koreny talked about was the water board, Sterkowitz continued. He's panicking that they might reverse their decision.

Can they even do that? asked his wife.

They can probably do anything, he replied, if the whole of the town council comes out against it.

Maybe 'twould be better, said Sterkowitz's wife. There's plenty as says we've enough water, why should we pay extra for it?

I don't know either, said Sterkowitz, but that's precisely what politicians are for, to know these things.

And then he went on talking, at the easy pace he only spoke at with his wife. He told her that Fritz Kalmar had been waiting at the entrance to the town and had waved frantically to stop the car – he called, Sterkowitz's wife interrupted, I told 'un you was coming back from Vienna – and implored him to come and see Antal Grün, even though it was Sunday. And so Sterkowitz had handed over his car to the mayor, who had to get up to the Rotenstein meadow as fast as possible, outside the grocery.

Lots of to-ing and fro-ing, he told his wife. I needed to fetch my bag from the surgery and had to go on foot, and Antal was so weak and Fritz so confused that I thought I'd better stay a bit longer.

You's too good for this world, his wife teased him. Soon afterwards she stood up and went to bed.

Sterkowitz cleared away his dinner things, sat back down at the table and thought for a while. He even turned off the light, to prove to his wife, if she came down again, that he was just about to come up. But he stayed where he was, looking out. Thunder rumbled in the distance; the wind was picking up. The trees started swaying back and forth, as if they could already hear faraway music, somebody beating time.

Antal Grün had turned up in Darkenbloom a few years after the war ended, a dynamic, suntanned and very engaging young man. He and his mother had moved in one day with the Kalmars, widowed Agnes and her disabled child. Within a week he had converted one of the two rooms facing the street into a makeshift shop. This room was also where he and his mother slept, behind an inconspicuous curtain. For the first few years they just conducted their business out of the window; Antal built a wooden platform with steps, which he would carry outside first thing in the morning when they opened and push up against the service window. The shed in the inner courtyard served as a storeroom, and right from the start he somehow managed to stock all the most important groceries. Grün's shop made it much easier for people in the centre of town to get the things they needed; Sterkowitz's wife immediately started going there, too. But before Sterkowitz himself – who worked almost around the clock in the post-war years – had made the new grocer's acquaintance, the latter appeared in his office one evening and asked to speak to him. Sterkowitz remembered this conversation very well. They sat together in the surgery, smoking. Antal Grün had eyes that always seemed to be smiling, because he was a little short-sighted. He had come to request that the local doctor intercede on Fritz's behalf. Sterkowitz noticed how well this shopkeeper was able to express himself, not like the tentative circumlocution of ordinary local people. Fritz was of normal intelligence, said Antal, but he couldn't speak very well on account of his early childhood injury, so at school he pretended he was mute. Everyone there thought he was an idiot; he sat in the back row and had to draw row after row of flowers and leaves, nothing else for the past year and a half. He, Antal, had discovered that Fritz already more or less knew his letters. Would the doctor please give his expert opinion? It would be such a shame for the boy otherwise.

And so one afternoon Sterkowitz, well aware that in Darkenbloom the doctor was an authority on a par with the mayor, the priest and the chief of police, examined little Fritz Kalmar. Antal was right: he didn't say a word, but he could obviously read and write. Sterkowitz put a page of the school primer in front of him, Fritz read it attentively and answered questions on it, writing the answers down if they required him to do more than nod or shake his head. Afterwards, Sterkowitz palpated the boy's larynx, looked down his throat, and found nothing out of the ordinary. He told him to say something. Fritz shook his head. Agnes, the boy's mother, started pleading with him, and Antal pleaded, too. Sterkowitz declared that he could probably help him, but in order to do so he needed to know exactly what Fritz could and couldn't do. Little Fritz stared at the floor.

Come now, young man, Sterkowitz insisted. Fritz's mother kneaded the boy's shoulder, and Antal Grün promised to let him work the till after school the following day. So at last he opened his mouth, took a deep breath, and out came a hideous gurgling sound, as if a muddy river were being sucked through a suddenly unblocked drain. Fritz closed his mouth again, tears flowed, his mother buried her face in her hands. Even Antal Grün was upset. The doctor felt ashamed, but didn't show it.

Never mind, let's forget that, he told the boy; and he decided to enquire about specialists in the capital when he got the chance. The very next day, though, he

dropped by the school and spoke to the teacher, and Fritz didn't have to draw garlands of flowers any more but was allowed to write and do sums like the others.

On this particular afternoon, Sterkowitz had found himself thinking about the dynamic, undaunted young Antal of old, as Fritz led him into an unventilated room where the grocer was stretched out like a dying swan. He knew, of course, that illness and infirmity could put decades on a person, but he wasn't prepared to accept this in Antal, who was ten years younger than him. Antal, he thought that evening, sitting alone in the dark, was someone he had secretly looked up to, with his energy and absolute determination to build things up again. Antal who, a few years after the war, had championed a wounded child and built the grey-faced, obdurate women of Darkenbloom a sort of wooden platform with steps up and down, where he served them with exemplary politeness: *Always at your service, Madame.*

So as he approached his bed, he teased him: Come now, Antal, what's with the long face, it can't be that bad! And before even examining him he went over to the window and threw it open: Never forget, you'll suffocate before you freeze!

Antal didn't respond. He really did look godawful. Fritz was leaning against the doorframe, wracked with worry. Amid much good-natured murmuring and harrumphing, a habit he had got into right at the start of his career, Sterkowitz treated the cut on his head first, which Fritz had provisionally bandaged. He measured Antal's pulse and blood pressure, listened to him with his stethoscope, checked his blood sugar. Antal had closed his eyes. Sterkowitz sat on his bed and gave a long, rambling speech about the body and the constitution in general, how the good old machine sometimes played up over the years and you just had to take a little care of it and keep it in good condition.

However, he blustered – from the way Fritz was blocking the door, he was starting to suspect that he didn't want to let him out again – however, with a man like you, who hardly smokes and never drinks, there's barely even a touch of rust! Come on, it'll pass – don't hang your head like this!

My head is propped bolt upright on the mountain of pillows you've shoved behind it, whispered Antal.

There we go, cried Sterkowitz, our good old Antal's back again, I definitely heard a glimmer of him there!

He stood up. Fritz planted himself in the doorway so he wouldn't be able to pass. Sterkowitz walked towards him, undeterred but with eyebrows raised, and Fritz gurgled something at him, more unintelligibly than he had for some time.

Come now, lad, Sterkowitz chided him, you can do better than that. Start again, nice and calm. Fritz gurgled.

He's inviting you to eat with us, Antal whispered; he's cooked for me. Sterkowitz laughed, and said, well, of course, I'd like that, but first I'll nip over to the surgery and get some drops to improve your circulation.

And so he had stayed for dinner. Fritz had rustled up a decent goulash, although by the time Sterkowitz returned with the medication it was only lukewarm. He and Fritz ate at a little table pushed up against the bed; Antal had his plate on a tray on top

of the blanket, almost like in hospital. Afterwards, when Fritz took out the dirty plates, Sterkowitz remained seated for a moment. Antal's eyes were closed; he hadn't opened them for several minutes. Sterkowitz was just wondering when he could sneak out when Antal began to speak. And he smiled the whole time he was speaking, as if it were extremely pleasant to talk with your eyes closed. Seemingly out of the blue, he said that the Tüffers would have liked to take his mother with them when they left; she used to sew for old Mrs Tüffer. The old lady, who ran the business, had been reluctant to forgo the high-quality buttons that Antal's mother covered with fabric, or her bodices, which were difficult to make on account of Mrs Tüffer's unusual measurements. A broad back and a very small bust, said Antal, which therefore required optical enhancement, but below these a narrow waist that absolutely should not be emphasized. Only a master craftswoman like his mother had succeeded in making the boss look not like a small, stocky wrestler or swimmer who had disguised himself as a woman, but like a well-proportioned, possibly even dainty lady. A good seamstress is a good liar, said Antal, smiling, eyes closed.

But they wanted to take just his mother with them; they only had one free berth on their ship's passage. And this was only because the Tüffer son's pallid wife had suddenly bethought herself of her Aryan lineage and filed for divorce. For Antal's mother, however, the offer was out of the question. The Tüffers, in turn, had not been prepared to exchange the mother for the son, and Antal's mother had never forgiven them for this, on principle. Antal had only just turned sixteen at the time.

Later, when Antal argued that, either way, separating them would have been terrible and wrong, she responded: That's a completely different thing. A person should be allowed to say how they would like to be rescued.

They never found out what happened to the Tüffers, whether they made it to New York or South America. Antal's mother did not excuse them. After the Tüffers left there was nobody who knew anything any more; no one was able to help, they were all in the same hopeless situation. Without a safe contact in the capital, Antal's mother refused to go there, so they just stayed, constantly looking for ways to escape, telegraphing everywhere – but they stayed, past the deadline. Until the truck came. There were fifty-one of us, said Antal, smiling, eyes closed, including an eighty-year-old rabbi and several children. And he told Dr Sterkowitz about his night on the breakwater.

Sterkowitz sat in the darkened room, gazing out into the storm. The branches were dancing czardas now. Antal had described it all precisely. Four dozen people were loaded onto a truck and driven forty-five minutes north, where they were made to climb onto a weir in the middle of the Danube. Women, children and old people. Onto one of those groynes constructed almost at right angles to the riverbank, because they're meant to regulate the speed of the flow and prevent erosion of the bank. They were shooed up onto it like a gaggle of geese onto a long springboard, except that these geese couldn't fly away. Shots were repeatedly fired into the air, as a threat. Only a few people were needed to chase many others up onto a narrow ridge. The

main thing was for the chasers to position themselves correctly, forming a corridor between riverbank, water and jetty. Then the people essentially had no choice but to walk slowly forwards onto the water, one after another, even when those at the front called back into the darkness that the weir had come to an end. That they couldn't go any further. People were backed up on a rocky weir that backed up the wide river. Did the first ones to step onto it in the blackness of the night hope it might take them all the way across, huge blocks of stone tossed into the river like a makeshift bridge? That once they reached the far bank they would be in freedom, albeit in wet clothes; that they could simply set foot in that other country and run away? But no: the breakwater only projected as far as the middle of the river, to where it was in full spate. Where the water already washed over this artificial barrier. So fifty-one people crouched down there and clung on. Falling asleep would have been fatal. The wrong person next to you floundering and dragging you down with them would have been fatal. Small children cried, and their mothers slapped them just to make them be quiet. Others wailed that perhaps rivers had tides as well, that towards morning a wave was sure to come and sweep them all away.

Many hours later, when the sun came up, they saw a few houses on the far – Slovakian – bank. People were standing there, waving. And these good Samaritans saved them; they fetched them in their boats, one little group at a time, and took them back with them to that other country. The fact that they couldn't stay there, in case they set a precedent; that for this reason they were deported back to the Reich just two days later; that the chaotic situation continued, and ended, for some of them, in death – this was not at all the point of what Antal had wanted to say to Sterkowitz. What he had wanted to tell him was that early that afternoon, before he collapsed, he had had exactly the same feeling in his body as he had had back then, when there were people backed up in front of him and others pushing from behind, dogs barking, gunshots, when anyone who tried to break away to left or right would simply have met an even quicker end in the cold, black water that was already licking towards them enticingly, the only place that offered them endless freedom. Rocks, cries, shots, night. Pushing and shoving from behind, nowhere to go in front. And because he immediately recognized this feeling of panic and constriction, because his body had returned him to that long-ago breakwater, he thought that this time it must mean certain death.

A very long silence followed, in which Sterkowitz didn't dare move and scarcely dared to breathe. Finally, Antal opened his eyes and looked at him.

I just don't understand why they did it, he said.

Soon afterwards, of course, he went on, it all got increasingly murderous. But it wasn't that murderous in the beginning. Seven years later, yes, clearly, things were very different around here: no one was transported by truck any more, someone like him would just be handed a shovel wherever he happened to be standing, a shovel to use for himself. Sterkowitz must have heard about it. But his story from earlier on – which had had a good outcome, thanks to the Slovakian fishermen who had come to their aid – to Antal it seemed too lurid. As if someone had permitted themselves a perverse sort of joke. Fifty people are chased onto a groyne in the river. As soon as

the sun comes up, they can be seen from all around. Either they collapse after a while from tiredness and exhaustion, fall in, are swept away like wet clothes or bundles of rags, downstream into the darkness, off and away. Or they're saved by someone from the other side. But what was it all for? Just be glad you weren't yet here, in those days, said Antal.

Yes, said Sterkowitz, and sighed. I was still a student then.

[...]

II. / 11 (Summer 1965)

A strange little thing happened the summer after Ferbenz's return and Horka's disappearance, in those bright months when Darkenbloom, purring with anticipation, was living for the September day when the count's family would come back and the crypt was to be blessed. In those airy, sunny weeks, people had the sense that everything really was being mucked out, freshly painted and made new, inside and out. Ancient Mrs Stipsits, who would soon be celebrating her one hundredth birthday, sat outside her house in the sun and announced to everyone who stopped and chatted with her that Zierbusch was even going to renovate the castle now, would you believe. And people smiled at her endearing misapprehension, instead of grimacing as they usually would at burbling, claptrap, codswallop, bluster and twaddle. You're right, Eszter Lowetz agreed, as good-natured and friendly as ever, that would be the icing on the cake, if he were to do the castle as well.

And who could blame the old lady? She was born as the American Civil War was ending, as Karl May was sent to the workhouse for the first time and *Max and Moritz* was published. But no one in Darkenbloom made associations like these, not even Rehberg, because he was still at the seminary back then; all anyone knew was that Mrs Stipsits was as old as the hills and so was permitted certain liberties.

That summer, a stranger appeared in Darkenbloom one Friday, someone whom, as Antal Grün later discovered, nobody had noticed. And this was very unusual here, where the walls had ears and every flower had little eyes it could turn this way and that as required. But it seemed that absolutely no one had been aware of this man.

Antal's shop was empty; it was a little after twelve. He was about to close for lunch, as shops still did in those days, when suddenly this person was standing outside his door and had a question. He spoke no differently to any of the locals – he didn't even have a Styrian or a city accent, he spoke like a Darkenbloomer – but he looked different. Perhaps it was the cut of his suit, the fabric, its fashionably pale colour, or his hairstyle – the overall impression on Antal was that he was dealing with someone who came from far away. He didn't know why this immediately struck him, but he sometimes wondered about it later on. So there he stood, the stranger, gave a name Antal didn't take in at first, and explained that he was looking for two women who had hidden him during the war. He wanted to thank them; they had undoubtedly saved his life. Unfortunately he could no longer remember exactly where the house had been, only that it was at the bottom of a cul-de-sac.

Antal Grün stood there with the keys in his hand, trying to compose himself.

And why have you come to me about this, specifically, he asked finally.

They looked at each other for a long time.

Antal thought: I've seen him before. But where?

The town grocer usually knew everything, the stranger said – the grocer, the hairdresser and the publican. He hadn't been able to find the hairdresser; apparently he was no longer where he used to be. He hadn't wanted to go to Hotel Tüffer, as it had passed out of the hands of the original owners a long time ago, who would

probably have understood what this was about. And so he had ended up coming to him, also on account of the name – *bistu beyz oyf mir?*

Antal closed his eyes for a moment and ran his hands over the front of his overall as if they were damp, although they were just cold. Nonono, he said finally, of course not, if you wouldn't mind waiting a minute, I have to lock up first.

Then he walked with the stranger – who he guessed was about his own age, early forties at the time – through the midday town, which appeared to be deserted. Everywhere people were eating lunch, or were out in the fields and vineyards; not a single soul stood at a window looking out. The only thing twitching the curtains was the gentle breeze that drifted down from the peak of the Hazug and made it easier to breathe. The Darkenbloomers' sixth sense had deserted them at the crucial moment, or, on the contrary, it was this that bound them to their dinner tables: they were eating dumplings and brains with eggs, and as they chewed they were thinking of nothing at all.

Antal and the stranger did not walk far, just a little further down Tempelgasse, round this corner and that; you needed to know your way around in the maze of the old town. The sun was directly overhead; the shadows cast by the two men were still very short. Geraniums, chives and parsley spilled out of earthenware pots in front of the old houses, *because plants know nothing; they grow and flourish*. The front of the Lowetz house was covered in wild vines; the little apple tree the couple had planted for their wedding was already an impressive size, had been bearing fruit now for several years, and was already spreading towards the fence. The flowerpots Eszter had standing by the wall were covered in blue glaze. Antal knocked, and called over the garden fence. Eventually, as was usual here, he even opened the front door and called inside. But there was nobody home. The stranger stood a few steps behind him as if poised to run away, squinting at the house through narrowed eyes. Antal suggested they try next door as well, at Agnes's; the two houses shared a back yard. And hadn't he said that two women had hidden him? It had probably been in the brick-walled shed where they stored the wood...

Agnes, the stranger asked in return, Agnes Kalmar?

Yes, said Antal Grün, that's her name.

Thank you, the man replied, but I think perhaps not; I've seen the house now, and I'm very grateful to you.

You know, said Antal, until recently I had my shop right here, next door, in that one room facing the street, you see? He went and stood under the windows and indicated with sweeping gestures the dimensions of the platform, which had since been converted back into firewood. Isn't it incredible, he said, the circumstances in which we live and work sometimes? We don't even realize until it's over.

This is where you started up after the war? the stranger asked.

Yes, that's right, said Antal, my mother and I came back a few years after the war.

On the way back to Tempelgasse the stranger asked Antal to pass on his greetings to the two women when he saw them, and to thank them on his behalf. You'll do that for me, will you, he asked, you'll know to find the right moment?

Of course, Antal Grün assured him, still puzzling as to whether he had met this man before, I'll do that. But – excuse me, may I ask you something as well?

By all means, said the man, and stopped.

Let's go back to my shop first, suggested Antal, who didn't want to ask his question in public. It was only in the days that followed, thinking back on this visit without fully being able to decipher it, that he realized with surprise that not a single face had appeared at a window, not one person in front of a house, not on the way there and not on the way back. Everyone must have been sitting down to lunch. It was also very hot. The sun was burning down, which was another reason why he wanted to get back inside where it was cooler. When they reached the shop, he first asked the man to write down his name and address on a slip of paper. In case Eszter wants to get in touch, said Antal, immediately excluding this possibility for Agnes in her fragile state. He would speak only to Eszter for the time being; you never knew with Agnes what would set her off again. With old stuff in particular you had to be careful. But details like these were of no interest to the stranger.

Dr. Alexander Gellért was written on the piece of paper, and an address in Boston. Antal Grün never forgot the name, although he gave the piece of paper to Eszter Lowetz soon afterwards; an expression of alarm crossed her face, and she squirrelled it away in the pocket of her apron. Antal didn't know anyone by the name of Dr Gellért, but what was in a name, after all, in those days.

He might not even have asked his question if this man Gellért hadn't brought it up again as they were saying goodbye.

Ye-es, said Antal, and didn't know where to begin. His gaze fell on the cash register, and while he thought, he absent-mindedly loosened the roll of paper from its clamp, as it seemed to him that it had run right down again. But he pulled himself together, replaced the almost-empty roll, looked up and said: It's really just a quick, simple question. Were you on that breakwater as well, by any chance?

The overhead fan revolved; a fly buzzed through the room. The roller blinds were still down, so the light was pleasantly diffuse; a cool room in summer, as if under water, at the bottom of a bright ocean full of colourful fish.

The man's expression didn't change. Unfortunately not, he said; and it sounded like a question, because his intonation rose slightly at the end of the sentence and hovered there, on high.

It doesn't matter – forget I asked, said Antal. He cleared his throat and held out his hand. Goodbye, then, and mazel tov.

Bye, Tolli, said the man, and they shook hands. Antal smiled: That's what they used to call me at school, when I was a boy.

Exactly, said the man, and he left the grocer's and walked all the way to the station. And once again no one seemed to have seen or noticed him; it was as if this visit had never taken place. Antal had the slip of paper, though; it was a provisional piece of physical evidence, even if ultimately it wasn't much use.

[END OF SAMPLE]